

Service-Learning as a Vehicle to Promote Student Social Responsibility. A Qualitative Study

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1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

“Promotion of Children and Adolescent development” is a 3-credit service-learning subject offered to undergraduates in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The subject attempts to promote students’ understanding about the needs and challenges of children and adolescents living in disadvantaged environments, cultivate students’ positive values, care and compassion, and psychosocial competence, and promote students’ social responsibility through service learning and reflective learning. Based on qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with eight student participants in 2016/17 academic year, the present study investigated students’ learning gains from this program, with a focus on their development of social responsibility. The findings showed that students experienced cognitive, affective and behavioral transformation in social responsibility and provided evidence for the impact of this service-learning subject on students’ social responsibility development.

Keywords: Service learning, Transformational learning, Social responsibility

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2. Introduction

Since 2013/14 academic year, the service-learning subject entitled “Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development” has been offering to undergraduate students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in every academic year. The subject adopts multiple teaching and learning approaches, including e-learning module that introduces the basic concepts and practice of service learning, lectures teaching core theories of child and adolescent development, a series of workshops that provide students with the background of their service target, hands-on skills for service design and implementation, experiences of micro-teaching, and opportunities for personal reflection, and eventually a five-day direct service in China mainland.

To facilitate students’ learning, a matrix of assessment methods has been employed. Students are guided to develop detailed service plans before the service-learning trip, and to write a reflective journal on what they have learnt in the lectures and workshops, as well as how such knowledge informs and is applied in their service design. During the service learning tour, students implement their service plans in a five-day summer camp for children of migrant workers, and apply the knowledge learnt to deal with complex problems they encountered in real-life practices. Teachers observe students’ service and provide instant feedback and support. Daily reflective meeting is held for students to review their service experiences, to understand and solve problems encountered, and to reflect on their learning gains and personal development. After the five-day service, students participate in post-service workshops, write reflective journal, and give group presentation that further help them consolidate and reflect on their learning experiences. To evaluate the impact of the program on participating students, post-service evaluation based on quantitative methods and qualitative analysis of students’ reflective journals have been conducted. While the findings showed that students benefited from the program in multiple domains of learning (Yu, Shek, & Xing, 2018), one key impact area of service learning, the development of social responsibility, has not been thoroughly examined. The present study focuses on students’ learning gains in this area through in-depth interviews with participants of this service-learning program.

3. Theoretical framework

The present study was based on Mezirow's (1991) transformational learning theory that "learning is understood as the process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (p. 31). The transformation is typically triggered by an experience which did not fit with one's pre-existing meaning structure (i.e., "a disorienting dilemma"), and only occurs when there are reflectively practices (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000), transformational learning can be achieved "by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind" (p. 19). The theory has been argued to be a useful framework for service learning research (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Feinstein, 2005; Kiely, 2004). In the subject entitled "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development", Hong Kong university students provide service to an underprivileged group, children of migrant workers in mainland China, a socio-culturally different context. The service-learning experience along with the structured reflective activities provide opportunities for students to transform their existing world view, preexisting perspectives, personal values, and stereotypes.

The present study analyzed the outcomes of students' transformational learning through service learning in terms of the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains, with a focus on social responsibility. This is because "transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions" (Transformative Learning Centre, 2004). In addition, the cognitive-affective-behavioral model has been commonly used in assessing student learning outcomes (Christensen & Menzel, 1998).

4. Methods and analysis

The present study was conducted in 2017 as part of an action research, which aimed to enhance the positive outcomes of global service learning projects. A total of eight participants were successfully recruited from the cohort of 2016/17 participants of the program to participate in individual interview after they completed the whole program. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Two trained researchers interviewed the participants, with one as the interviewer and the other

as the observer. Each interview lasted for about 1.5 hours, which was audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

While analyzing the transcriptions, deductive coding based on the theoretical framework was employed. The transcriptions were coded according to the predetermined three dimensions of transformation regarding social responsibility.

5. Findings and Discussion

Cognitive transformation – from basic to broader understanding of social responsibility

By joining the service-learning program, participants gained more understanding toward social responsibility. The concept about being a responsible citizen has shifted from “not break the law” to “offer help to others”.

“At the beginning, I thought civic responsibility means abidance by law or regulations. This is, (we should act) within the laws or regulations. We do our own stuff and don’t violate the law. Everything will be OK. After this service-learning program, I think that apart from doing my own business, I can also help others. ... It will not cost us too much time, but help the society as a whole.” (Student 3)

Affective transformation -- from resistance to increased acceptance

Participants also showed affective transformation on social responsibility. Some students who enrolled in this program only to fulfill the university’s requirement at the beginning turned out to find this program meaningful and genuinely thought highly of the service learning experience at the end. One student had described the radical change of her attitude toward the service learning from “a waste of time” to “more important than money”.

“I myself quite resisted service learning, because I thought the 40 hours without payment was a waste of time. This is, because, I have not much money. I work (part-timely) a lot. For me, each hour counts. However, after I completed this service learning, I believe that many things are intangible. Particularly, I feel like what I have gained is not money, but something that is more important than money. Then my feeling towards the program has been changed.” (Student 2)

Behavioral transformation—from neglecting duty to act responsively

Besides the cognitive and affective dimensions, participants also made behavioral changes and gained socially responsible action during the program, sometimes even without teachers' explicit instructions. Below is a typical example:

'.... One kid did not like to sing, then he/she runs outside the classroom crying. If it happened before the program, I would let the kid run away and thought he/she would come back by himself/herself later. But since I was supposed to be responsible for that class, so I have to take good care of him/her. So I could not just let him/her run away, then I followed him/her out. I ran after him/her to the playground and talked to him/her. I think I would not do those things before the trip, but after it I did do something.'
(Student 5)

6. Conclusions

The service-learning experience in "Promotion of Child and Adolescents Development" in Hangzhou has made transformative impacts on students' in the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of students' social responsibility. The findings add evidence on the effectiveness of service-learning program with a focus on social responsibility. Future studies using quantitative research methods could be conducted to further generalize the present findings. It would also be valuable to conduct follow-up interviews to examine whether the transformative impacts of the service learning experience would last long.

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