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The impact of community services as a catalyst for students' growth and learning: The Case of a Taiwanese College of Technology

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of community services on students' growth and learning from Taiwanese college students' perspectives. The data for present study was gathered using mixed method of quantitative and qualitative techniques. 277 under graduate students who were selected randomly responded the self assessed five Likert scale questionnaires. While, the follow-up exploratory qualitative approach was conducted on 19 students, selected randomly from a pool of students who had participated in the quantitative study. The results revealed that the student in general indicated existence of intention to do communal service voluntarily but the ultimately they are more prone to do due to the requirement of the college and the need to fulfill the credit hour .Besides that, on the aspect of service experiences, the students are incline to have the humanistic values appreciated when involved in the services such as joy, empathy,, appreciative and sense of belonging towards the community. As for conclusion, it was found that the community in general acts as the catalyst to build the students towards a more wholesome individual. This is as; the community functions as the educator in achieving the above goals.

Keywords: Community Services, Students' Growth and Learning, Taiwan

JEL Codes: C11, J12

Introduction

Most academic literature defines service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote students and

development" (Jacoby, 1999, p.20). In fact, it is common for educators inculcate the value of global citizenship such as peace and justice, wisdom, respect and compassion to incorporate service-learning, generally related to students work performed for community (Panici & Lasky, 2002; Carlson-Paige & Lantieri, 2005). Service-learning also has been identified as one of the promising "high impact"

activities that engages students in learning and strengthening their thinking skills especially in the development of their empathy, personal ethics, and the habit of helping their communities (Wigginton, 1985; Ikeda, 2005; Berham, 2006). Although there is a growing number of studies embarking on the exploration towards the impact of service-learning on students' outcomes (Speck & Hoppe, 2005; Berham, 2006; Ford, 2005; Hendrix, 2003, Patterson, 2004), however, remotely only a minimal research has eventually investigated onto the students perceptions in regards to their service-learning experiences and outcomes. Therefore, this study attempts to overcome these limitations by investigating the impact of community-services on students' growth and learning from the students' perspectives.

Community Services and Students' Learning

Service-learning is a method that weaves community service and learning with historic roots that can be traced back to John Dewey (1859-1952). Service learning is also cited as the student's quality indicator of the professional practices of education process and viewed as a way to extend classroom content into the world setting (Cohen & Milone-Nuzzo, 2001). Many studies suggests service learning as the pedagogical benefits attained through the production of desirable student outcomes which includes, personal and interpersonal development, social responsibility, and improvements in academic learning (Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001). While Gray, Ondaatie, and Fricker (2000) found that service learning actually is the

chemistry that boosts the critical thinking skills, helps students indentify career goals and develop skills to succeed in the workplace.

Service-learning however precludes career-oriented internships or practicum, on the ground that such internship only provides benefits to the student rather than the community; it is also not the same as 'volunteering', as beside meaningful community service, service-learning also emphasizes students' learning (Egger, 2008). An intense interest in service-learning throughout the academy has been fueled by the high idealism of service-learning, as a way to make a difference nationally by producing a generation of citizens who would restore community (Speck & Hoppe, 2005; Berham, 2006). Therefore, no one would object to the altruistic value of peace and justice, wisdom, respect and compassion, as propounded by the above mentioned scholars, but then, the propounding question would be, how will the educators inculcate these values in students, and make them part of their lives?

This research meant to study the impact of community services on students' learning in College of Technology in Taiwan. The college has a long standing culture of promoting volunteer services. Students are encouraged to take up volunteer services in the hospitals, homes for the elderly, recycling centre, or they may also volunteer to serve at elementary schools, to run activities for young kids, and other forms of community services. The college believes that good students must not only excel academically, but must also be compassionate "bear a good heart". So,

therefore the school administrators require the students to fulfill certain credit hours of “volunteer services”, before they are eligible for school scholarship. The same applies to those who apply for financial aids. The rationale behind this concept is that if people are to be helped, they need to learn to serve and return the grace of others.

Unlike community services where the focus is generally on the parties served, service-learning students are required to write a reflection of their services. The purpose of this was to identify the degree learning acquired by the students while involved with this program. While the teachers will serve as mentors guiding them on questions asked or problems encountered.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to understand the effects of community services on students’ growth and learning from the perspectives of Taiwanese college students’.

Based on the purpose of the study, the following questions were asked:-

- a. What are the main motives that trigger students to engage in community services?
- b. To what extent do community services create impact on students’ growth and learning?
- c. How do community services create impact on students’ growth and learning?

Methodology

The present study was conducted using mixed method of quantitative and qualitative techniques in the process of data gathering. from the respondents.

Quantitative methods

Participants

In this study, 230 undergraduate students were selected randomly from the College of Technology in Taiwan, whom previously had participated in volunteer services during a six-semester period in summer 2011. These students were asked to voluntarily complete a self-administered questionnaire during the final week of the semester and a total of 227 (98 %) of completed questionnaires were collected.

Instrumentation

To measure level of community service learning impacts, an instrument was developed using items replicated from Toncar et. al., (2006). The eleven item instruments has two parts, with the first part of the questionnaire bridging to determine whether students went for the services out of their own volition to help others, or due to peer friendship, or they merely participated in services primarily to fulfill their credit hours. The second part of the questionnaire consists of questions derived from reading in the area of volunteerism and service- learning. These items were measured on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”.

Qualitative method

The follow-up study uses the naturalistic qualitative and exploratory approach, the semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted on 19 students, selected from a pool of students who had participated in the previous study. The selection criteria were conducted through a sampling process. The

data obtained on how community services have an impact on their learning was discussed. During the interviews, every effort was made to establish a trusting relationship with interviewees, to encourage frank discussion and deep reflection. Participants were asked to describe in a story form how their experiences in community services create an impact on their growth and learning and as a way to elicit more details to reveal their “meaning-making” strategies.

Results and Discussions

From the 227 survey questionnaires collected, it was noted that 89 (39.2%) students have been involved in community services for 1-2 times a semester, 77 (33.9%) students for 3-5 times in a semester, and 61 (26.9%) students for more than 5 times in a semester.

Factors that influence students’ will to participate in community services

Table 1 shows that out of the 227 data collected, 112(50%) students agreed and 65(29%) students strongly agreed that they participated in volunteer services because they wanted to help others. However 94 (41%) students agreed and 43 (19%) students strongly agreed that their reasons were due to peer friendship; 74(33%) students agreed and 78(34%) students strongly agreed because of credit hours. The said data revealed that, though it is optional for students to engage in volunteer services”, and there were certainly a great portion of students the data however also showed that the requirement of credit hours, by school administrators, as a policy to encourage community services, does create an impact, and has become one of the triggering

factors for students to go for community services.

The impact of community services on students’ growth and learning

As to the question on how far services create an impact on students’ learning, the result of the survey was presented in Table 2. The result of the survey showed that students generally responded positively to community services with a learning experience (means score=4.37). The greatest reward for their service was joy (means score=4.34) and feeling of empowerment. They became more ready to help people in need (means score=4.21). According to the students surveyed, community services made them aware that their future profession is very meaningful (means score=4.23), though they were not that positive about their application of professional learning in community services (means score=3.93). As the literatures suggested, community can be effective educators (Berham, 2006), and students generally felt that the interaction with the parties served gave them new perspective about life (means score= 4.28). Students participating in community services also experienced (a) paradigm shift. The real world exploration provided them a chance to clarify values, sense of self and ethical principles. They also learned to accept cultural diversities (means score= 4.21).

A more detailed description of their learning impact is to be discussed below, based on the qualitative data collected.

Feeling of Joy

“I feel so happy when the service was returned with a kind gesture. The patients gave me courage to continue with the hospital volunteer

services,” said Student A1, who has participated in volunteer services for more than 10 times. A few other students, who had participated in different type of community services, for different credit hours, all shared the same joy as A1.

“I thought community services are just providing free labor. But after having a touch with the elderly, and getting the warm responses from them, I just realized that servicing could be such a joyful journey.” (Student A2)

“We visited a cancer patient at his house. He was all alone. Under the guidance of my seniors, I learned how to serve unconditionally and selflessly. That brought joy into my life and I found life meaningful.” (Student A3)

The knowledge shared by the students confirmed that by committing themselves in community services, they not only experienced learning, they also experienced a commitment to doing meaningful and authentic work, as well as “a sense of joy in doing service and a sense of community that results in providing help to others” (Wigginton, 1985). They felt the inner joy, warmth and satisfaction that come from giving to others and being accepted by others (Hodsmann & Tuchmann, 2004).

Empowerment

When asked on the impact of community services on their thoughts, students discovered that with joint efforts, they too could change the world.

“The most powerful thing in this world is action. Though we have little energy and strength in the meantime, but the service experience made me believe “many a little makes a mickle” (Student B1).

Their views supported earlier research that said students do find that they have the power to change the world after engaging in community services (Berham, 2006). In fact, students generally felt empowered after providing services to others.

“Community services do not only mean providing services to the needy. It is also a process of empowerment. It helps improve my interpersonal relationship. I am more ready to open up and to serve” (Student B3).

The experiences in community services empower the students in many ways, amongst the obvious ones are:

- Awareness of others’ need,
- Learn to appreciate diversity, and
- Professional learning

Awareness of others’ need

As students became committed in services, they became more sensitive to other people’s needs, and were less self-centered. A student wrote his observation and reflection in a poem after his services in the hospital, “I read their eyes full of sadness; I heard their voice full of resentment; I vow to open their heart to take away their sorrow, And I promise to serve and to bring love to all in need” (Student B5).

Learn to value diversity

As students opened themselves to new experiences and people, they became sensitive to diversity. Below are a few examples of students who participated in various community services, and their respective learning experiences:

“Serving the aboriginal students, having contact with people of different thoughts, there are certainly a great deal to learn about.

I am no more self-centered, and I know if I continue with my services, I can help the children and grow up together with them” (Student B6).

“The elderly spoke languages that I could not understand. But I tried to communicate with body language. I learned that only by being proactive, may we have a chance for next step, to know more about others. This is an important experience, it changed my attitude” (Student B7).

From the students’ responses, it was obvious that students developed an awareness and acceptance of others from different backgrounds, and they became more empathetic and less judgmental, accepting their own internal locus of control and being less likely to blame others or make excuses for shortcomings. They grow through their experiences as suggested by Billig (2004).

Professional Learning

Students participated in community services learned in the real world context, and the interactions with their community partners made them aware of their future roles, and they found that their professional learning is meaningful. Some students said, “When I heard the patients crying, I know they were painful. I want to be a good nurse in the future, and be nice to the patients” (Student B11). “The volunteer services make me aware that it takes patient, loving kindness, dedication, sincerity and carefulness to take care of a patient. I want to smile always and be a nurse with great compassion, to relieve the patients from suffering” (Student B12).

According to Billig (2004), these affirmative feelings lead students to more effective

learning of content as well as skill. Because the learning was done in a real-world context, students’ brains construct meaning from the learning and remember it effortlessly (Gregory, 2008).

Paradigm shift

Most of the students surveyed said that they experienced paradigm shift, clarification of values, sense of self and ethical principles as they engaged in community services. When witnessing suffering, most of them had deep reflection, and they learned to cherish life more, and they learned about the essence of gratitude and contentment. According to Berham (2006), these students who learned to do for others rather than ‘being done for’ by others became more self-confident and developed more self-esteem. His view was supported by Student C1’s reflection, “Throughout my life, I am served and given. This is the first time I learn to give and serve. I found it meaningful, and the experience did widen my perspective in life.”

Students learned from their community partners as well as other senior volunteers and peers. As they opened themselves to new experiences and roles, they felt that they are useful members of the community. Student C2 has this to share: “I used to be a firm believer of human is born sinful. But after experiencing the warmth volunteers provided for others, I told myself that I too can dedicate my skill to help those in need.”

As students became aware of their communities, they too developed a sense of understanding and compassion. Student C3 said, “I used to have stereotype image about

the elderly through pictures seen. But pictures do not speak, the real man did. A real touch with the elderly changed my perception about old people. I find that if we served with a joyful heart, they too will rejoice with us.

Students were able to look outside their lives and realize some of the hardships others face on a daily basis, and they learned to cherish what they have. "After seeing and hearing the sufferings, I have no complaint about life anymore. I decide to lead a frugal life, so that I can save more money to help others" (Student C4).

Students also learned to treat others as they themselves want to be treated, to have empathy for the problems and concerns of others, and to defer gratification as they work towards long-term goals. As Student C6 said, "I thought volunteering meant to serve others, but at the end of the day, it was me who benefited from the process. I had a paradigm shift, and more positive now. I could put my feet into the shoes of others, and think from other people's point of view."

Students who learn the components of emotional intelligence are said to be more successful throughout their lives (Cooper, 2007), and in this study, it was found that students became more aware of their own emotions, as Student C7 noted:

"I found that mundane people's mind always harbored by emotions. It is important to be always acquainted by positive thinkers, and have positive outlook of life. To be a good volunteer, we have to always have love and grateful mind. So, just do it."

The most beautiful experience was to see how students realized that they can become part of a bigger picture, and they felt that they too can make a difference in the lives of others. "The community services changed my perspective. I have a more positive outlook now, and I start to understand my school policy, which wants to develop us to be better persons. I am proud to be part of the school, and very certain about what I am to do after graduate" (Student C8). Student C10 shared his change of feeling from reluctance to learning, throughout the process of community services, "I went for services because of credit hours. Initially I thought that would be a waste of my time. But at the end of the day, I found that I learn people skills, and I now understand we must not only care for people dear to us, but to all in needs of help. We have to cherish what we have, and serve with altruistic love, to lead a blissful life".

C10's reflection together with some other students' were partially agreeable with Egger's (2008) view, in the sense that students who saw the need to go for services because of credit hours, may view "service-learning is a waste of time", before their commitment to services. But if students do open themselves up for learning, during services, they would have an opportunity to experience a paradigm shift, which will definitely be a meaningful learning experience. Their learning would not be limited to 'increases in empathy for persons in need' (Egger, 2008), but more importantly the change of mindset, an awakening to their conscience and potential, as well as an enhancement of their skills in providing services. From that point of view, we can't say that "Service-learning does no

service to learning.”

Conclusion

The study in this case may not be the best specimen for service-learning that emphasizes on professional teaching and students’ learning, in the literal sense. But the real “service + reflection” process students engaged in this case study, positively proved learning on the part of students, who have served their communities. The importance of reflection was best described by Student D1, in this case, “Reflection on services is just like looking into the mirror. I saw my own image. The teachers in the community taught me what good characters are, and they taught me how to

serve with hands and hearts. It is important in my life”.

Our conclusion is that community can be effective educators, and students engaged in community services experienced joy, and a sense of empowerment, during services. They also endured a paradigm shift in the process of reflection. Community service enables students to find meaning in life, and be taught the value of humanity. Students learn to appreciate the interdependent world in which they live; they learn to respect one another’s difference, and take active steps in their own lives to serve.

Table-1: Motives of students engaging in community services.

Motives	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Wanting to help others	65	112	49	1	0
For peer friendship	43	94	84	5	1
For credit hours	78	74	65	7	3

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Table-2: Means scores of the impact of services on students.

Impact of services on students	Means score
1. The community services train me to be more proactive.	3.89

2. The interaction with the party whom I provided services gives me new perspective about life.	4.28
3. While providing services to others, I too learn something and benefit from it.	4.37
4. Participating in community services makes me aware of my future civic responsibility.	4.04
5. Experience in community services makes me realize how happy it is to serve others.	4.34
6. Participating in community services makes me more ready to help people in need.	4.21
7. Experience in community services makes me aware that my future profession is very meaningful.	4.23
8. I could offer my professional learning in community services.	3.93
9. Participating in community services awakens me to the understanding and acceptance of cultural diversities.	4.21
10. I learn about the essence of gratitude and contentment through community services.	4.29

The result of the survey showed that students generally responded positively to community services with a learning experience ((with means score= 4.37). The greatest reward for their service was joy (means score=4.34) and feeling of empowerment. They became more ready to help people in need (means score=4.21). According to the students surveyed, community services made them aware that their future profession is very meaningful (means score=4.23), though they were not that positive about their application of professional learning in community services (means score= 3.93). As the literatures suggested, community can be effective educators (Berham, 2006), and students generally felt that the interaction with the parties served gave them new perspective about life (means score= 4.28). Students participating in community services also

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