An Overview of Personal Development of Post-Graduate Students in Service-Learning Project

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Abstract

Service-learning is a teaching strategy and a form of experiential education that trains students both in and outside the four walls of the classroom. It attempts to introduce students through their respective course content opportunities to understand the wider world by applying knowledge in a community. The service-learning program was introduced inthe School of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) for quite some time. Students who enrolled themselves in this program benefited in many ways. This study aims to explore the personal experience of the participating postgraduate students by revealing the efficacy of service-learning; its exposure, personal identity; spiritual growth, and how it encouraged the moral development of students. Participants were selected from the School of Education, UTM, and were interviewed. The result was recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Research findings disclosedthat service-learning has an impact on four areas of personal development of postgraduate students.

Keywords: Service-learning, personal development, postgraduate students

Introduction

For the past years, it has been noticed that the education system of Malaysia and some other Southeast Asian countries had a significant program reformation and restructuring especially at the higher education levelSarjitandGurnam, (2009). This remains an effort to meet up with the global modernization of the social, political, and economic institutions in which higher education is a major player in social change.

Service-learning is a new type of educationalapproach that involves collaboration between students, faculty, and the community (Mirna, 2016). It is also viewed as a kind of credit-bearing learning experience planned to satisfy the needs of a particular community towards enhancing the feeling of a sense of belonging by discharging individual responsibilityBringler& Hatcher (1996).

Furthermore, it works differently with any other charitable activities being a course-based service experience that can be related to it by bringing out meaningful service activities through engaging the students, the community, and the faculty as well. Being different from any other charitable activity and unlike voluntary service, service-learning is viewed as a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to a quantifiable sequencethrough reflection activities. The course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education (Bringle& Hatcher, 1996).

This method aims at changing the academic experience of a learner where the educational outcomes are expanded and deeply enriched when the learner faces high-quality learning environments that

actively involve the provision of frequent feedbackthrough collaboration with others which promotes work on tasks that have real consequences that are personally relevant(Marchese, 1997).

Extensive studies reveal that service-learning has constructive effects on students' moral and personal development. It also influences the sense of personal identity and spiritual growth all in their ability to work well with othersand display desirable leadership and communication skills(Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray, 2001). Kendrick (1996), was of the view that involvement in service-learning will ultimately cause a remarkableincreasein the student's personal efficacy.

On this background, therefore, this study sets its objectives to highlight the major implications of service-learning on postgraduate students in particular and to theirpersonal development in wider perspectives. To achieve this,therefore, the work examines the following questions with regards to service-learning to serve as a guide to achieving the stated objectives. The questions are: (1). What is the efficacy of service-learning on postgraduate students? (2). How does service-learningunveilthe personal identity of postgraduate students? (3). How does service-learning develop the spiritual growth of postgraduatestudents and(4) How does service-learning encourage the moral development of postgraduatestudents?

Conceptual Understanding of Service-Learning

Service-Learning can be defined as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience whereby a studentparticipatesin an organized service activity that meets up with a community'sneeds. This course-based should reflect the service acts as a means to gaina deeper understanding of a course content in an effort to extensively appreciate an area of discipline to enhance the sense of civic responsibility for creating wider interest inthe understanding of community life (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995).

Service-learning is an approach of teaching/learning which connects meaningful community service with academic learning. It also integratesthe personal growth and civic responsibility of an individual within a given communityLake& Jones, (2008).Service Learning is best understood as an educational approach in which a student endeavors to learn certain theories in the classroom after which volunteers through social service groups on reflection activities to deepen their understanding of what is being taught.In another view, service-learning is a community-based learning and or an experimental learning approach Clevenger-Bright (2012). Apparently, service-learning stands a get way into gaining the trust of communities on the presence of the university system as a sincere neighborhood institution that was described as a partner that feels like addressing the basic needs of its immediate community(Vogel &Seifer, 2011).

Ultimately, service-learning aims to involve students in a wider range of organized activities that could benefit individuals in a community whereby the expected experience may be used to advance the curriculum goals. It, therefore, appreciates the gaining of a profound knowledge of the course and curriculum content as well as wider indebt of the discipline towards feeling a better sense of civic responsibility. Therefore, service-learning is bound to be identified with qualities such as the ability to integrative learning and community needs, general reflections on the needs and curriculum setup, the contextual focus of the curriculum, the strength-basedof the service-learning project, reciprocal feedback from both the community and institution and the lifelong education

approach since it involves the community at large (Bingham,2019).

Participation in Service -Learning Projects

Participating in service-learning projects expands the range of real experiences necessary to fully develop an individual. Looking at the academic performance in general, the service-learning approach increases the knowledge background of a learner on the account that it is a kind of a reinforcement exercise at the time of project implementation (Lizzul, 2015).

Furthermore, it was established that the service-learning approach enhances or prepare students for a better future career such as the ability to display desired leadership skills (Astin, 2001; Eylerand Giles, 1999) and also enhance communication skills, professional growth (Sedlak, 2003), and increased confidence to proceed with their chosen careers (Walker et al., 2003; Yates andYouniss, 1996).

Again, in an effort to explore more on the impact of service-learning on the participants, early researchers described how service-learning could advance the educational experience of participants such as their ability to understand the academic contents, ability to use a wide variety of teaching strategies, ability to make a wide range planning on learning outside the classroom and the ability to make an accurateconnectionbetween learning content and the field classroom curriculum on one hand and the social background of an individual student participant towards teaching/learning tolerance on the other hand (Lake & Jones, 2008).

Service-Learning in Higher Education

Participants in service-learning were known to have developed an appreciation for community engagement by understanding the fact that as a scholarly activity, service-learning is capable to develop the whole educationsector and indeedhelps to realizethe goals of academia for the benefit of the society at large. (Vogel and Seifer, 2011).

Furthermore, service-learning in higher education generally increases the social and civic understanding of the students (especially of the teacher education program) by inculcating the sense of active participation in projects and subsequent transformation of the society and scope of education. Lake & Jones, (2008), were of the opinion that, the service-learning approach opens the mind of the participating students through a built interest and connection to their aspiration of proposing a project topic in their field of studies.And understandably, through teaching and research projects, it became clear that the participants share knowledge, experience, and passion with others as they continue towards a civictransformation as well as promoting social, moral, and personal benefits (Eyler& Giles, 1999).

Heffernan (2001), was of the opinion that, the service-learning pedagogical approach challenges institutions of education to redirect the idea of education, its curriculum, and disciplinary training on the student and his role as potential educators. He further, observed that many faculties relate the difficulty to abandon the comfortability and predictability nature of classroom work. To this, service-learning in schools is unpredictable and as such, uncomfortable.

Apparently, service-learning in higher education institutions focuses on the collaboration of the intellectual, moral, and civic dimensions. It is a problem-solving attempt rather than preparing students for a particular job, the service-learning ensures to prepares students for practical community-based problem solving through explorations and connections of theories and the actual needs of the community and this is the major distinction of service-learning with other forms of experiential exercise in schools (Heffernan, 2001).

Personal Development Attributes

The effectiveness of service-learninggoes beyond just giving the students an opportunity to find themselves becoming community advocates but it inculcates the

spirit of having improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a well-developed social awareness. In service-learning, it was established that students are prepared and armed with learning strategies individually which were built through the support of the course instructor and carefully proceed for success to promote or maximize their growth in self-efficacyBernadowski et. al (2013).

We have to look ahead of the importance of service-learning to the pedagogical aspects, its capacity is just beyond that, but to prepare the minds of participants to see the value of establishedteaching methodsand put into practice which motivates the student to have the feeling to opt teaching carrier after graduation(Lake& Jones, 2008). Service-learningshould be described as community engagement where a student participantcombines learning goals and community service in such a way that the learner can develop academically and benefit the community

Service-learning brings students participants together to interact with different individuals in a given community as they discharge their responsibility(Jacoby & Associates, 1996), along the line, these contacts build commensurable benefits to the students such as the spirit of involvement in a community service which indicates a positive movement towards social responsibility, and personal empowerment. Also, a positive commitment with an effort to promote the understanding of individual differences, as well as educational benefitsin it (Meyers, 2009).Similarly, substantial evidence reveals that a lot of students that participate in service-learningor community service ended up having a positive association with other social groups through the different responsibilities undertaken and also had personal empowerment, alongside a commitment which as well encouragedthe understanding and commitment to the

beautyof racial difference (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

Furthermore, service-learning was viewed as an exercise that is embedded into an individual identity and experiences and as a model of teaching and learning, it is seen as the institutional context and mission that is carried into the community (O'Meara and Niehaus, 2009) which raised the question on whether undergraduates have anypersonal identity development through participation into the service-learning project?

An academic framework was proposed to indicate that service-learning and civic engagement can work concurrently towards spiritual practice and eventually transform the student positively (Welch and Koth, 2009), even though the term spiritual is regarded as too complex and have multiple definitions such as its description as an experience that leads to a self-generated sense of unity or connection with something outside one selfhood (Burton, 2002).

In addition, service-learning courses can be powerful instruments for cognitive, affective, and moral transformation (Eylerand Giles, 1999) rooting the concept of moral development to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory that postulated six stages of moral development that capitalize on an irreversible, structural reorganization of thinking about moral issues by the students who better understand themselves by identifying their weakness and strong sides, fears and limitations (Toncart et al.,2006), and thereby increasing confidence in themselves(Astin, Sax, 1998).It is no doubt found to be a student-based project that positively promotes issuesof tolerance (Eyler& Giles, 1999), self-esteem, andsensitivity (Verducci& Pope, 2001).

Methodology

This paper has been generated based on a qualitative research study on the understanding of the integration of the service-learning approach in some courses in the School of Education, Universiti

Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). In fact, by combining this type of learning into a course of studies, UTM had marchedahead to the next level. The study looked at the first conduct of service-learning program in Bogra, Bangladesh where 16 undergraduates from various faculties headed to Dari Para Village and in 10 days students conductedthe teaching of English language, computer workshopprogrammes and helped to design the landscape of Zaher Uddin Model Junior Girls' School (Office of Corporate Affairs, 2013).

The study uses a case study approach. Supported by Zainal (2007), case studies have different preferences where current data of real-life situations will be examined to provide anin-depthunderstandingof the behaviors of the subject chosen. A case study is very reliable when examining "what", "how" and "why" questions especially where the investigator has little or no control (Yin, 2003).

Data were collected through the administration of semi-structured interview questions with the purpose to investigate the postgraduate students' personal development in service-learning in Malaysia. It involves the students of the School of Education in UTM, Skudai, Johor. There were eight students who were willingly involved in the interviews. The interviews were run smoothly and data wereanalyzed using the thematic qualitative data analysis.In this study, from the collected data, the researcher gained insights into the personal development of postgraduate students in service-learning in the School of Education, UTM. A case study provides a descriptive approach so that the researcher gains a comprehensive understanding of postgraduate students' personal development in service-learning.

Findings and Discussions

This is educational research with the research scope being on the course and the students at the School of Education, UTM, Skudai, Johor, Malaysia. It attempts to investigate postgraduate students' personal

development in service learning. Data analysis produced criteria items and these items were grouped and identified based on each process. Personal development in this study that consists of four main aspectswas established on the basis of the objectives of the study that quested to understand the efficacy of service-learning on postgraduate students; how it may unveil the personal identity of postgraduate students; how it may develop the spiritual growth of postgraduate students and how it may encourage moral development of postgraduate students where discussions were placed under the four topics as in below.

Personal Efficacy

In an attempt to address the first objective of this research on investigating the personal efficacy of postgraduate students towards the service-learning project in the School of Education, UTM, it is found out that few themes were strongly associated with the students' personal efficacy in the service-learning and that project implementation was in particular closely linked to the postgraduate student's personal efficacy in the exercise through the maintenance of social interaction among postgraduate students, collective information searching, personal skills development, and a clear experience throughout the service-learning project exercise.This means that being part of the project connects all the themes to students' personal efficacy because were activeplayers in this very important project by ensuring the success of the service-learningproject. Postgraduate students' personal efficacy built up when all of the themes were strongly supporting each other.

Furthermore, to observe the theory by Albert Bandura that propagates self-efficacy as a key behavioural mechanism that underlines humanbehaviour and as one of the critical factors that motivate people to engage in pursuing their goals, it is right to say that the postgraduate students in this project developed their

personal efficacy throughout service-learning experiences. Through the opportunities in the service-learning project, students find themselves becoming community advocates who possess improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, and growing social awareness. In a nutshell, four important themes arose from the respondents which includeeffective project implementation, interaction among postgraduate students, information searching, and the development of personal skills and experience throughout service-learning.

Personal Identity

The second objective was to explore postgraduate students' personal identity on service-learning projects. To this, the analyzed data reveals that there were four consistentthemes that emerged relating to the personal identity of postgraduate students in service-learning. This was similar to a previous study that has shown how service-learning was embedded into the individual identity and experiences (O'Meara and Niehaus, 2009). Here, the four themes uncovered, were the personal character of postgraduate students, communication in service-learning, service-learning project execution, and personal achievement.

Spiritual Growth

The third and most important theme was the objective of exploring thespiritual growth of postgraduate students undertaking the service-learning project in the School of Education, UTM. This evidence reveals that service-learning somehow has impacts on the spiritual growth of the participants in the project and also elevated the personal qualities of the postgraduate students in general. It can be summarized thatservice-learning projects significantly challenged participating students and when counter approached with persistent support from group members, the result then triggersspiritual growth of the group members. And this was evident in the group under surveillance.

Furthermore, the importance of spiritual growth was identified as a basic constituent in the academic classroom or as a co-curricular setting which may eventually become a powerful tool to engage students rigorously to have the intellectual and spiritual formation (Welch &Koth, 2009). Being one of the attributes that were investigated in this research in the process and practice of service-learning projects, three themes emerged. These include the personal qualities of postgraduate students, its benefits, and the project implementation. The results show that the project participants had experienceda better sense of understanding of themselves in role and place as human beingsin the world and also were willing to serve as mentors to other interested postgraduate students and hope it shall be transformedinto their futurecareers and lifestyles.

Moral Development

The fourth objective was to investigate postgraduate students' moral development on service-learning in the School of Education, UTM. On this, analyzed data reveals that personal value, difficulties, and advantages in service-learning were found to be the main themes complementing postgraduate students' moral development in the project. Even though some of the participants did not report any significant changes in their moral development, they are actually become more compassionate and sensitive by having a better understanding of their abilities and being able to solve their problems amicably.

Despite the fact that obstacles were faced by the students during the service-learning yet that does not mean they lose their hope and all of the participants concluded that service-learning is an appropriate project and the right thing to do. Here too, the theme of personal value, difficulties, and advantages of service-learning emerged from the findings.

The personal value that evolves during service-learning does give an impact on

postgraduate students' moral development. Their own personal value motivated them in giving their best service-learning to the community. This was cemented by Brody and Wright (2004), and Boyle-Baise (2002) where both suggested that service-learning provides an opportunity to develop relationships in participating students on one hand and with the community members on the other hand. And apparently, these participating students that were not otherwise met before in their everyday lives have fostered diverse attitudes and cultural awareness through the rigorous interactions in service-learning project exercises.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The researchers unanimously agreed that the first and most important recommendation in th9is paper is challenged other researchers to dig deeper into this new area of project approach by extending and exploring more further into service-learning and its benefits to the students and society. As it is evident that this study involves a small number of postgraduate students in the School of Education, UTMwas studied, it is therefore recommended to study a larger group that may likely involve students in different faculties which may yield different results. Furthermore, as this research only aims at four attributes in personal development, further study can be done in other aspects of personal development such as academic achievement, civic achievement, and so on.

Finally, this research only involves qualitative research methodology, other research methods such as quantitative or mixed-methods should be embarked on to find more intricacies of the impact of service-learning projects among students of postgraduates.

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