

Service-Learning as Extra-Curricular Activities in a Residential College Setting¹

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ABSTRACT

Most researchers and practitioners take service-learning to be curriculum-based. Some scholars, however, argue for a more broad definition of service-learning, which encompasses structured non-curriculum-based community service activities. Adopting the broad definition, this paper presents the service-learning practice in a residential college setting and illustrates that service-learning can be a very effective instrument for residential colleges to promote students' personal growth. The study is based on two service-learning projects initiated by a residential college in the University of Macau, whose recently implementation of full residential college systems provides a good platform for service-learning projects to prosper.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Extra-Curricular Activities, Residential College

1. A BROAD DEFINITION OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning has become a popular teaching method in higher education (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008; Butin, 2006). It has been proven effective for improving students' understanding of social issues, personal insights and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012), and it has been adopted in a wide range of disciplines such as business and management (Andrews, 2007; Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008), health and nursing (Housman et al., 2012; Ross, 2012), education (Ponder & Lewis-Ferrell, 2011), physics (Orleski, 2013), etc. Most of the service-learning practices are curriculum-based, i.e., they are the application of classroom knowledge to the real world problems; and by doing so, the community needs are addressed and students' understanding of course content furthered (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Howard, 1998; Butin, 2010). However, some other scholars have suggested a broader definition of service-learning. Jacoby (1996), for instance, 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 student learning and development. Reflections and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (p.5).

As he argues, such a broad definition is needed because in addition to curriculum-based service-learning enhancing student learning, there exists non-curriculum-based service-learning, focusing more on student development such as identity exploration and social responsibility. This paper follows the definition of Jacoby and presents the service-learning practice in a residential college setting. It is to illustrate that service-learning serves as a very good instrument for residential colleges to promote students' personal growth.

This research adopts a qualitative method. The researcher participated in the service process and did on-site observation. Sharing session was organized, semi-structured

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questions were asked and students' feedback was collected.³ Focus groups were also organized to discuss about problems emerged in the service process. This is a very preliminary study of the practice of service-learning in residential college, more data in expected to come in the coming semester.

2. THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE SETTING

University of Macau is the first university in Asia fully implementing a residential college system. In the era of building research universities, faculty members tend to focus on their research and publications rather than students. Students are therefore in a certain degree marginalized or neglected in many research universities (Fairweather, 1996; Boyer, 2014). In the pursuit of a world class university, University of Macau dedicates to cover both specialty education as well as liberal arts education. The faculties continue to focus on their research while the residential colleges work to develop students' various competencies including interpersonal skills and teamwork, global citizenship, cultural engagement, leadership and service, and healthy living. These competencies together will enable students to become "intellectually and socially resilient individuals leading principled, caring, and productive lives and conduct a life-long learning."⁴

After 3 years' pilot program, in 2014, there will be a full scale implementation of residential college system in the university. All freshmen will be required to live in a residential college for at least one year. All the freshmen will have to fulfill the requirement of residential college for graduation. The requirement includes a non-credit bearing⁵ general education course conducted in the residential college and a satisfactory e-portfolio, which documents all the reflections of students' participation in various college activities and their growth. Each residential college has one master who is an established full professor, one associate master who is assistant professor or above, two resident fellows who, with rare exceptions, hold doctoral degrees and four administrative staffs. The associate master and the resident fellows are responsible for the teaching of the general education course. Resident tutors (RT) and resident assistants (RA) selected from postgraduates and upper class undergraduates are also equipped to provide assistance in the administration of the college. College staffs together with RT/RAs are responsible for initiating activities in line with the five competencies for students to participate in.

As service-learning serves the goal of residential college in cultivating students' various competencies and producing caring individuals, it has become a common practice in the pilot residential colleges not as curricular-based but extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, the system of residential colleges also conduces to the adoption of service-learning; indeed, residential colleges have all the resources for initiating service-learning projects. To list a few, first, the resident fellows are full time staffs that qualified in designing and instructing learning projects for college students, and second, college funds provide financial

³Question list and students' feed-back script can be provided upon request.

⁴See Goals of residential colleges of University of Macau at the website <http://rc.umac.mo/goals-and-motto/>

⁵The course, however, is under reform. In the future, there might be credit allocated to the course.

support for service-learning activities. Overall, service-learning as extra-curriculum activities becomes a practice that fits well in the residential college setting.

3. SERVICE-LEARNING AS EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Two service-learning activities were initiated in the past semester in Cheng Yu Tung College. The first group partnered with an organization called Centro do Servico de Fornecimento Temporario de Alimentos da Caritas (food bank), which is affiliated to Caritas de Macau. The organization is started by Caritas de Macau and aims at getting in touch with those having economic difficulties by providing food support. Further assessment and follow-up service are also provided to prevent other potential problems from arising.⁶ 24 students joined this service program voluntarily and all of them were committed to the service for one year.

Part of the service was to pack and distribute food to the poor. Each month a group of students went to the service station of Caritas and work for 4 hours. About 200 service recipients, usually the elderly, came over to collect food. The more challenging part of the service was home visit. Students working in groups regularly visited people living in public housing to show social support, to detect potential needs or problems, and to look for solutions with the social workers. The same group followed up the same case for at least half a year.

The other project worked with Cradle of Hope. Cradle of Hope is also a local charity providing family-like living environment for 0-6 year old children who suffered from trauma of abuse, abandonment or neglect. It provides a secure environment for children to heal and to grow to upstanding members of the society.⁷ 11 students participated in this activity voluntarily. They were divided into 5 groups to take care of children of different ages. Students went to service every weekend for at least 10 weeks and 3-6 hours each time. Their work included tutoring and babysitting.

In both projects, students provided direct services for the community. They volunteered at the local charities, discharged the assigned duties and reflected on what they did and saw. For the first project, the challenging part for students was the home visit to the public housing residents. All of the participants come from affluent families of mainland China. They had no idea of the welfare system in Macau, and they had never walked into the public housing and talked to people living there. But with this duty, they had to interact with people from completely different background and find out problems the poor are facing; they were also encouraged to work out solutions with the charity.

For the other project, it was equally challenging for all students to tutor children aging from 0 to 6. Likewise, all of the participants come from Mainland China. Most of them do not have siblings, nor do they have extensive experience of living with younger children. But in that project, they had to learn how to calm a crying baby and how to deal with children in

⁶ For details of the organization, please visit the organization website at <http://www.caritas.org.mo/zh-hant/service/youth-and-community-service/centro-do-servico-de-fornecimento>

⁷ For details of the organization, please visit the organization website at <http://www.cradleofhope.org.mo/tc/>

conflict. In particular, , students had to learn to communicate with children, who, due to their earlier suffers, are often highly self-protective and might even be violent.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICE-LEARNING AS EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE

The characteristics of service learning as extra-curricular activities in residential college are as below:

4.1 Students' participation was motivated by their interests.

For the curriculum-based service-learning, students may pursue it for the sake of credit. But with regard to extra-curricular activities, students participate because they are interested. Interest keeps one's enthusiasm in the activity. Students were very dedicated to the service and no one dropped out from the program in the past semester. In this sense, the projects were very successful.

4.2 Projects are open to students from all disciplines.

One of the underlying principles for residential college is embracing diversity. To create a diversified and energetic environment for students to learn from each other, residential colleges host students from different academic and cultural backgrounds. The service-learning activities are not attached to particular curriculums, especially ones that require specific skills. It welcomes students from all disciplines as long as they are interested. This kind of inclusiveness makes extra-curricular activities suitable in the collegial setting.

4.3 Project was designed to enhance students' personal development.

Unlike the curriculum-based service-learning which focuses more on knowledge, one of the main purposes of the service-learning in residential college is to promote students' personal growth in line with the residential college spirits. The projects aim at cultivating students' leadership, team work spirit, interpersonal skills and social responsibility. Some projects may also attempt to nurture citizenship, and to promote cultural engagement and etc. Of course, if particular skills and knowledge are needed for the service, tailor-made trainings will be provided. Students are also encouraged to explore relevant literature and resources to solve problems in the fieldwork.

Despite the controversies around the definition of service learning, most researchers agree that reflection and reciprocity are two key components for service learning (Jacoby, 1996). The service learning projects presented in this article live up to these two dimensions. Sharing sessions are organized for students to discuss what they see and think (e.g., what they perceive as problems) in the fieldwork, and also voice their concerns and opinions on the implementation of the projects. Through the reflection, students learn interpersonal skills, teamwork spirits and social responsibility. The services students provide also benefit the community and relieve some workload of the charity organization.

5. IMPACT ON STUDENTS' PERSONAL GROWTH

Most of students gave positive feedback for the two projects. Feedbacks were collected during the sharing sessions of the two projects, from which clear signs of personal growth were presented. Students show growth in the following aspects.

5.1 Interpersonal skills and team work spirit

As mentioned, students come from affluent families of Mainland China has little experience of interacting with people from different economic and cultural background. They did not know how to wear properly in a home visit, nor did they have basic skills to start a conversation with whom they would visit. Training was provided to help them cope with the situation. After the first home visit, all the students talked about the experience excitedly. They said that it was easier than they thought and much more fun, because the elderly were very nice and talkative. As a result, students became more confident in communicating with people of different age and from different cultural and economic background. And because they had to work closely with team members to finish each task, they practiced team work as well. One group of students developed the most efficient way to pack and distribute food.

5.2 Self-responsibility

The participation in these projects was fully voluntary. How to make volunteers responsible has been a problem bothering charity organizations. In the Cradle of Hope project, 40% of the participants never missed one single service, although they were informed that if they were sick or had other arrangements during holidays, they could ask for leave. But 40% of them choose to stay. One of the students had his mother waiting for him for 2 hours because the service project overrun the allotted time. They said they knew that if they were not responsible, the children would have noticed. They wanted to be a role model for the children. In the Food Bank project, there was heavy rain during one home visit, students all got soaked but none of them yielded; all finished their work. It thus seems fair to say that students learned to be responsible for their work.

5.3 Social responsibility

In the project of Food Bank, students began to think about the welfare system in Macau and reflect on the welfare in Mainland China. Some of the students got interested in social security for elderly, and they compared the welfare system of Mainland China with that of Macau. Moreover, most of the students also learned that there is a profession called social worker. They suggested that University of Macau should also educate social workers for the society. In the project of Cradle of Hope, although students were happy to see that the children were taken good care of, they also felt sad for them because they did not have real families. Students realized the damage of broken families done to children. Some student proposed that the next step of the activity could be a promotion of care for children in the society.

Apart from these aspects, students learnt various things through the projects. These are some quotes from students' reflection. "We are very tired every time after the service, we fall asleep on the way back in the bus every time and sometimes even lean on the passenger

next side. Even so, I am happy doing the volunteer service. It is the happiest time in the week.”⁸ “I didn’t like children before, but now, when I see a child on the bus, I could not stop looking at him/her.” “I am amazed by children’s talent, they are fast learners and very creative.” “I learned to be responsible person through the service.” “I learned to be patient.” “I learned to behave myself so that I can set a role model for the children.” “I learned how to educate children with propensity for violence.”

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

From these two projects, we learned some experiences in the partnership with community organizations, and in the administration of students. Here I propose some suggestions that might be useful for future projects.

6.1 Partnership with community organizations

The role of community organizations needs to be clarified at the beginning of the collaboration. Community organization has its own agenda and they do not want to spend too much time on projects irrelevant to their agenda. To establish a partnership with community organizations, we have to take their agenda into account in designing the projects. But it is also important to keep independence while collaborating with community organizations. Otherwise, we may sidetrack the goal of the service learning.

6.2 Pre-set rules for students

Since the service-learning projects are not curriculum-based and not credit bearing, students can quit anytime during the project without being penalized. It is important to set up clear rules before the registration, and to deliver clear message about how much time it will cost and what gain they can expect from participating in the project. It was lucky that the two projects mentioned had zero dropout rates, students showed some resistance when they were pushed to think deeply and to read extra readings. It is thus important to layout the rules and have them sign an agreement in the very beginning.

Overall, extra-curriculum service-learning activities prove to be a fruitful practice in residential colleges. Various service-learning projects focusing on different areas of personal growth will contribute to the whole person education pedagogy of residential college. With the full implementation of residential college system in the university level, the number of service-learning projects is expected to grow. A systematic analysis on service-learning outcomes is also expected.

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⁸ These are quotes from students’ sharing. To protect privacy, students’ names are deleted. Original documents can be presented upon justifiable request.

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