

Assessing Students' Experiences of Service-Learning in the Philosophy of Life Courses

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Abstract:

Introduction

The instructors of “Philosophy of Life” include a service practice unit in the course design. Each student has one or two times, a total of 6 to 8 hours, to go to an off-campus institution for services to the disabled, special children, senior citizens, etc. The students who participate in the course will apply their expertise to the service organization and strengthen their life philosophy course—service-learning practice. The course objectives of “Philosophy of Life” provide students with the opportunity to reflect on life, to enable the ability of self-awareness and experience integration and to understand the meaning and value of life. Besides, the studies found that service practices can enrich students' knowledge and experience learning, leadership, interpersonal relationships and civic responsibility, and thus promote an all-around development; and the service learning motivates students to continue to practice society care or social justice action (Lin, 2016).

Theoretical framework/literature review

The concept of experiential learning stems from John Dewey's concept of “learning by doing”. Dewey believes that all real education comes from experience. Abstract concepts and theories can only be easily understood if they are restored to life experience. He regards that education, as a process of continuous reorganization and transformation of experience, needs to be guided by reason. He emphasizes the learner-centered education, placing the individual in the position of the learning subject, and focusing on the individuals psychology and experience (Li, Chen, & Shu, 2011; Wang, 2006). David Kolb integrates Dewey's educational philosophy, Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, and Kurt Lewin's learning theory, and proposes the concepts of the experiential learning cycle: “experiencing”, “reflecting”, “generalizing” and “applying”. Kolb points out that learners absorb experience in the practice, reflect on the experience, and then conceptualize the results of the experience, and finally apply it in life, and continue to cycle the above four stages in the experience education. Kolb's experiential learning circle theory is also the most commonly used learning model in Taiwan (Kolb, 1984; Guo, Liao, & Shi, 2010; Hsieh, Wang, & Zhuang, 2014).

Methods/analysis

The study was conducted in a northern private university in Taiwan. The targets included 11 classes in the first semester of 2018 academic year. The research materials are curriculum design and teacher's reflective journal for the “service-learning”. The qualitative analysis is used as a main method. The “Curriculum Design” and “Teacher Reflective Journal” are openly coded to

further find the same sub-themes. These sub-themes are further categorized to form different subject areas, and the analysis results of the above three steps are regularly discussed by two analysts until the consensus of the subject classification is obtained.

Results and Discussion

1. Value of Service-Learning Curriculum

(1) To pass the spirit of Catholic service

Fu Jen Catholic University, taking the service as one of the traits, conveys the spirit of Christian love to students and prompts them to have the comprehension through service practice.

(2) To understand the society needs and learn to give, to experience service and care, and cultivate the initiative to care for the society

The curriculum lets students walk out of the campus to find out the vulnerable groups who are in need of help. It aids students to learn how to give by doing their parts, stimulate their service enthusiasm and compassion, experience the value of caring and love between people, foster a benevolent and open mind, and will actively taking care of the social issues and those in need.

(3) To reflect and treasure the happiness on the process of service

When in service, students realize what they have. They also comprehend their own outlook, values and attitudes on life through guidance, and then cherish what they have.

(4) To recognize the service target not just the knowledge but also empathy

Have the opportunity to contact people of marginal groups and change the stereotype about them. Through the service experience, students can recognize the service target not just the knowledge but also empathy.

(5) To bridge both the school and social education; to apply the knowledge and learning in the academy for daily life

Providing the necessary service knowledge and combining the functionality of university education and social education, the curriculum plans students to walk out of the campus and participate in social services. It makes young people apply what they learn in the academy and use their knowledge to deal with real life situations.

2. The Teaching Guides for Service-Learning

Most importantly, the teacher leads and accompanies students to practice the curriculum.

I. Administration and knowledge & attitude for service-learning before the curriculum

(1) Administration:

- The teacher chooses a social welfare institution nearby and goes to know its operation and service contents.
- Invite the teaching assistant of the Service Learning Center to introduce the goals and processes of service-learning for students. Also the social worker of the institution comes to explain the nature, service contents and precautions before the curriculum.
- Arrange two service periods for students.
- Ask students to group and create service plans.

(2) Preparations for service knowledge:

- Introduce the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in the classroom, so that students can understand the basic rights of people. When they go to the institution, they can judge what rights of the service targets already have and what else are needed to

promote.

(3) Preparations for service attitude:

- Learn the attitude toward the human dignity and view.
- Strengthen students' enthusiasm and attitude toward service-learning.
- Enable students to understand and empathize with the service targets through service practice.

II. During the curriculum process

Guide students to learn the following:

- How to arrange your time?
- How to measure the needs of yourself and others?
- What is the life value of the service target?
- How to learn to serve others?

III. After the curriculum

After the curriculum, the teacher designs a learning sheet, based on the Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory (experience, understanding, judgment and decision) and asks students to write personal reflection report.

Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

After mutual understanding and service-learning activities, students are more willing to cherish, accompany, and distribute. Moreover, they feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment after serving others. Additionally, they recognize the target group more, and decrease the stereotype and fear to them. Most students give positive comments toward the service-learning activities in the course and feel meaningful as follows: Service-Learning fosters civic responsibility and engagement. Students and faculty report that Service-Learning has a positive impact on students' academic learning. Service-learning has strong influences on the ability of students to connect the theory which is learned in the classroom to the real world. Educational institutions recognize that service learning makes community-campus partnerships become closer and develop a stronger linkage with local residents.

Keywords: Philosophy of Life, service-learning, Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory

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