Debate as Service Learning

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Abstract: Service learning (SL) is an innovative teaching methodology where students apply what they have learned in the classroom to serve a community. Through SL, students will combine learning, practice and reflection. This paper presents a service learning activity on a Debate Tournament undertaken by TESL undergraduates of UPM. In this project, there were three groups involved: 20 TESL teacher trainees, 200 lower form students aged 13-14 years old and lastly 40 upper form students aged 16 years old. In this program, the teacher trainees provided the service, teaching and coaching the lower forms about debate. The teacher trainers were the service provider while the form one and two students were the service recipients. The third group in this program were the form four students who assisted in running the debate competition. Through this program, the teacher trainees gained hands on experience teaching and managing students while the students had the opportunity to debate and improve their communicative as well as argumentative skills. During the program, observation of the teaching was undertaken by an evaluation team. A survey was undertaken to gauge the students’ satisfaction and their perception of the activity at the end of the activity. The trainee teachers wrote their experience in their reflection report followed by a content analysis of it. Later a descriptive analysis of the survey was carried out and the results showed both groups, teacher trainees and school students, benefited from the program.

Key words: Service Learning • Pre-service teachers • Communicative skills • Argumentative skills • Debate

INTRODUCTION

Confucius, the scholar once remarked:

- I read and I forget,
- I see and I remember,
- I do and I understand.

This was probably the earliest observation of the strength of experiential learning over rote memorization. In fact, current best practices of teaching and learning tally with this wise observation. Today, practitioners and educators alike recommend hands on or experiential learning, cooperative learning and corroborative activities as effective means for successful learning to occur [1]. Unlike rote memorization or drilling, in experiential learning or collaborative activities, learners find such lessons more meaningful and relevant as they are able to connect what was taught (content knowledge) with what they already know (prior knowledge). Similar observation was made by the renown psychologist Ausubel many decades ago [2]. The above practices that emphasize the integration of student and knowledge centred mirrors what service learning is all about. In SL programs, students will use what they have learned in their academic skills and knowledge and apply them for practical purpose for example to solve problems in real life needs in their own communities. Hence, service learning is an effective and innovative teaching learning method [3] that links experiential learning with community engagement [4].

In fact in SL, the learning goes beyond the classroom walls and into the real world context that is in the community [5,6] According to SERC Pedagogic service [7], service learning programs involve student in organized community service that addresses local needs.
What is obvious is that in SL there are two parties involved—the service provider(s) and the service recipients. Because the service and learning goes in tandem, SL is reciprocity in nature—the element of give and take more than charity is involved [8].

For the learning process to take place, reflection, a key element of SL, is essential. Through it, the learner is able to make sense of his past experiences in order to affect and understand future experiences [9].

In the US service learning has been practiced for more than a decade and is extensively incorporated in many courses such as health sciences, communications, English, sociology and psychology [10]. Despite this, research in service learning is still at its infancy [11]. The following describe some of the research done in SL:

**Research in Service Learning:** Kendell [12] asserted that SL is, “the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (p 18). This included among others—students’ growth in academics, social maturity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and leadership skills [13].

Research done by Eyler & Gilkes, revealed, a majority of the participants asserted that they learned more and were motivated to work harder in service-learning classes than in regular classes, had a deeper understanding of subject matter and recognition of the complexity of social issues, remembered materials better through experience as they could apply the material that they had learn in class to real problems [6]. Lastly, it reported that the power of service-learning was rooted in personal relationships and in doing work that made a difference in people's lives.

Similar findings was also reported by Prentice and Garcia [14] who argued that CSL gave students opportunities to apply their classroom learning to real-life contexts, develop an appreciation of the interrelated aspects of all learning and life experiences.

According to Adele H Stamp Student Union [15] argued that CSL can help students develop the habit of critical reflection, deepen their understanding of course content, enable them to integrate with practice, sharpen their abilities to solve problems creatively, enhance their skills in working collaboratively and learn about human difference and commonality.

**Research of Service Learning and Language Acquisition:** Though language learning lagged behind other subjects in service learning, research results show overwhelming positive benefits [16]. Researchers and teachers reported improvement of language skills where students became less apprehensive [17] and had better communicative competence [18]. Since the target language was used in real-life context, collaborative learning approach adopted in the service learning promoted proficiency and self-confidence [19]. Service learning somehow lowered the students affective filters and this expedited their rate of learning the language [20].

**Service Learning and the Teacher Education:**

The potential of service learning in teacher education is enormous especially for pre-service teachers. SL enables PST (pre-service teachers) to try out new strategies, to practice them and to engage in peer coaching [21].

The following are some of the cited reasons why service learning should be included in the teacher education programs especially among pre-service teachers [22]:

- Service learning in teacher education enhances pre service teachers teaching and learning by improving their understanding of the academic content;
- Service learning increases pre service teacher social and civic understanding, participation and transformation.
- The service learning prepares the pre-service teachers for the workforce by having them work with students with whom they might not otherwise work with;
- The service learning assist the teachers to meet with the requirement of the school and nation educational requirement.

Even though SL has been around for quite some time (a decade in the United States), it is a new teaching and learning methodology here in Malaysia. The following describes debate as a service learning program carried out by the undergraduates at a school in one of its district area. Debate was chosen as it would benefit the two parties involved: students would have the opportunity to improve their oral communication skills [22] while the trainee teachers would be presented with a systematic teaching and learning approach[23].

Thus the objectives of the study were to determine:

- Students perception of the effects of the program carried out.
- How effective were the lessons carried out by the pre service teachers (PST)
- Any benefits the pre-service teachers gained.
MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

In this service learning, 20 pre service teachers (PST) conducted a debate program as part of their aural and oral course. The recipients were 200 form one and form two students aged 13 and 14 respectively. To assist the running of the debate tournament 40 form four students were appointed as debate committee members. For the undergraduates, the objectives of carrying out the SL were to:

- Apply/link what was taught in class.
- Work directly with students and benefit real teaching situation.
- Prepare them for the actual teaching world.

Whereas for the students, the objectives of the program were to:

- Introduce them about debate and its structure.
- Provide an opportunity for all students to debate.
- Teach students how to argue effectively.
- To create a positive speaking environment.

As in all service learning programs there were three stages involved:

- Preparatory stage b)Experiential stage c)Reflective stage.
- At the preparatory stage, a survey was undertaken among the undergraduates to determine their familiarity of debate. Subsequently, based from this survey, a training program was planned and carried out accordingly. Next was the experiential stage. Here the undergraduates went to the school and taught the school students about debate. A workshop was carried out to brief the students the debate structure and how to argue in debate. The workshop also included a mock debate where the undergraduate would give assessment at the end of the mock session. Subsequently, the students were grouped accordingly and a debate tournament followed. In the competition, the students would debate for four rounds. This was the preliminary round and winners would be announced at the end of it. After each round, the trainee teachers would assess the students’ performance.

During the workshop, each of the trainee teachers were observed and assessed by an evaluation team comprising postgraduates taking the course Curriculum and Syllabus Design in TESL.

Instrument: The instruments used included surveys, observation and reflection.

Survey: The survey comprises four sets of questionnaire:

- Pre Questionnaire (Q 1) was issued to the teacher trainees. Since this was the first time the study involved trainee teachers in debate, the construct item were exploratory in nature. It aimed among others to determine if the pre service teachers had any debate experience and thus the need to hold a workshop to train them.
- Post Questionnaire. There were two sets constructed for this purpose. One set was given to the lower form students to determine their perception of the program as debaters. The second set was given to the debate committee members to gain their feedback of the program. Both sets were given at the end of the activity. Most of the question items were adopted or modeled from published work that examined debate among first language learners. This included work by Kankanhailli [24], Rear [25] and Hall [26].
- While Questionnaire (Q4) was a teacher observation form used by the evaluation team to evaluate the trainee teachers teaching. This checklist form which had 40 items was adopted from Brown [27].

All the questionnaire items used a Likert scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. The midpoint rating of “3” was defined as “not sure”. An SPSS descriptive data analysis was run on the data obtained from the survey.

At the end of each questionnaire, an open ended question asking for their overall comment of program, suggestion and recommendation was given.

Observation: The observation here refers to the feedback of the evaluation team. Based on a check list, they provided information about the general teaching and what they felt of the program.

Reflection: At the end of the program, the pre-service teachers wrote a reflection report of the experience before, during and after the program. An analysis of the students’ reflection of the community service learning was done manually through multiple reading. Donnison and Itters [29] identified three themes based on online reflections. They were personal benefits and personal development, professional development and community understandings and connections.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey: Questionnaire Q1 consists of 4 statements given to the pre-service teachers (PST) at the beginning of the course. The result showed that a majority of the undergraduates were not familiar with debate and agreed to have debate training and workshop.

Questionnaire Q2 which consists of 21 statements was given out to each student in Form 1 and Form 2. From the findings, majority of the students found the program and its activities fun and beneficial. From the open-ended question, 143 were positive comments and 7 negative comments were retrieved. 73 students had no comments on debates.

Among the Advantages They Obtained

Benefits of Program: 72% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they had benefited from the program. The benefits gained by students could be categorized into four aspects: teamwork, debating skills, self-development and improvement in English language. 30.5% had strongly agreed and 43% had agreed that they had improved their spoken English after the debates.

Knowledge Gained: 78% stated they gained beneficial knowledge. New information included the debating concept: ARE (Assertion, Reason and Explanation and Evidence), learning about arguments, refutation, POI (point of information), making a stand and giving rebuttals. The students also gained a lot of information from the brainstorming activity.

Skills Learnt: 86% stated they picked useful skills such as being able to express their opinion, summarizing, elaboration of ideas, listening for main points and details, questioning and predicting arguments.

Recommendations and Criticism: Only the remaining 6% had negative perceptions of the program. These students felt less confident in taking part in future debating competitions. About 1/5 disagreed on having the debating competition again the following year.

From the open-ended questions, it was revealed that students found the program hectic and the time given to discuss/brainstorm was not enough. Others complained of having the program during the weekend as they wanted to meet their parents or rest.

Questionnaire Q3 was a set of questionnaire that had 17 items. This was given to the debate committee members who organized the overall running of the debate. All the members stated that the debate was useful for the students (67% strongly agreed and 33% agreed). 74% stated the debate was interesting, while 76% stated it was carried successfully while 67% stated it was carried out effectively. As for the workshop where teaching took place, 78% stated the teaching was clear and effective.

Questionnaire Q4 was a set of questionnaire that consisted of 52 items. This was administered to each member of the evaluation team who observed the teacher trainers during the program. It had five aspects which were preparation, presentation, methods/execution, personal characteristics and teacher-student interaction. 55% strongly agreed and 27% agreed that the teacher trainers were well-prepared and organized in class. 82% agreed that the teacher knew when the students had trouble understanding the lesson. 64% and 9% strongly agreed and agreed that the teachers positively reinforced the students. 91% agreed and strongly agreed that the teacher was able to control and direct the class.

Observation: It was reported that the program was well sequenced and structured. The lesson was planned accordingly with the following stages: 1. Explanation 2. Discussion 3. Brainstorm 4. Mock Debate (Practice) 4. Assessment 5. Debate Competition. During the explanation stage, the trainee teachers had handouts prepared for the students. However, the delivery could have been more effective if the trainee teachers had prepared teaching aids like colourful word cards to explain some of the concepts in debate since the students were young learners. It was observed most of the lessons at the beginning were lecture style-rigid and teacher centered. Some trainee teachers were reading aloud the handouts. It should have been a listening and speaking activity. They could have made the lesson clearer by using the existing debate seating position to explain the roles and debate structure and getting students involved by using the strategy total physical response. However, subsequent activities such as the discussion of a motion, brainstorming, mock debate and assessment were excellent as they were student centered and provided the students the guide and scaffolding needed before the actual debate.

Overall, the debate was a good program and benefitted both groups: the teacher trainees as well as the students. The lower for students had the opportunity to practice public speaking individually and independently. A lot of guide practice was provided, for example, the mock debate, discussion and assessment. Students gained a lot of benefits. The format guide was helpful and it provided the scaffolding. In the language aspect of speaking skills, they learned public
speaking, how to give opinions, how to argue effectively, how to be persuasive in giving ideas/opinions. From the listening aspect, they learned to identify main ideas and specific details and inferring. From the social aspect, they learned how to work in a team and to brainstorm. The skills learned included summarizing, questioning (during POIS), clarifying (when responding to POIs) and writing ideas in point forms.

However, there were some areas that needed to be improved. The program was quite hectic as the schedule was packed. Perhaps, it could be extended to two weekends and not one. This also would give more opportunity for the trainee teachers (undergraduates) to get to know their students better. Lastly, the program could do well if some fun activity such as games were carried out before the workshop.

As stated by Verducci and Pope [22], service learning enhances the pre-service teachers’ understanding of academic content. In this case, it was an opportunity to try out what they had learned from their courses or classroom and transfer them to real teaching situation. This also agrees too with findings by Eyler and Giles [6]. As suggested by Wasserman [21] by carrying the SL, trainee teachers were helping to meet the school and nation educational requirement. In this case as reported from the students’ perspective and the observation report of the evaluation team, the students gained invaluable hands on experience debating. They also had the opportunity to practice listening and speaking activity and at the same time to acquire useful information, knowledge and skill. This agrees with findings of Lee [23].

Reflection: Based on the undergraduates' reflections, the following themes were identified. Among them were the undergraduates’ gained personal benefits. They found the experience enjoyable and rewarding and they were really motivated and keen to get involved later in similar programs. Another theme identified was personal development. Here the undergraduates stated they had learned and acquired useful skill and gained positive attitudes of teaching. They understood a teacher’s work better and reaffirm their career choice. The third theme identified was community understanding and connection. Through the program they learn they could connect and understand the students better. They saw the importance of peer support among the school students in assisting their friends to learn a new skill.

The above three findings agree with the themes identified by Donnison and Itters [29]: personal benefits and personal development, professional development and community understandings and connections. This too agrees with Verducci and Pope [22] observation that SL promotes pre-service teachers’ social and civic understanding, participation and transformation. As reported in the observation, the SL enabled the trainee teachers to try strategies to practice and to engage in peer coaching. A similar observation was made by Wasserman [22]. Another important finding here is the effectiveness of hands on or experiential learning as stated by Zemelman [1]. These trainee teachers found the activity meaningful and relevant as they were able to connect what they had learned with the hands on exposure. Through this SL, they gained some insights of a teacher’s tasks in teaching and learning and handling of a classroom. It shed light what their future career would look like and this helped reaffirm the choice of career they had chosen.

CONCLUSION

The SL approach enable the trainee teachers to make debate doable and accessible to all the students in the lower forms. All the groups who were directly involved benefitted from the program: the trainee teachers as well as the school students. SL is an innovative teaching methodology and the strength of it is it links experiential learning with community engagement [4]. And as such, it should be included in the teacher education program.

REFERENCES