Early Collaborative Service Learning Activities and Suggestions for Service Learning Courses at a University in the Mekong Delta Region

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Abstract: *Service learning (SL) is a teaching method that combines meaningful service to the community with curriculum-based learning. Students improve their skills by applying their academic knowledge into the real world; they then reflect on their experience to enhance the connectivity between their service and their learning (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2018). However, in fact it seems that this learning approach has not widely been applied in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs). This paper reviews the SL application in foreign and national HEIs and its benefits towards instructors and students in the SL project process. In accessing some websites of institutions regarded as strong in the applicability of the SL approach, the authors used the document analysis method to explore the resilient advantages of the SL application. Then, an open-question survey was sent to 14 participative students from a Mekong Delta region university to learn about their SL perceptions, and finally this paper provided recommendations for the SL employability in some undergraduate training programs of this institution.*

Keywords: application, community, employability, higher education, teaching method

1. Introduction

Service learning (SL) has a long traditional origin of existence and it is defined by Barbara (1996) as a form of experiential education in which students participate in community activities to address the community needs, combined with structured opportunities for learners' reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes. Similarly, Xing (2013) stated that SL is a form of learning that occurs as students work with their peers through applying their academic knowledge to community needs, and simultaneously students reflect their experience and the real outside-world knowledge relevant to their skills. This teaching approach has been employed in various American HEIs for over three decades and this approach has been expanded in application in East Asian universities, especially in Hong Kong and Japan for over a decade. However, SL has, in fact, still seemed to be new in the Vietnamese HE context. As academic researchers working at An Giang University (AGU), located in the Mekong Delta region, the authors have gained some opportunities to attend international SL conferences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) and at Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines. We have had a valuable time to learn models and experiences of the SL practices applied in Hong Kong and Filipino universities. The writers of this paper aimed to provide the basic literature reviews of the SL approach and models used in foreign HEIs as well as in Vietnamese ones. This is followed with the volunteering practices and the beginning SL appearance AGU. Finally, the authors suggested needs to introduce some SL course forms that can be applied in this university to enhance the core quality of voluntary activities implemented by its Youth Union and Student Association and to promote students' sense and empathy for communities.

2. Literature Review

1) What is Service Learning (SL)?
So far there have been numerous definitions of SL. According to Knapp, Bradley, and Fisher (2010), SL is the engagement of students in service projects to apply classroom learning for local communities and agencies that exist to affect positive changes in the community. The National Youth Leadership Council (2008) defined SL as "a philosophy, pedagogy, and model for community development that is used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.SL refers to learning that actively involves students in a wide range of experiences, often benefitting others and the community, while also advancing the goals of a given curriculum (Univeristy of Washington, 2018). Carleton University (2017) considers that SL is a form of experiential education supporting deep. Through their SL activities, students apply classroom knowledge in practical settings to enhance their understanding of classroom knowledge. West Virginia University (2017) considers SL as a form of civic engagement in which students participate in a set amount of community service to learn more about community needs, the value of community involvement and to look for course content applied in the real world.

2) SL Benefits
Numerous studies have indicated that there are some obvious benefits of service or community learning bringing to the participants. Carleton University (2017) stated that SL can benefit all participants, including students, faculty, academic institutions, and communities. Students gain academic knowledge and skills, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence. Faculty can enhance the quality of their teaching; find opportunities for research and outlets for professional expertise. SL supports the civic engagement mission of colleges and universities and improves town relationships. Community members receive valued service

and institutional support. There is also great evidence of SL benefits. A number of researchers like Giles (1999), Astin, Sax, & Avalos (2000), and Elyer (2001) have documented the SL benefits to students and, to a lesser extent, faculty, academic institutions and community members. SL improves student learning outcomes and contributes to student personal and social development. Faculty report enhanced teaching, service, and research opportunities; academic institutions report increased student retention and improved community relationships. Community partners receive additional resources to support their agencies' mission.

It can be stated that SL brings lots of benefits for all participants, not only for students and faculty but also for academic institutions and their communities. Due to obvious benefits to communities, SL enables institutions to create and design training programs to be more applied and practical in life. It helps to shorten the gap between theory and practice in life realities. Moreover, it helps students to gain practical and deep learning and inspires them more civic, community and global engagement. Therefore, almost all universities in the United States have compulsory policies for SL. An increasing number of Asian universities such as in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and the Philippines are designing practical SL programs and put them into practice.

3) Overview of service-learning practices in Vietnamese HEIs

A glance at the model of Vietnamese HEIs
The first Vietnamese HEI, Temple of Literature (*Quốc Tự Giám*), was founded in 1076. This institution helped the Royal dynasties to train elite people to become national leaders. The university perceived as it is now is in fact that it appeared in Vietnam since the 1920s. It followed the model of French HEIs until 1954. Later, the HEIs in northern Vietnam followed the mono-disciplinary Soviet system while the ones in southern Vietnam were influenced by the comprehensive US model. Since the reunification of the country in 1975, the Vietnamese HEIs were still influenced by the Soviet model, including two main characteristics: focusing on teaching and mono-disciplines. This theoretical learning convention has been viewed to have weak linkages between universities and community by Billig and Furco (2002), and Kirkham (2001).According to Pham Thi Ly (2014), in HEIs' three core tasks: teaching, research and community services, she considered that most Vietnamese HEIs merely focused on the task of teaching while research is conducted by research institutes separating from universities. Community learning services were considered as extra-curriculum activities.

The connectedness of communities and universities in Vietnam
It was stated by LyPham (2014) that the model of Vietnamese HEIs has existed as an ivory tower due to two reasons: (i)most HEIs are public institutions granted by the state's finance, having limited autonomy and weak motivations for innovation, and (ii) between 1975 and 2011, many Vietnamese HEIs did not really need to attract students and they did not see their community engagement as a survival matter. She added that the traditional model of

'ivory tower' formed by a central planning economy did not create incentives for HEIs to have engagement into local communities serving the society's specific needs. HEIs' community engagement activities are seen most popular such as "Green Summer Volunteer Campaign", "Summer Youth Volunteer Campaign" launched by Vietnam's Youth Union (VNYU) in the late years of the 20th century. In the past years, these youth – activity movements have attracted thousands of students every year in the called –Youth Month (26th March, 1931, the foundation date of VNYU) and in two summer months (July and August).Green Youth Summer is voluntary activities of college and university students in their summer holidays that target to serve disadvantaged people in remote areas. These activities, according to Mr. Le Quoc Phong, the first Secretary of the VNYU, actually create a practical and experiencing environment for students to actively excel their soft skills such as planning, time management, teamwork, public speaking and communication (Thu Hang, 2017). Ly Pham (2014) stated that although the youth movements greatly helped in students' capacity building, the past years' youth voluntary activities were simply a mode of temporary educational activity/movement rather than true community services that universities offer to transform the community. She also added that over nearly two decades there has been an increase in the number of private HEIs in Vietnam which accounted for 19% in the total number of Vietnamese HEIs and the students from private HEIs took for 1% of the total number of students. She stated that community service programs implemented by private institutions such as FPT University, Nguyen Tat Thanh University were more meaningful to communities' needs than public ones. She, however, admitted that one public institution in the Mekong Delta region - namely Can Tho University did quite well their practical research to serve the needs of local communities in the fields of agricultural and environmental sciences (Ly Pham, 2014).

AGU's voluntary activities
In this section, the writers only revised AGU's voluntary activities from 2014 to 2017. In general, AGU's Youth Union organized youth activities in March and two summer months (July and August) every year. For instance, in the Youth Month (March), frequent activities such as "Philanthropic Blood Donation", "Voluntary Saturday for Environmental Protection", "Youth Leader Competition", "Max-Leninism Sciences and Ho Chi Minh's Ideology' Competition", Job-orientation Consultancy Day, International Women Day (8th March), and Celebration of Youth Foundation Day (26th March) were organized. For the two summer months, several common activities (including teaching primary students, organizing sport games for local youths, cleaning paths streets, schools, and cemeteries; propaganda activities, social activities of thanking and gratitude such as offering gifts for policy families: invalid soldiers, Vietnam's Heroic Mothers.

Every year, according to AGU's Youth Union, nearly 300 AGU students (in the total student number of nearly 16,200) participated into voluntary activities to get peripherally "practical or movement marks"(ĐRL - Điểm Rèn Luyện) rather than 'true community – engaged services. Only about two percent of students participated in these activities (An

Giang University Youth Union, 2014).In general, voluntary activities and movements operated by AGU's Youth Union partly encouraged its students to engage in local community services. Still, their community-service engagement has not really been in a sense of proactive, deep, sincere meaningfulness. Therefore, only few AGU students truthfully desired to actively join those voluntary activities.

In the past three years, within the collaborative framework agreement on implementing the SL Program between AGU and HKPU, about 30 students of different academic disciplines from HKPU were annually sent to AGU to implement their SL activities [with the assistance of AGU students of the Foreign Language Faculty (FLF)] in schools and local communities in remote and disadvantaged areas such as in Thoai Son District and the Tiger Island in Long Xuyen City. The students of the two universities were organized to work in groups of three (2 HKPU students and 1 AGU student). Before the SL project, the students of the two institutions were given careful instructions and duties on their SL responsibilities. For instance, the students explored and learned the local knowledge and cultural practices of communities, and Hong Kong students, simultaneously, introduced some basic knowledge of healthy lifestyle that they gained in academic settings to the local residents and encouraged them to eat locally nutritious meals to reach a simple and healthy lifestyle. Additionally, the students instructed the local residents to practice common simple and physical exercises to keep healthy. What the Hong Kong students did for the Tiger Island (My Hoa Hung Commune)'s local communities in the time of their SL activity truly moved the hearts of the local people and AGU students participating in the activity. From 2015 to 2018, the collaborative SL projects of the students from HKPU and AGU sincerely came into the hearts of the local communities and of the participative students although they did not share the same language. The students from the two universities developed their empathy towards the poor communities around them. Many participative AGU students stated that they actually had positive changes in their minds about voluntary work. They developed the friendships with their Hong Kong peers and instructors. Many of them cried on the farewell party day. They wished that AGU's Youth Union and the Faculty of Foreign Language could organize some similar SL activities for AGU students.

Why to use SL approach

Carleton University's lecturers considered that service learning could promote a deep approach to learning for participative students (Carleton University, 2018). They stated that SL required students to use classroom knowledge to provide effective community service. Howard (2001) noted that students participating in SL could apply knowledge by applying and testing academic learning. They might synthesize knowledge by bringing their past and present learning together to add coherence to their academic studies. They also might have a critical thinking and a distinction of important things in the real world that can be filled in their minds. They, additionally, could learn cultural diversity from the local communities around them, and finally it was likely for them to develop their communal and social values through experiencing community issues.

Due to goals of sustainable education development, many educators from the US universities such as West Virginia University, Carleton University, and Wisconsin University have made efforts to help their students to apply classroom knowledge to the real communities. By doing so, it means that they are enhancing the connectivity between university and community through SL.

A group of Carleton University instructors defined SL as an effective means to teach about sustainability and to link classroom learning to community challenges (Carleton University, 2018). Through the application of SL in undergraduate and postgraduate training programs, students can gain the following benefits:

- See the relevance and tangible application of how concepts learned in class relate to society;
- Develop an understanding of the research process from "big ideas" to experimental design to analysis;
- Experience the complexity and unpredictability of engaging with real world problems;
- Learn to synthesize, integrate, and infer relationships;
- Develop independence and learn professionalism;
- Understand the nature of non-unique solutions;
- Be resourceful to solve challenges independently and creatively,
- Develop "soft skills" in working with community partners,
- See themselves as relevant and empowered,
- Strengthen civic agency, and
- Improve motivation and take their work more seriously when they have a real client.

(Carleton University, 2018).

Base on such benefits, the SL experts of Carleton University suggested strategies for teaching with service learning by designing, executing and assessing a service learning project. In this project, lecturers can take advantage of the wealth of experience, resources, and materials developed by their colleagues:

1) Scale the project so that it is appropriate for the skill level of the students and the time frame allotted;
2) Have classroom content that dovetails with service learning activities;
3) Have students write about their activities in a journal, blog or web page as one mechanism for assessment;
4) Make use of expertise and resources from the community/stakeholders;
5) Have the class collectively participate in a research project from conception to completion;
6) Use scaled activities. These can be effective and increase student motivation. For example, there might be an expected level of effort for a course, but additional effort may lead to co-authorship of a paper;
7) Outsource research experiences in order to help manage faculty loads and broaden student experiences, and
8) Use service learning successes to improve town-gown relations

(Carleton University, 2018).

3. Methodology and Study Results

The authors used a document analysis to review previous studies to learn about SL benefits and understand the SL practices in the current Vietnamese HEIs. In order to learn

about the participative AGU students' SL perceptions in June 2018, the authors designed an open-question survey to learn about their positive and negative perceptions, and difficulties they got when joining this year's SL project. The survey was sent to 14participative students via email. All 14 responded surveys were obtained. The 14 respondents greatly appreciated the practical meaning of the SL project conducted by the HKPU's Nursing School. These engaged students reported that they learned and developed lots of necessary skills and academic knowledge from this year's SL project. They all had positive perceptions about the SL projects. They included:(i) recognizing the civic responsibility for community and society, (ii) developing communication skills, teamwork skills, money and time management skills, and interview skills, (iii) improving intercultural communicative competence with Hong Kong peers in their work groups, (iv) having a sense of hearted empathy towards disadvantaged people and local communities, (v) having initial senses of wider regional ASEAN citizenship and global citizenship, (vi) improving their pedagogical competence and translation skills, (vii) learning difficulties in life of the local people, (viii) learning some basic healthy lifestyles, and (ix) developing foreign friendship and having close foreign friends. For difficulties, most of them admitted that they did not have much difficulty when participating in the project. Specifically, one respondent said that perhaps Hong Kong friends had more difficulties in food, culture than AGU students had. Another student stated that he had some difficulties in communicating with their Hong Kong peers on initial days due to lack of vocabulary to express, but then he could overcome these difficulties in next days and they had better mutual understandings and became good friends. In brief, AGU students had lots of positive perceptions and emotions about the SL project in 2018, expanded their international friendship, and they themselves developed their senses of civic social responsibility and community engagement.

4. Suggestion for the SL employability at AGU

From the above-mentioned SL benefits, the writers believed that in order to develop students' empathies towards local communities and simultaneously to promote the Five Constants of Confucius's virtue ethics (*Rén* (仁 , benevolence, humaneness)- Nhân;*Yì* (義/义, righteousness or justice)- Nghĩa;*Lǐ* (禮/礼, proper rite) – Lễ;*Zhì* (智, knowledge) - Trí;*Xìn* (信, integrity) Tín (Runes, 1983)for AGU students to become ASEAN and global citizens in the future, some current BA training programs of AGU need to be considered to integrate them in a manner that they can encourage students' community-service engagement. Following are my suggestions to introduce some integrated subjects to turn these academic subjects to become some modes of service learning at AGU.

- Group 1: Integration of English, natural science and environment subjects
- Group 2: Integration of English, business and agriculture sciences
- Group 3: Integration of English, IT, business and arts
- Group 4: Integration of English, culture, tourism, and environment subjects

Firstly, instructors of such above subjects need to have discussion meetings to find out how they can combine their disciplines to create interdisciplinary service learning projects to address local community needs in the Mekong Delta Region in general and in An Giang province in particular. Secondly, the instructors need to make surveys to learn real needs of the local communities and adjust their expected curriculum-based outcomes. Thirdly, in order to have such project-based learning methods to be implemented conveniently, there initially needs to have greater support from the Rector Board, and relevant faculties, supportive offices and units of AGU. Then, service learning will become official requirements for AGU graduates to gradually replace presently non-meaningful voluntary activities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper provides the literature review of SL practiced in national and foreign HEIs. It is followed with the introduction of the benefits of the SL approach towards teachers' professional development activities and students' learning outcomes. Lastly, the paper ends with some recommendations for future SL courses that can be applied at a university in the Mekong Delta region to address local communities' needs and to enable its staffs and students to have higher competences in their journeys of becoming ASEAN and global citizens in the time of integration deeply and broadly to come.

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