

Glimpses of Medical technology Students: The Realities of Service- Learning

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This study sought to determine the effects of service-learning among students enrolled in Community and Public Health. Employing content analysis, reflections of students from 2009 to 2013 were analyzed by looking at their journal entries during their community immersion. Learning experiences were grouped according to similarities, but unique recording of reflections written by a few were also included and analyzed. Reflections of the majority of students were full of positive outlook at the start of their encounter with the community, looked at their task with excitement and had willingness in their hearts to serve. Their reflections were about the joys of serving and an appreciation of whatever little they had as an individual and as a family. They realized that they had no reason to be discontented with what they had in life because they saw with their very eyes how families in the community lived with almost nothing at all. A number expressed ambivalence helping others because they too felt that they had unmet needs. In this group, a few admitted that their attitude towards the community members was wrong, and they hoped that if given another opportunity to serve, they would be kinder and less judgmental. However, the rest of those who entered the community with ambivalence indicated a change in their attitude towards the families they were serving.

Keywords: content analysis, service-learning, reflections, community service

INTRODUCTION

Community and Public Health is a 5-unit course of a BS Medical Technology student. It has a 3-hour lecture component that is classroom-based and a 6-hour community immersion component where small groups of 15 or 20 students are accompanied by their instructor to needy communities identified by the Institute of Service-Learning of Silliman University. The students are tasked to assess the health status of the members based on existing data obtained by barangay health workers or rural health units and results from laboratory tests that they conduct among the members. The immersion may run for three (3) months, and each week the students are required to write entries in their reflection journal about the learnings and realizations as they interacted with their classmates, their instructor, and more importantly, their assigned community.

McDonald and Kunard (2008), in their book *Reflection Guide: Making Sense of the Service Learning Experience* notes that service-learning makes experiences in the community better as students engage in experiences that help them learn while also helping the community meet its needs. This experiential education is made possible by integrating the learning experiences through reflections (McDonald & Kunard, 2008). The University of Minnesota Community Service-Learning Center (n.d.) identifies reflections as one of the most rigorous components of service-learning. The exercise, however, allows the students to thoughtfully process their community work and critically reflect upon their experience.

Oftentimes, student reflections talk about victories and the joy they attain from serving others. The reason why students would rather write about positive feelings is because they truly feel fulfilled in community work or because writing only about the good stuff is the safest place to go especially as they know that their reflections will be discussed and processed by their facilitator (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Usually, students who come from stable and loving family backgrounds and who have parents who can provide them with their basic needs and wants, or who come families that are very supportive of their endeavors find it easy to write about the positive impact the community experience has taught them. However, a few who belong to families who have to struggle for their basic needs write entries in their reflection journal about their ambivalence when they enroll in the course (Putnam, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was obtained from reflection journals of students enrolled in Community and Public Health of the Institute of Clinical Laboratory Sciences in Silliman University. Using content analysis, reflection journals from 2009 to 2013 were examined and analyzed for similarities or differences. The process involved an understanding of the reflections and thematic narrative analysis of the retrospective data (Ogden, 2014). According to Kohlbacher (2006), qualitative content analysis is a method of examination of data material. It focuses on interpretation rather than quantification and on subjectivity rather than objectivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barbara Jacoby in *Service-Learning in Higher Education* (1996), noted that “Service-learning is a form of experiential education where students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes.” This principle goes very well with the mindset to serve and learn from the process. However, students with unresolved issues about who they are or what their purpose in life is engage in service-learning activities bring to the community a spirit of resentment and pretentious service because deep in their hearts, they are still ambivalent about the very essence of service-learning. They may enter the community with insensitive hearts and judgmental spirits who want to get away from people as soon as possible. These are students who go through the process of community immersion but without enthusiasm, no joy in the things that they do.

AMBIGUANCE AND INDIFFERENCE IN STUDENT REFLECTIONS

A journal entry of a student who found it very difficult to appreciate what she was doing for the families assigned to her group at the very beginning of her community immersion narrates:

When I started this course in Community and Public Health, I was reluctant and I did not want to serve others in the community.

I did not like the idea of helping people who did not even want to help themselves. I entered the community not with a merry and cheerful heart because I myself had so many needs in my life that were not met. I was a whiny kid who complained about wanting to acquire the newest iPhone not recognizing that others do not even have the simplest of mobile phones.

Such were the strong words in the journal entry of one student assigned in a depressed community in Dauin, Negros Oriental. Indeed, a few of the students entered the community with a skeptic mindset. They hated the idea of helping people who do not like to help themselves. They were cautious, and they shunned mingling with other people because of their pre-conceived idea that people in the community often pretended to be socially-acceptable. The students admitted that they just went through the process of listening to the stories of the people in the community despite the fact that they had already dismissed the stories of the wives or husbands as exaggerated. They believed that people would tend to concoct stories about their life in order to cover up something that they did not want others to know. They listened to the stories believing that these people may opt to omit some facts and add a few to their life story so that they may seem like better people to the listener. One noted in her reflection a very poignant comment: “They would say they eat vegetables when actually they were not eating them at all.”

STRUGGLES AND SACRIFICES OF STUDENTS IN SERVICE-LEARNING

The life of Medical Technology students in the community can be likened to a medical mission. After organizing the community and engaging them through public health awareness, the students, through Service-Learning and Community Participatory Action Research, worked with the household members to identify the top three health problems they believed was affecting their members and to determine solutions that address the problems and help improve their health. This was achieved first of all by getting the demographic profile of the household members and assessing their health through laboratory tests. The activity was a daunting task for very busy students who have almost 27 units of course work for the entire semester. Doing the activity means staying in the

community for long periods to assess the people's baseline health status, testing drinking water supplies of each household, examining the feces of adults and children for intestinal parasites, and examining their urine samples to obtain presumptive indicators for urinary tract infection, diabetes or kidney damage. The students examined blood samples to rule out anemia and diabetes, and determine the community member's blood type, blood pressure, and body mass index (BMI) especially if they appeared to be malnourished and financially-challenged.

After meeting with the community, health challenges revolved around the areas of waste management to eradicate dengue infection, provision of clean drinking water, and lifestyle changes to correct anemia, diabetes, parasitism, hypertension, or malnutrition. Students provided tips to household members through health education sessions and lifestyle intervention activities. The community was organized in a way that they could appoint among themselves leaders who could do the supervision so that no one in the community would be left behind. Towards the end of the community immersion, a closing program was conducted to celebrate the learning of the people in the community.

If the community assigned to the students was not within the city but was 20 kilometers away, they had to wake up at 4AM during a regular school day so they could catch the school bus that would leave at exactly 5 AM. Sometimes, the students would skip lunch because by the time they got back to their school, it was almost 1PM, and they had another classroom-based subject to attend. In one journal entry, the student wrote:

Service-learning is exhausting. It involves a lot of sacrifices. You give time, effort and money. It consumes your energy—but it is fun. When you are in the community, you cannot think about the grades you get on exams but you become more concerned about how you make a community member happy.

SERVICE-LEARNING GAVE STUDENTS A SENSE OF FULFILLMENT

To most students, the community experience was one of the most memorable moments of their lives. It gave them a feeling of being useful.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” One student noted:

As a student I felt useful because I experienced what it is to be a health worker. In the community assigned to us, some families were not warm, hospitable and welcoming, and we had to be very patient. I know it was hard for them to spare some time for us because they have a family to attend to but they still come to our lectures and I felt honored that they cooperated. I had compassion for them because although some families could eat three times a day, others could not. And even though I had to wake up early just to reach their place on time, and even though we almost could not spend our weekends with our family and friends because we had to do overtime work, the community was worth sacrificing for. (Emerson, n.d.)

Another student shared that the course in Community and Public Health changed his perspective as a person. He wrote:

Service-learning taught me to stay grounded though we were surrounded with the power and potential to be a good leader and speaker. We were in the community to teach them about improving their health. Instead the community members whom I have dealt with were the ones teaching me lessons—not about academic stuff but life lessons that I will never forget. It gave me a better view and closer look of the realities of those who are challenged in all aspects of their lives.

Institute of Clinical Laboratory Sciences aims to produce globally competent graduates who are well immersed in the community. It is believed that learning cannot be gained solely within the confines of classrooms. Learning should foster community building by promoting health and uplifting the environment. When student groups were assigned to the community with health needs, they are never assigned to communities that were affluent. In a journal entry of one student, he clearly noted this observation:

The community we served never knew what it is to be prosperous. They live in very simple settings as tenants of the land. Most of the time their expenses are greater than their income and it is too difficult for them to maintain a healthy physical body. When we came to their community they had no sanitary practices. They hardly bathed, they threw garbage anywhere and did not appreciate the eating of vegetables. So we taught them about the food pyramid and the importance of sanitation. We showed them how to wash their hands and bathe their children. We provided seedlings for them to start a community vegetable garden. Towards the end of our stay in the community, we checked their garden and it was well-tended and watered. And when we offered them food to eat, it was wonderful to hear one resident declining and saying “manghinaw sa ko” (I will wash my hands first). It was an overwhelming feeling to see lifestyle change even in a community who had almost nothing.

A relatively well-off student wrote:

Service-learning developed in me patience. I learned to live out of my comfort zone and stay under the heat of the sun for long periods alongside bushes. Now I can say that I can do this again without getting affected anymore. I saw that life is never fair, that problems can come and go but it is always up to us to crumble with the difficulties or choose to rise up to the challenges. If God will allow me to finish my course, I will not forget to give back to the less privileged even in my own simple ways.

Echoing Gordon B. Hinckley’s (2014) words, “One of the great ironies of life is this: he or she who serves almost always benefits more than he or she who is served.” A student also wrote: “my perspective about people and things around me changed and made a big impact in my life. The unwashed and dust-covered bodies of children in shirts almost likened to rags made me think of what I have right now: ‘I had enough and they had very little of that which is necessary.’”

SERVICE-LEARNING FOSTERED A SENSE OF SECURITY

Another aspect that community work through service-learning did to the lives of others was to make classmates who used to be strangers become partners, allies, and friends. They felt secure to speak out and share their fears with each other. A classmate could share personal woes like the following: “I was shocked that condoms were given for free by the City Health Office. The idea seem to encourage people to have sex even without marriage. I understand that one’s sexual desire is difficult to control but I do not think that this should be done.” This sense of being accepted by one’s teammates in service-learning also gave them the feeling of security. One said, “Service-learning is not about being acknowledged for the work you have done. It is about loving your work and being able to bless others even in small ways. Their happiness brings joy to my heart. Their smiles are enough reward for the time and effort I placed for them. We are not ‘magical genies’ who can grant their wishes but at least we tried to help them in simple ways.”

SERVICE-LEARNING RESULTED IN CHANGED LIVES

Going back to how the story ended for the student who found it difficult to serve others, towards the end of her community work, her entries slowly demonstrated positive changes in her outlook. She wrote:

But as my meetings with the community progressed, I was able to inch closer into their lives and I felt grateful that I live the life I have right now. I always whined because of the things I don’t have but when I see Ate Norma, struggling to feed her big family, Criselda who married at such a young age, Ate Mercedita who barely spoke of her hardships, I had to be thankful to God for what I have. These people do not even know what the food pyramid is much less eat a balanced diet with their current budget. Our group could not help them financially but we could give them the knowledge for their daily undertakings. To be able to help others, you don’t have to have something grand. We could not give them a few hundred pesos—we couldn’t do that because we were just students ourselves. We helped them pick themselves up by giving them knowledge. But if I will be given another chance to serve

I would be more enthusiastic next time. I will stop myself from flinching or making hideous faces when I see things I do not like. I find myself doing this all the time and it is very insulting to other people. Years from now, I will look back and think about what made me behave badly in the community. I would not want to be selfish to others but help them the best I could. Ghandi once said that “the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others”. Now I thank my teachers, my classmates especially the people in the community who changed a lot about me and how I viewed life. Much like what Ghandi said, it is in serving others that I found my true self.

It is a joy that in the Institute of Clinical Laboratory Sciences students become better persons and learn to empathize with those in need. It is this life-changing experience that makes students feel that they are agents in redirecting the lives of community members. The privilege of assisting them in prioritizing community health problems, implementing healthy lifestyles, and empowering the community to take actions to improve their health redefined students’ perception of looking at the welfare of others—they learned that the true value of service to others is not to consider only those who are close to a person but also “the others” who need utmost services. One student, while performing laboratory tests for a community member, noted: “Performing lab tests for those in need and who might be truly sick made me nervous. I decided to perform the test accurately because if I don’t, the inaccurate results I give might affect his life. I was already sad that in the registration table for Sitio Hawa-hawa, purok Bandera Espanola, Dauin, Negros Oriental some people could not read or write or even spell out their names correctly. They say to me ‘ikaw na lang bahala day.’ Some come with deformed hands and feet—lacking three fingers or toes. I said to myself ‘if they cannot read or write and lacked fingers as well...the least I can do for them is provide them with an excellent community health service. Putting smiles on their faces, giving them courage and knowledge about health and life makes me happy inside—I am a better person now and I now appreciate the things I have.”

Service-learning allowed our students to gain from the engagement. One student during a reflection session noted: “It has blessed me to know that I have shared my knowledge in improving one’s quality of life. I never

valued my education before but listening to them made me appreciate the privilege given to me to go to school and learn. Listening to their knowledge based only in oral tradition and beliefs showed me that the task ahead of us is difficult—it is hard to change attitudes and to remove belief systems from the minds of the uneducated. I realized that transporting my learnings from the four corners of my classroom helped me to inspire others in improving their quality of life, promote health and prevent diseases.” Another said that “service-learning gave memories and learnings that money cannot buy. Lessons that one can only glean from the community and not from classrooms. I realized that mingling with the people makes them feel comfortable by the simple act of listening and talking to them. When I asked the members of the community about their monthly income, I felt so guilty because my parents support me and provided for all my needs. There wasn’t anything that I needed that they couldn’t give. I was able to think of how much hardship they have gone through and the efforts they exerted so they can provide all our needs in the family. I learned from the community members how to value budgeting my money and saving for the future because we will never know what our future holds for us, to avoid getting things which I don’t need. My experience made me thrifty and more practical when acquiring things.”

“If only we had a longer time in the community,” lamented one student, “I think that we could have done more for them; more projects, better programs that will prevent disease occurrence. Saying goodbye was never an easy thing especially when they said ‘balik-balik ra nya mo.’ These people have caught my heart and I will treasure my community hours with them in my heart.” These were the most common words students wrote as they closed their journal entries. “We wanted to build healthier communities for them yet in return they have given us something bigger than all the services we have put together for them: the community has made a better and renewed version of myself”.

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Health Diagnosis in the Community begins with understanding what they need. Nutritionally-deficient communities are encouraged to help themselves using whatever resources they have.





As part of their approach to community organizing, community members are provided with free laboratory procedures for water, urine, blood and fecal analysis.



Community members are encouraged to maintain healthy lifestyles and clean their environment.



The road to service-learning may be difficult but students do not mind the sacrifice.