Perceived Effects of Service Learning Program on the Academic Development of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

The research paper ascertained the perceived effects of service-learning program (SLP) on the academic skills development of pre-service teachers in one of the universities in the Philippines. The study utilized pre-experimental design among 187 students measured in different times. The researcher employed a two-part quantitative questionnaire and one semi-structured questionnaire to determine the perceived effects. The result revealed that SLP has high effects on the academic skills development of students. Respondents further explained that SLP helped them value the importance of proper lesson planning, employing differentiated instruction, and mastering classroom management to be a more effective educator.

Keywords: Service learning program, pre-experimental design, academic development

I. Introduction

In 2008, *Teachers Matter* was the theme chosen for the World Teachers' Day – a belief majority, if not all, upholds. Teachers do matter that in fact, it is an accepted naked truth that teachers occupy the central role in maneuvering and developing the outcome of educating the country's future generations. Hanushek (2013) of Stanford University sympathizes, "Over the last two decades, research on student achievement has pinpointed the central role of teachers. While other factors—families, peers, neighborhoods— are obviously elements in a student's learning, it is the school and particularly the teachers and administrators who are given the public responsibility for the education of our youth. There is a general consensus that improving the effectiveness of teachers is the key to lifting student achievement, although questions remain about how best to do this" (p.23).

Thus, it is very critical how pre-service teachers are trained, supported, and developed. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2014) believes that preparing pre-service teachers is important since well-prepared teachers are more likely to produce higher student achievement and to remain in teaching. Further, teacher preparation helps candidates to develop the knowledge and skills they need. Unfortunately, many pre-service teachers failed to develop their academic skills while in training. These academic skills "are what we call *transferable skills,* which means these will stand (pre-service teachers) in good stead both when looking for employment and in (their) future careers" (Smale & Fowlie, 2009). Underdeveloped academic skills of students, when not honed, are carried over that results to unpromising, underprepared career execution.

Australian Government Primary Principals Association (2014) reported,

> *"Principals in Australian Government Primary Schools are encountering newly qualified teachers who have not mastered basic literacy and numeracy concepts together with some who have hardly seen the inside of a classroom. Inconsistencies between teacher training institutions, course content and outcomes are generating teachers with widely varied*

competencies, including some who are simply not ready to teach. In order to train and produce high quality future teachers, we need the government to outline a clear vision for world-class preservice education in Australia"

Unfortunately similar problem exists here, in the Philippines. Acedeo (n.d.) of The World Bank reported that teacher education graduates are weak in subject matter content. Recent graduates' four years or more of academic preparation proved inadequate, making them ill prepared to educate the next generation. The trend of the result of the recent licensure examinations for teachers where on average, a dismal 24% of test takers only pass, manifests the situation the education system is in.

Objectives of the study

This study determined the perceived effects of SLP towards the academic skills development of pre-service teachers.

Significance of the Study

Results precipitated from this study are intended to contribute to the body of knowledge in training and honing the academic development of pre-service teachers and are believed to be significant to the following: 1) *curriculum developers* - their desire to search for effective strategies in developing the academic skills of students can be fulfilled by processing the result of this study. They may implement or enrich to come up with a better methodology in helping preservice teachers reach their fullest potentials; 2) *professors of pre-service teachers* – they are the main molders of tomorrow's teachers. The result from this study will help them to initiate, adopt, or enrich strategies found to be effective; 3) *pre-service teachers* – they are the main recipient of this study. The result of this endeavor may help them develop their academic skills; 4) *researchers* – this study may inspire other thirsty researchers to quench their hunger for solution in developing the academic skills of pre-service teachers by conducting similar or parallel study.

Theoretical Foundations
Service-Learning Program.
ServiceLearning Program, which, recently, has been gaining positive support in holistically developing students in many countries around the world, can be traced to Dewey's ideal of experiential education. Today, we call it the integration of community service and the school curriculum.

Service-Learning Program (SLP) is a teaching and learning strategy that combines practical real-life experience, with academic theory. SLP integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, foster students' sense of civic engagement, and sharpen their insights into themselves and their place in the community (Fayetteville State University (n.d.) & Indiana University Bloomington, (n.d.).

In short, SLP provides an opportunity for students to apply what they have been learning in the class in a more practical setting. They are involved in the community service related to the course they are taking. In SLP, "students learn not only social issues but also how to apply the new knowledge to action that addressed real problems in their own communities" (Torres & Sinton, as cited in Duke University, n.d.).

Several authors and researchers gave various definitions of SLP. But even though it seemed that coming up with just a single definition is elusive, "all agree that service learning programs are a powerful tool to address important social issues that communities in general face today" (Casey, 2006).

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).
"Experiential learning theory (ELT) draws on the work of prominent 20th century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development – notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others – to develop a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience and a multi-linear model of adult development" (Armstrong &

Fukami, 2008). The primary focus of higher learning education according to ELT is to engage students in a process that best enhances their learning. This process may include feedback on how effective is the effort they are investing in. For ELT, education must be a continuous reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1897).

The works of the prominent scholars are integrated into six prepositions, which they all share (Armstrong & Fukami, 2008):

Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. For learning to take place, the focus must be on the process that includes feedback on the affectivity of the learning effort.

All learning is re-learning. It is important that students' prior knowledge is accurate, activated, and integrated with the new, more refined ideas.

Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Without conflicts, differences, and disagreements learning process will not take place. For someone to learn, it is imperative that s/he solves the opposing conflict.

Learning is a holistic process of adaptation. Learning is not only what happens in the mind. The other aspects must also be involved – feeling, perceiving, and behaving. *Learning results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment.* The way a human learns is greatly influenced by his/her interaction with his environment. The decisions and choices learners make are determined by the events they lived through, and those events influence their future choices.

II. Methods

Research Design The researcher made use of preexperimental research design particularly the one-shot case study. According to Babbie, (2015), pre-experimental design exists because sometimes, the conditions for full-fledged experiments are impossible to meet. In oneshot case study, the researcher measures a single group of subjects, made them exposed to a treatment and makes observations after the administration of the experimental stimulus (Babbie, 2015, & Sharma, 2014). on a depended variable following the administration of some experimental stimulus" (p.222). The single experimental group is exposed to a treatment and observations are made after the implementation of that treatment

Population and Sampling Technique

Students during the collegiate years 2013-2015, whose classes in the College of Education included SLP as part of the curriculum, were purposely included in this study. There are around 187 students identified who have taken classes with SLP. This includes those who are regular students and Licensure Examination for Teacher (LET) Unit Qualifiers.

This study uses purposive sampling because it is "based on selecting the individuals as according to the purposes of the researcher as his controls. An individual is selected as part of the sample due to good evidence that he is a representative of the total population" (Calmorin & Calmorin, p. 104).

Instrumentation

Survey questionnaire was used determined the perceived effects of SLP towards the academic skills development of students. Questionnaire is the most common technique in management research (Veal, 2005). The researcher used the Service Learning Program Questionnaire and the SLP Evaluation Questionnaire respectively. Both of these questionnaires are self-constructed, garnering ideas and concepts from various sources. The researcher sought the help of experts [College Dean, Department Chairs, Graduate Professors, and College Professors] to validate the instruments. Several revisions were done until it finally received the approved state.

In distributing the quantitative instrument, the researcher secured the class roster from AOLIS and personally contacted the respondents and asked permission to conduct a research. This took place after their final grades have been encoded to limit the possibility of students' bias. After their verbal agreement, questionnaires were distributed.

It took about 10-15 minutes for respondents to return the filled in ones. The distribution and collection of questionnaires happened in various occasions in the span of two collegiate years.

Further, to support the quantitative data, the qualitative questions were given to students' right after the completion of their SLP. The qualitative data served as the evaluation and reflection of their personal experience in participating in SLP.

Data Analysis

Data was treated to find the mean, standard deviation and frequency. As for the qualitative data, in order to extract the themes that lead to identification of SLP's effect to students, inductive method was employed. The researcher identified the most common occurring theme through coding and then combined the open codes into one overarching concept.

III. Results and Discussion

Table 1: *Descriptive results of items under Academic Skills Development*

Area	x	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Gave me an opportunity to apply what I have learnt in class.	4.50	.64	Very High Effect
2. Made me realize the practical application of the academic materials learnt in class.	4.55	.61	Very High Effect
3. Taught me the importance to be an expert in the academic materials I am learning.	4.14	.96	High Effect
4. Gave me a chance to personally assess how much I have learnt in class.	4.33	.71	High Effect
5. Made me utilize my multiple intelligences	4.42	.70	High Effect
6. Provided an occasion to share knowledge acquired from previous classes.	4.34	.66	High Effect
7. Help me understand the course material better.	4.30	.95	High Effect
8. Helped me see the connection between academic learning and real life experiences.	4.50	.79	Very High Effect
9. Gave me a glimpse of what I would be in the future.	4.30	.95	High Effect
10. Convinced me that learning is more than classroom discussion.	4.12	1.31	High Effect
OVER-ALL MEAN	**4.35**	**.49**	*High Effect*

Through SLP, students realized the practical application of the academic materials learned in class, with the highest mean (4.55) and SD (.61), which is interpreted as having ***very high effect.*** Next in line is how SLP gave them opportunity to apply what they have learned in class and how SLP helped them see the connection between academic learning and real life experiences both with a mean (4.50) and SD (.64) and (.79) respectively, and both are interpreted as having ***high effect.***

The lower means lie in the perception that SLP taught students the importance to be an expert in the academic materials they are learning with a mean

(4.14) and SD (.96) and the perception that SLP convinced them the learning is more than classroom discussion with a mean (4.12) and SD (1.31), which are both interpreted as having **high effect.**

This quantitative result is also supported by the themes that emerging from the question, *what lessons have you learned after participating in SLP*. The lessons learned by students are lesson planning, classroom management, and differentiated instruction.

Lesson planning. As included in NCBTS, writing lesson plans is one of the competencies pre-service teachers must develop. By participating in SLP, respondent KJ realized the importance of having an effective lesson plan in teaching. He recalled, *"through SLP, I learned the importance of planning for teaching."* Respondent IT expounded under similar note as he expressed, *"planning is basically the most important part of any project. If the planning (were) good, our SLP would have been a lot better. Plan and prepare ahead of time"*. Similarly, respondent JC reflected how developing a thorough lesson plan could lead to better results. She realized *"that if you are really prepared for class, you will be equipped for it… A thorough preparation would be (better)…"*

Respondents' responses were in congruence to what literature postulated. According to Coulter (as cited by Williams, 2009), "more than just an opportunity to do good for others, Service Learning Program provide an essential links between the academic skills that students are developing and the real world contexts that give these skills value". SLP helps students to meet standards expected of them (such as lesson planning) (Purmensky, 2009).

Differentiated instruction. Respondent JG said that through SLP, *"he has learned the importance of (differentiated) activities"*. He even stressed that teachers must really be careful in choosing activities because *"this will really affect the students' learning process."* Respondent PB supported the observation and added that *"teachers must take several experiments (in teaching strategies)"*. A foreign student, Respondent DN, also realized how *"students are very eager to learn when they have different types of activities with fun yet educational"*.

On a similar note, literature commends how SLP can contribute in helping students appreciate personal learning styles that may lead them to utilization of differentiated instruction in teaching. Nendel and Miller (2011) commented that one of the reasons for the academic growth that occurs in SLP may be the flexibility of application of skills and knowledge by students. When students bring their own experiences, learning styles, and understanding of the content, students make connections and learn in their own unique way.

Classroom Management (CM). Several respondents conveyed how SLP helped them see that they must develop their CM strategies. Respondent DN recalled how she had to apply several techniques learned in class *"so that learners could focus on the activity than to be bothered by the noise"*. Respondent PB also resorted to creative CM strategy by "clap(ping) and call(ing) their attention" in order control the noise.

Purmensky (2009) also expressed similar views by saying that SLP can also help pre-service teachers in developing skills including classroom management. Instead of waiting for their internship, students can immediately utilize classroom management skills techniques in the classroom.

The general result that service learning program contributes to the academic development of students corroborates with Conrad and Hedin's as cited in Billig & Vaterman, 2003) review of studies. In their review, they identified personal growth and development, intellectual development, and academic learning as the impact areas for programs that combine service and learning. Williams, as cited in Billig & Vaterman, 2003) also identified positive impact of service learning program on student's personal, career, affective, and academic development. Similarly, Rootas cited in Billig & Vaterman, 2003) identified outcomes of service learning program in six domains: cognitive development, academic development, academic engagement, civic development, social development, moral development, and personal development.

IV. Conclusions And Recommendations

The responses of students showed their positive perception on the effect of SLP in developing their academic skills. Their responses in the follow-up questions also revealed that SLP opened their appreciation to things they have been learning in class such as lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and classroom management. This study concluded that by exposing students to SLP, their academic skills will be developed and competencies being honed in class will be highly appreciated. This study recommends teacher education institutions to include SLP as part of instructional strategy to give students not only to help students see the practical application of theoretical materials they are learning but also to appreciate the beauty of learning through service.

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