A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT USING CROWDFUNDING STRATEGY: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore students' experience and reflection in doing a Service Learning project as part of their course work. The Service Learning project allows the students to practice their knowledge of raising capital through crowdfunding, and at the same time situates them in an environment where they could learn from the community and provide services to them. After the students had completed their project, they were given a set of questionnaire that asked them about their experience and reflection. The findings showed that the students were able to understand their civic responsibility better and at the same time they were willing to self-learn and be creative when they were given an interesting task which they were passionate about, and the task was an authentic, real-life situation which was familiar to them. The researchers hope that more courses in Universities and schools in Malaysia would integrate Service Learning into their courses with a hope that it could enhance civic responsibility and increase moral values among Malaysians.

1. INTRODUCTION

Service Learning had been identified as a teaching strategy that offers students opportunities to learn both in the classroom and in the wider world (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp & Fisher 2010). This pedagogical tool can provide students with chances to directly interact with local agencies and effect change in the community. However, most universities were too focused on improving students' professional skills and knowledge, rather than emphasising the importance of service within the community and civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher 1996). By participating in a Service Learning activity, previous studies had shown a significant positive effects on students' academic performance, values, leadership and professional development (Astin et al. 2000; Mahasneh et al. 2012). Service Learning could also increased students' awareness of the world, sense of responsibility and increase their personal values.

Lately, there were an increasing number of reported cases been highlighted in the news regarding bullies, gangsterism and robberies involving teenagers in Malaysia. Few researchers suggested that the declining moral values were caused by unfiltered media exposure via television and the Internet (Buerah et al. 2012; Wan Norina et al. 2013). Others blame the current educational system (Mohamad Khairi & Asmawati 2010; Muhamad Suhaimi et al. 2011), and the failing of family institutions (Adeline Annet, Mohd Mahzan & Abdul Razaq 2015). Based on the findings of previous researchers, it was anticipated that by incorporating Service Learning as part of students' academic requirement, it could help to increase students' civic responsibility and at the same time improve students' discipline and moral values.

2. SERVICE LEARNING IN EDUCATION

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defines Service Learning as "a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of

the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 222). Service Learning offers effective pedagogical strategies, promotes a scholarship of engagement among students and institutions, fosters a more active citizenry, and enhances student development through active learning and participation, engagement in the community, critical thinking, and information on real-life conflictual situations (Bringle & Hatcher 1996; Butin 2010).

In Malaysia, Service Learning is still in its infancy. There were a few private and public universities as well as schools that attempted to implement the concept of Service Learning in their institutions. However, the numbers were still too small. Service Learning had only been explored in Malaysia around the year 2005, while in developed countries Service Learning had been researched and integrated into the academic curriculum a decade earlier.

Though it has many similarities with charity and community service, Service Learning emphasised more on the 'learning' rather than 'service'. The focus of Service Learning was to promote both academic knowledge and civic skills of students. Students would go to the community, try to understand their needs, and then try to apply their knowledge and skills in a real situation to help solve community problems (Hamdan et al. 2015; Lemieux & Allen 2007). The process of Service Learning was described as the acquisition, discovery and reflection of skills and knowledge through experience (Reinke 2003). Aside from developing civic propensities, Service Learning could also enhance academic learning and higher thinking skills among students (Howard 2003).

3. CROWDFUNDING STRATEGY

Crowdfunding is a new alternative of raising enough business capital from a large number of people to start a new business (Profatilov, Bykova & Olkhovskaya 2015). Previously, to start a small business, business owner tend to rely on their own savings, family and friends.

Currently, there are many crowdfunding platforms had been developed such as Indiegogo, Kickstarter, FundMe and PitchIN. The platform provides opportunities for new business to pitch their business ideas to anyone with Internet access and raise enough money to realise their business plan. Currently, the crowdfunding platforms were not limited to business fund only, but also includes campaigns for educational support, new film/album creation, new technology creation and community services.

To start a crowdfunding campaign, business owners will need to create a creative business pitch video which will be uploaded to the crowdfunding platform. They will also need to decide on the total targeted fund that they wanted to achieve and how long the campaign would last. Each successful campaign will need to pay around 5% campaign fees to the crowdfunding platform. However, some crowdfunding platform allows 0% campaign fees if the campaign is for a charity cause (example: Indiegogo).

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study explores the experience and reflections of a group of Malaysian University students' in relation to a service learning project conducted for their classes. A recent technology-based strategy which is crowdfunding was introduced as the strategy that the students' employed to help selected non-government organisations (NGO).

The objectives of this study were to explore:
  i. students' experience after the Service Learning project; and
  ii. students' reflection on the Service Learning project.

5. THE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

At the beginning of the semester (end of February 2016), 98 students from the Faculty of Business and Management, Sultan Idris Education University registered for the E-Commerce class, which runs for 14 weeks. The students were given an assignment sheet that contains the instruction for their class project,

which was a Service Learning project. To tie in with the E-Commerce class requirement and objectives, the students were required to create a crowdfunding video to help Non-government Organisation (NGO) to raise money for their needs. Crowdfunding was one of the options for raising business capital discussed during lecture. The aim of this project was to allow the students to practice their knowledge of raising capital through crowdfunding, and at the same time situate them in an authentic environment where they could learn from the community and provide services to them.

The class project was a four to five members group project and was divided into three main phases which were pre-production, video production and post-production activities. Figure 1 showed the three main phases and the activities in each phase:
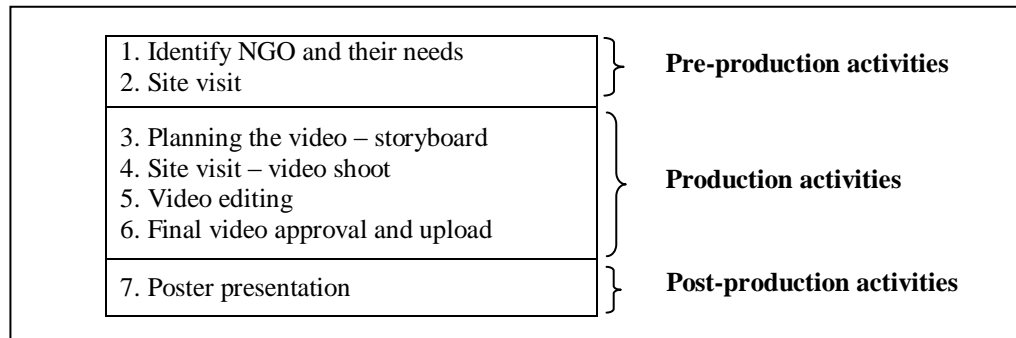

Figure 1. Project development phases

For the first three weeks of their class, the students need to complete the pre-production activities. Each group was required to submit a brief introduction of their selected NGO to their lecturers for approval. Upon approval, the students had eight weeks to plan, complete and uploaded their crowdfunding video either to a crowdfunding website (such as Indiegogo, GoFundMe or PitchIN) or a social networking sites (such as Facebook or Youtube). By week-13, each group had to do a poster presentation of their Social Learning project experience, and their presentations were evaluated based on:

   i. the ability of each group to properly introduce their NGO and the purpose of the needed fund;
  ii. the explanation on how they create their crowdfunding video;
 iii. the impact made by their crowdfunding video (either monetary or an increase of awareness); and
 iv. their creativity in creating the video and conveying the correct message.

6. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed based on the Student Service Learning Survey questionnaire developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (2004) through its Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning project.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A was for demographic information: gender, semester, course and the name of their selected NGO. Section B consisted of 15 questions that describe the students' experience after they completed the Service Learning project. The students need to indicate their beliefs and attitudes towards each of the issues raised by the question on a numerical interval marked between 4 for Strongly Agree to 1 for Strongly Disagree. Finally, for Section C, the students were required to write their reflections based on their experience in doing the Service Learning project.

The questionnaires were distributed to the students after they had completed their final phase, which was the poster presentation. All 98 questionnaires were returned and analysed.

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The NGOs selected by the students consists of institutions that provide services for the orphanage, old folks homes, old folks transit center, homeless, stray cats, and *pondok* (private religious school) education. Section B of the questionnaire describes the students' experience in completing the Service Learning project. The questionnaire was consisting of 15 items which were divided into three constructs: 1) student awareness (3 items); 2) integration of Service Learning into University courses (6 items); and 3) impact of Service Learning (6 items).

For student awareness (Figure 1), mean analysis showed that all students had a positively high awareness on the needs and problem faced by the community and the students were aware of their responsibility towards their community.
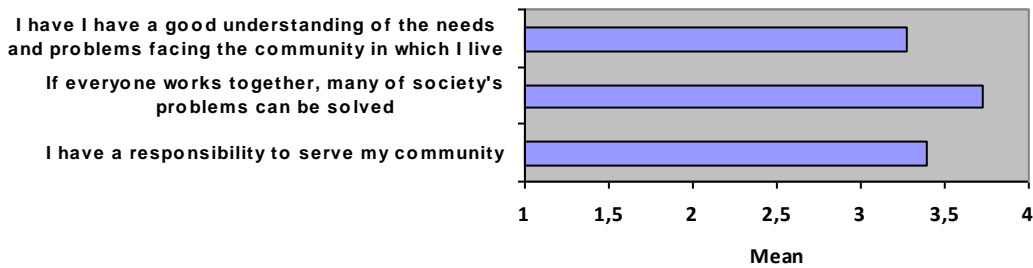

Figure 2. Mean values for student awareness

Most of the student understands that to improve the well-being of the community is a team effort (mean = 3.725). Everyone must work together, no matter how small the contribution; it does make a difference to the community.

For integration of Service Learning into university courses (Figure 2), most of the students agree that there should be more courses that include Service Learning into the course work. However, the students were in-between when asked whether they would continue volunteering or participating in the community after the end of the course (mean = 1.898). Some students were not certain when asked about their own biases and prejudice. They somewhat agree that the Service Learning project made them realise of their own biases and prejudices (mean = 3.061).
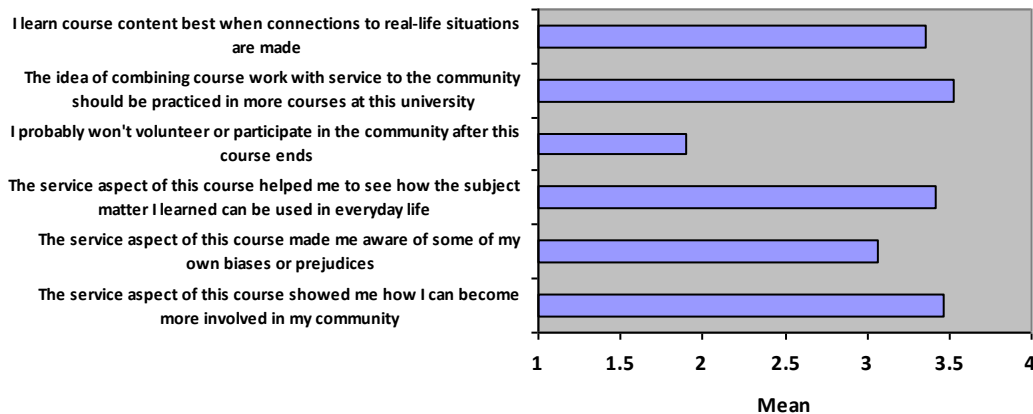

Figure 3. Mean values for integration of service learning into university courses

Figure 3 showed the mean values for the third construct which was the impact of the Service Learning project. The students were not sure whether the Service Learning project for this class was beneficial for the community (mean = 1.950). This could probably cause by either the explanation about the project were not

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clearly presented, or the students were not able to understand their role in this project as this was the first time a Service Learning project was introduced as part of their course work requirement.
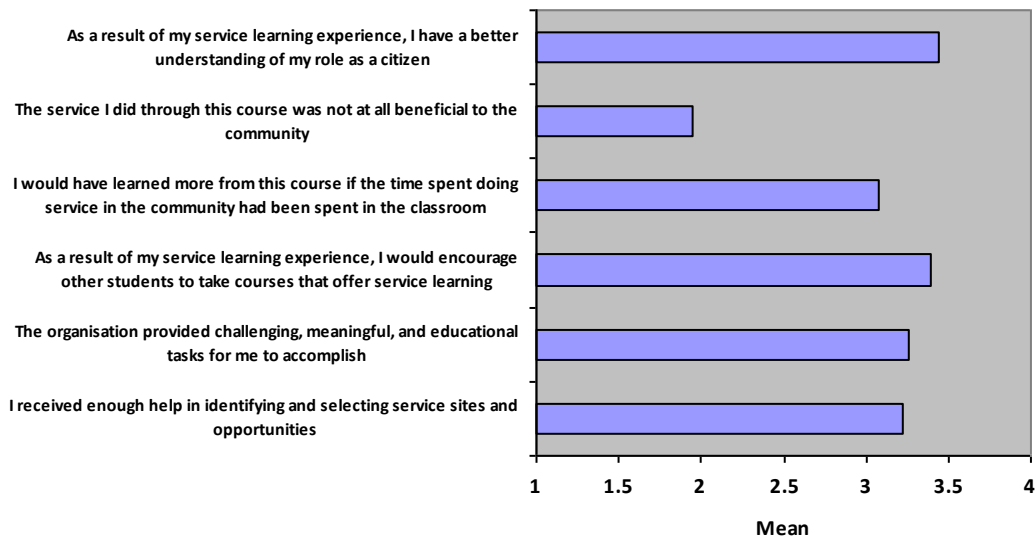

Figure 4. Mean values for impact of service learning

Section C of the questionnaire, the students was asked to write a reflection based on their Service Learning experience. All students reflected that we need to be thankful for what we had. Some students described that the Service Learning project had changed their perspective and they learn to be more empathetic towards others. One student quote:

> This project had opened my eyes and I feel excited and a sense of responsibility to help more people who are unfortunate. Before this I never really cared about others, but now I know that not everybody is as fortunate as I am and seeing their smile made me feel happy.

Another student felt that the Service Learning project had made him realised that he actually had the ability to help other people.

> What I learned from this project is that I actually had the ability to help and find ways to help those who were unfortunate.

Some students expressed that the project helped them to be confident in public. They were initially unsure how they were going to approach the people in their selected institution. One student described that she is usually shy and quiet. However, this project had taught them to be more organised, more confident and opportunity for them to practice their communication skills.

Two students wrote that this project had shown them an alternative way of raising money for the unfortunate using technology. Not only that but they also realised that there were procedures to be followed if you wanted to raise money for charity causes.

> I learn how to correctly use crowdfunding to help others raise money. There are procedures that I need to follow. Not as easy as I thought.

> I learn how to raise money following the correct procedure, as to ensure that there will be no misappropriate used of the money that we raised.

8. OBSERVED UNIQUE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Lately, educators in Malaysia were highly encouraged to adapt a different style of student learning where students would apply their knowledge in a real-life context and situations as it was believed that students would learn and understand more by applying their knowledge in an authentic situation (Hursen 2016). Based on this current study, it showed that by immersing the students a real-life situation and purpose, the student could and will find their ways in solving problems presented to them. The assignment had proved that not only students were able to work and learn independently, but some of them were highly creative in editing and producing a high quality short documentary-styled video. During the whole process, the lecturer did not interfere with the students' idea and creativity, but instead support them to make the idea more manageable. The aim was not to 'spoon-feed' the students with our ideas, but letting the students think for themselves and be creative.

Through this assignment, it also showed that when a student is excited or passionate about a certain thing, they do not mind the extra works (and study) that they need to do, which coincides with the idea proposed in the Theory of Reasoned Actions and the Technology Acceptance Model (Bagozzi, Davis & Warshaw 1992; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). The students even willing to do self-learning / collaborative learning on topics that the do not understand (e.g.: how to use video creation software). To the researcher, this was an interesting finding. This was a group of undergraduate students who normally will do their studies just for exams. Now they were telling the researcher what they had learned and even showed others what they know.

One student described her experiences as valuable and the project had given her the opportunity to learn how to create a video, video editing, and uploading a video to the Internet.

> Before this I am not very good in using computer technology and the Internet. However, as the editor of the video that our group had created, I had learned how to create a video, how to edit the video, how to include subtitle to the video, how to add voice over etc. This project had shown me that I can do many things. Never say 'I do not know'.

However, the lecturer must play an active role at the beginning of the assignment to promote the idea for example by showing them examples of a crowdfunding video, crowdfunding success stories, etc. Most of the students were not sure of their own ability, especially when it involved computer-based technology. By trying to put the assignment in a positive light, it gives the student the little push to try harder and be confident.

9. CONCLUSION

This study explores the experience and reflections of a group of Malaysian University students' in relation to a service learning project conducted for their classes. Crowdfunding strategy for raising business capital was used as the medium which the students will use to raise money for their selected NGOs. The findings showed that the students had a positive experience in doing the Service Learning project. They understand their role as a citizen better and it enhanced their civic responsibilities. The study also showed that by incorporating the element of 'fun' and technology in a task can be the key to promoting active-learning, creative and innovative thinking among the Gen-Y students. This new generation can easily relate themselves with technology, as long as enough guidance was provided along the way. Hopefully, Service Learning would be implemented in more courses, not only in Universities, but also in schools. By learning about others, it is hopeful that Malaysians will be a more sympathetic and empathetic community and hopefully could help to increase moral values among teenagers.

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