

# Capturing Pre-Service Teachers' Development through Service-Learning

Dayang Hartijah Abang Ahmad Moomala Othman Maryam Jahedi\*

Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a Community Service Learning (CSL) program in contributing to pre-service teachers' developmental growth. In this study, 20 TESL undergraduate students carried out a service-learning activity which involved a debate tournament program at a school where they taught and coached debate to 200 school students aged between 13 and 14 years old. With their assistance, these school students gained hands on experience debating. After the program, the pre-service teachers wrote their experience in their reflection log book. A survey was then undertaken to find out how much the program affected the trainee teachers both socially and academically. The analysis of their reflections indicated positive response of the program from everyone. Responses of pre-service teachers in the survey revealed that they have gained much personally, professionally and socially via CSL program. Likewise, the descriptive analysis of the survey provided insights into its benefits to students in general and ESL learners in particular.

**Keywords:** service-learning, reflection, pre-service teachers, teacher development, teacher preparedness, debate

## 1. Introduction

Many educationalists concur that a successful lesson is one which engages the learner with meaningful activities as such an experience would often leave an indelible impression and so facilitate the teaching and learning process. An example of this is the service-learning (SL). According to Bringle and Hatcher (1996), SL is an educational experience whereby students participate in a service activity, such as teaching and learning that meets the needs of a community and they can give their reflection on the service activity to contribute to the better understanding of that particular subject or discipline. In other words, SL combines community engagement and academic connection where students are directly involved in providing service to community as well as learning from the context in which the activity occurs and, thus, can solve a real problem in a community (Verducci & Pope, 2001). Hence, service-learning is a "reciprocal learning" activity (Sigmon, 1979) in which both key players in SL, the service provider and the service recipient, can benefit. Since service and learning go hand in hand, SL strategy is often lauded as an innovative and effective teaching/learning approach (Lake & Jones, 2007). Through real and meaningful practical experience, the learner is able to link or relate what he or she has learned in class and in the process of giving service to the target community (Carrington & Saggars, 2007). As suggested by Eyler and Giles (1999), the strength of SL lies in two aspects: (1) the personal relationship that it builds; and, (2) the difference in people's lives that it creates. This approach is so effective that has been incorporated and implemented across various disciplinary courses nowadays (Wilczenki & Coomey, 2007; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). SL started in the United States has come a long way since it was first introduced more a decade ago.

Service-learning has also left its mark in the educational field even though it is still recent (O'Connor, 2012). In education, SL is considered a novel strategy as learning takes place at a real teaching site amidst a community. The site could be a classroom, or several classrooms (Sigmon, 1996) or beyond the classroom or school (Lake & Jones, 2007). It is considered versatile as it integrates school curriculum with community service (Myers & Pickeral, 1997) and such diverse educational activities can be carried out across different age group (Carrington & Saggars, 2007). According to Eyler and Giles (1999), it is an innovative and dynamic teaching strategy that links personal learning, professional knowledge, social commitment and emotional growth. SL allows student teachers to relate and link their action in the community to the academic teaching at their university (Copeland et al., 1993). It is also a learning process which can dislodge pre-service teachers' wrong or unexamined assumptions, beliefs and knowledge about students, teaching and schools (Trier, 2006). Furthermore, it is a career orientation - a context to prepare the new teachers for the workforce. Some educators have suggested that service-learning can increase pre-service teachers' self-efficacy and as such it is an effective tool to modify pedagogy and to improve the quality of teaching that is much needed in schools today (Wasserman, 2009). Clearly, the exception of SL lies with the advantages highlighted by Verducci and Pope (2001) among others, including (1) SL fosters pre-service teachers' civic participation, social awareness and transformation; (2)

SL offers teachers the opportunity to work with students which prepares them for their future career in schools; and, (3) SL offers the chance for pre-service teachers to meet the school and national educational requirements and standards.

Many studies have focused on pre-service program such as research on pre-service teachers' challenges and concerns on their teaching practices (Kabilan, 2008; Berg & Smith, 2014), effect of pre-service program on students' performance and success (Fredericksen, 2000; Kamuche, 2006; Simonet, 2008), and students' experience of ICT integration (Shaun, 2009; Hazniza, 2014); however a few studies have been conducted on Malaysian TESL students' service-learning program which have integrated their service practice with debate activities (Moomala et al., 2014). Therefore, in this paper, the researchers concentrated on the service-learning program conducted by pre-service teachers using debate and examined their reflection papers submitted as part of the course requirement as well as their feedback from a survey undertaken at the end of the program.

Before embarking on this project, meetings were held between school stakeholders who had expressed their concern and highlighted the lack of their students' oral communication skills. Debate was chosen as a community service program as it was deemed an effective and systematic teaching /learning approach that could assist to improve students' oral communication skills as well as critical thinking (Zare & Othman, 2013). This was also in agreement with the national educational requirement by Ministry of Education in Malaysia (2012) which emphasized improving students' oral communication skills as well as their critical thinking. Therefore, in this study, TESL undergraduate students were exposed to service-learning pedagogy, which integrated a community service experience with debate. It was aimed to identify the themes occurred on their reflection over their SL experience in Malaysian secondary school and to describe their perceptions on integrating service-learning experience with debate activities. Thus, the study was an attempt to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the predominant themes that are emphasized in pre-service teachers' reflections on their service experience in Malaysian secondary school?
- (2) What are the pre-service teachers' perceptions of debate as community service?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Participants and Sampling Procedures*

The service-learning was part of the course requirement LHE3208 oral and aural skills. A specific oral communication program was put up for this service-learning with the focus on the pre-service teachers to see how efficient they could be in their delivery of speech. The study of Community Service Learning (CSL) focused on an English debate program carried by 20 pre-service teachers for 200 students aged 13 and 14 years old. The pre-service teachers taught, trained and coached the students on debate. Their sessions were consisted of a workshop, a mock debate and a debate competition with evaluations.

Moreover, students were taught the structure of ARE; i.e. A stands for assertions of a claim made followed by R which refers to reasoning and E which denotes evidence or elaborations to support the claim (Meany & Shuster, 2002). They were also taught how to give rebuttals and elaborate ideas. The components of ARE represent elements of critical thinking or high order critical thinking related to Bloom's Taxonomy including interpretation, application, evaluation, analysis and synthesis. Moreover, students were taught the importance of gestures and facial expressions as the elements of creativity in their delivery performance. Another critical thinking element was thinking games carried out before debate proper explanation.

#### *3.2 Data Collection Methods*

Pre-service teachers were required to write a report; a reflection of their experience before, during and after the program. Even though the study only took place for a short period of time, sufficient information regarding the subjects' experience could be drawn from their reflection documents. Another instrument used in this study was a survey carried out to determine the trainees' perceptions of the program. Therefore, a set of questionnaire was given to the pre-service teachers after they completed the Community Service Learning program. The questionnaire was administered by the lecturer of the course in order to get the undergraduates' feedback on the CSL program.

#### *3.3 Data Analysis*

The analysis of the students' reflections on the Community Service Learning was done manually through multiple readings. For the analysis of students' reflections, first, the data were organized into categories. Then, they were coded according to theoretical perspectives and the themes emerged in the study (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, the study adopted coding framework by Donnison and Itters (210). Based on the analysis of online

reflections in their study, they (ibid.) found three major themes, including personal benefits and personal development; professional development; and, community understandings and connections. The themes mentioned above and their associated subthemes are listed below:

| Theme                                      | Subtheme  |
|--|---|
| Personal benefits and personal Development | Enjoyment and personal reward                         |
|  | Motivation for future involvement                     |
| Professional development                   | Development of skills and attitudes for teaching      |
|  | Understanding of teacher's work                       |
|  | Affirmation of career choice                          |
| Community understandings and connections   | Sociocultural understandings                          |
|  | Understanding role of community groups and volunteers |
|  | Developing community connections                      |

Figure 1: Coding Framework by Donnison and Itters (2010, p. 63) Adopted for the Analysis of Reflections

Moreover, a descriptive analysis was used to analyze the questionnaire. The analysis was done descriptively through percentage according to the items categorized based on the themes identified from the analysis of the pre-service teachers' reflections, including personal benefits and personal development; professional development; community understandings and connections; and, academic connection relating to creative and critical thinking skills development. Internal reliability was determined and the Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.78.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section is organized into two sub-sections. First, according to the analysis of pre-service teachers' reflections on their service practice, the main themes and their associated subthemes are presented. Then, the descriptive analysis of pre-service teachers' perceptions of using debate as community service is given.

##### 4.1 Themes of Pre-service Teachers' Reflections on Their Service Practice

The analysis of pre-service teachers' reflections indicated a positive response of the program. Close reading of the reflections confirmed the three major themes suggested by Donnison and Itters (2010). Besides, a new theme along with its subtheme emerged in the study which has not been previously mentioned in the literature. The themes identified in the analysis of the reflections include: (1) personal benefits and personal development; (2) professional development; (3) community understandings and connections; and, (4) academic connection. The academic connection is much related to creative and critical thinking skills as, in the process, the pre-service teachers were required to explain the debate, evaluate the students' delivery performance and deliver oral judgments. The development of the last two elements (creative and critical thinking) was expected as the service involved using debate activities. Since debate involved arguments as expected, creative and critical thinking skills were incorporated in the reflections. The followings are excerpts of the reflections based on the abovementioned themes and their subthemes.

##### 4.1.1 Theme 1: Personal Benefits and Personal Development

###### Subtheme 1: Enjoyment and Personal Reward

Based on the reflections, service-teachers found the teaching experience extremely enjoyable and fun and they were positively motivated:

When the tournament began, I felt very happy and proud as I could see a tremendous improvement in the students' presentation of speech. They took all the advice I had given and put it into practice. This gave me an utmost feeling of pride and joy.

Yet, another successful day teaching and judging the students. All of us left with a very happy heart of accomplishing the task given.

All of my feedback was positive. I suggested a few areas for improvement whereby they could improve themselves. At the end of the lesson, the students were really grateful and thanking me a lot. I was very happy that I managed to create some sort of sparks among them.

###### Subtheme 2: Motivation for Future Involvement

The reflection showed that the pre-service teachers were intrinsically encouraged and motivated to get involved with similar program (Community Service Learning) in the future. Some of them expressed enthusiasm in contributing to this kind of service learning program:

I felt happy to give the students some knowledge and was satisfied to see that the end result was a positive one as the students did better in each round. If given another chance, I will definitely go again

to this school to conduct the debate workshop.

I am really looking forward for this kind of activities more in the future. This time, this project really provided us with memorable and valuable experience. I don't know how much, but I have gained a lot.

I used to be in doubt if I could be a good teacher, but now I am quite confident that I can become one. I really hope that more programs will be carried out in schools with real school children so that we as future teachers will know how to teach and deal with students more appropriately rather than just learn it in a lecture room.

#### *4.1.2 Theme 2: Professional Development*

##### Subtheme 1: Development of Skills and Attitudes for Teaching

Many students viewed SL as a program which develops positive skills and attitudes in teaching. These skills include pedagogical skills, classroom management skills, communication skills and leadership skills:

I am really grateful with this school debate program because I got the opportunity to get involved in and having that as an experience really opened my eyes and mind on what I should expect when the time comes for me to do my practical at school. Not only I managed to control the class and taught them debate, I also learned many things from the students.

This program has given me one valuable experience that I have found hard to find anywhere else. At this school, I learned to attend to the behavior of the students besides giving them the knowledge.

I have learned a lot from this program. From the teaching aspect, how to deal with the students, how to judge a debate and many more.

I enjoyed my first day as a teacher. It was so different. What my lecturer told me before was true; situation out there in classroom is so different. No matter how well we are prepared, sometimes in reality we cannot carry out what we have planned. Every time when we teach, we must do it as if it is the first time we are going to teach; as a teacher we should not feel bored of our own teaching materials. Hence, I learned that as a teacher we really need to be very creative to attract students' attention and also we should not get bored with teaching the same things over and over again.

##### Subtheme 2: Understanding of Teacher's Work

Pre-service teachers understood a teacher's work better after undergoing the service-learning. They realized that teaching was not something that could be done by anyone without much effort and preparations:

Teaching is not as easy as what I thought it would be and a teacher needs to be creative in order to control the class. Plus, voice projection is also the main element for success in teaching. Teachers need to attract the students' attention with different type of activities and the way of delivery of a message to them.

To me, in order to teach, we have to be knowledgeable in that field. I don't want students to learn something wrong or incomplete from me.

The first thing that came across my mind is that this is the most memorable experience that I have ever had in my life. Teaching is not an easy task to do. It requires a lot of effort and preparations. I never thought I could do this kind of thing.

##### Subtheme3: Affirmation of Career Choice

This section revealed that the pre-service teachers finally affirmed the career that they had chosen after going through the service-learning program:

I realized how much I want and love talking to the students. I love teaching them something. I love their puzzled look before I started teaching and love to see the way their faces lit up when they finally understood what I had taught them. I have never thought that I could warm up to the idea of being a teacher. But now, after actual experience of being in a real school, I feel that teaching is something that I love and could do for a long time.

Another important thing I will always remember is how to be a unique and creative teacher. We must have variety of styles to teach. Once again, this day gave me an opportunity to know how much I want to be a teacher and what are the things needed to be a good one.

Through the program which I attended, I have learned a lot of things and it opened my mind and thoughts about teaching. Now, I have a clearer picture of why I want to become a teacher in the first place. I really enjoy teaching and want to give something to the students and make them become great individuals. I love being a teacher.

#### *4.1.3 Theme 3: Community Understandings and Connections*

##### Subtheme 1: Sociocultural Understandings

The pre-service teachers reflected sociocultural understandings among peers as well as the target group of the

service-learning program. The following reflections indicated their sociocultural understandings:

I interacted with the students and they really cooperated with me. We started our session with an ice-breaking, which I asked them to introduce themselves and talk about their interests in order to know them. It went well, and I could not believe that I was more comfortable teaching them rather than doing a presentation to my classmates. It came naturally and it was not so bad.

The students were enthusiastic and they really put an effort to win because they knew how it went. It became an interesting debate session, and I enjoyed the moment. They were so nice, everyone showed their respect to me and I was glad that I had them.

The students showed some progress when they were laughing because of my joke. They started to warm towards me. I am happy for that. Then I told them what we were going to do for that day.

#### Subtheme 2: Understanding Role of Community Groups and Volunteers

The pre-service teachers reflected the benefits of team teaching- they helped each other during the service learning program:

The small activities that I came up with to explain the debate process were also easier for me to do. Since I saw that they were responsive, it encouraged me to do what I had planned. Maybe it was also due to the support of my two friends which enabled me to work better as a team.

I have also learned some useful tips and teaching styles from my team mates. Each of us had so many varieties and by incorporating these, teaching became so easy.

My friend did the introduction part, which was very interesting. He asked the students to draw a picture and explain how to relate it to themselves. It was to get the students talking. It worked very well as one girl came up with a poem describing the picture she had drawn.

There were other groups involved in this English activities besides Form One and Form Two as participants. They were the students in charge of the flow of the events, making sure that the running order of all activities goes accordingly with technical support. We would love to express our highest gratitude to these students for making this program a success, not forgetting the school administration, teachers and last but not least, our lecturer.

#### Subtheme 3: Developing Community Connections

Furthermore, the pre-service teachers reflected that CSL gave them the opportunity to connect with the community, especially the target group:

We were greeted upon our arrival. That was really a surprise as I didn't expect to be greeted in that manner. Truth be told, that act of kindness lowered my anxiety level. I also could see that my friends were starting to loosen up too.

I even talked to a girl who expressed how she felt; that the topic for the mock was something that she was not familiar with. She struggled to perform so she was upset about it. Those made me feel like I could connect with these students.

We saw the students playing sports on the field when we got onto the bus. As we were leaving, suddenly all the students stopped playing and waved their hands at us until we could not see them any longer. It really touched our hearts- we were really being appreciated by them even though we had only spent two days with them. That is the sweetest memory which I will never forget.

#### 4.1.4 Theme 4: Academic Connection: Creative and Critical Thinking Skills Development

There was ample evidence in the reflection where pre-service teachers were able to relate their lectures or classroom teachings to the community program and use them during the workshop or debate tournament:

I started my class with lots of hope. First, I had ice-breaking session; I asked them to introduce themselves and say something interesting about themselves. I started first as my lecturer had told me whenever we ask our students to do something we must provide them with examples; a teacher should start and give examples. That is how I could judge their proficiency level.

My friend started the lesson on debate by explaining the importance of debate. She explained the ARE (assertion, reason and evidence) concept to the students. I did my part of teaching which I explained the STAND concept. I drew a chair on the whiteboard and explained how the stand functions when they construct points for their arguments. The students responded well as I asked them to give examples. Next, my other friend taught them about point of Information (POI) and how they can deliver it when giving a speech. After being convinced that enough teaching was provided, we conducted a mock debate to see the students' performance.

In judging the students, I learned that being just and fair was very important. We also had to look into paralinguistic features to ensure that students offer a convincing speech.



While I was giving feedback to their performance, I explained to them how I was evaluating them and what were the features that I looked in giving marks to them so that during the tournament they could improve themselves. After the break, I informed them further about the elements that would be evaluated by others during the debate. I told them what they shouldn't do such as not to hold notes and being monotonous.

#### Subtheme1: Hands-on Debate as a Valuable Experience

The pre-service teachers reflected that the experience gained carrying out the debate program was valuable and useful, especially for their upcoming practical course in schools:

This debate workshop also gave me the feel of what my practical teaching would feel like. Prior to this, the only experience of teaching that I had was during our microteaching lessons. Thus, this experience was indeed a learning experience for me. I learned to be more confident when I stood in front of a classroom. I also learned how to respect students as individuals who would face anxiety, especially during their teenage years.

At first, I was very reluctant to involve in the program for the fear of being made fun of. However, after conducting the mock debate and judging, I felt more relieved and confident to carry out this workshop in real. I was exposed to a real classroom situation where students could be really naughty or be really good and quiet at the same time. Now I know how to prepare myself when I go for my teaching practice. I also feel that I have learned a lot of new skills which I could put to use in the future.

They were tiring days that we had been through, and a lot of problems came. But personally I am satisfied because this experience was priceless. I met real students and after being a university student for three years, I was speechless. This experience gave me some kind of motivation and confidence to do my teaching practice later on.

I have learned many things through this program. It is also a good experience for me before going into real working world. Now I know what I am good at and what are the things that I need to improve on during this coming one and a half year before becoming a real teacher.

#### *4.2 Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Debate as Community Service*

This section presents the analysis of the pre-service teachers' perceptions on integrating service-learning program with debate. The categories of the questionnaire given to them were divided according to the themes identified, i.e. academic connection relating to creative and critical thinking skills development which has been emerged from the data as well as three major themes proposed by Donnison and Itters (2010): personal benefits and personal development; professional development; and, community understandings and connection.

The analysis was done descriptively by determining mean score of each category. The mean score above 3.5 was considered to be high, between 2.5 and 3.4 was medium and below 2.4 was low (Oxford, 1990). For this study, the mean score above 3.50 was considered high as it was above 66% or two third of the sample. Any score between 2.50 and 3.50 was considered medium and less than 2.50 was considered low.

##### *4.2.1 Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions: Personal Benefits and Personal Development*

Item 1: I enjoyed teaching the students how to debate

Item 2: It was personally rewarding when I completed the program with Form One

Item 3: It was personally rewarding when I completed the program with Form Four

Item 4: I would give this debate approach a try in future

Item 5: I become confident to express my opinion

The above items were the constructs for theme 1. Figure 2 indicates the breakdown percentages of each construct. Overall, the mean score for this theme was high; the mean score was 4.33.

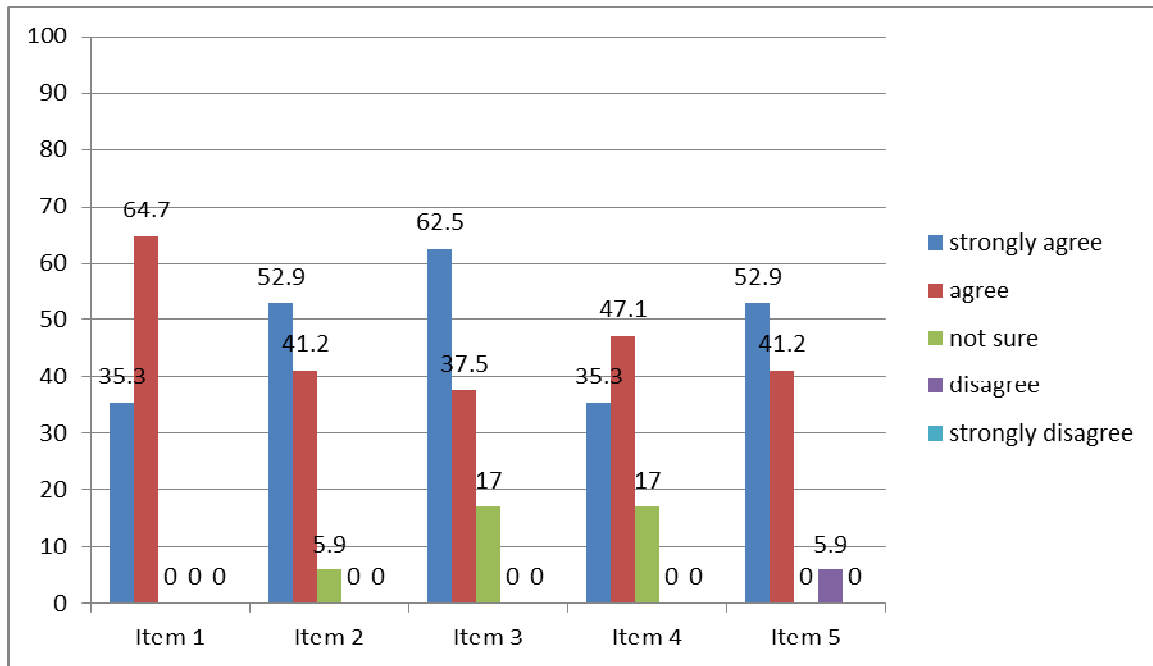


Figure 2: Breakdown Percentages of Items Related to Theme 1: Personal Benefits and Personal Development  
 As shown in the bar graph above, the pre-service teachers reported strongly agree and agree on most of the statements under the personal benefits and personal development theme.

4.2.2 Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions: Professional Development

- Item 1: I benefited some useful skills in teaching the students to debate
- Item 2: My attitudes towards teaching improved after teaching in Banting
- Item 3: I now understand better the work of a teacher
- Item 4: I am now certain I have made the right choice choosing teaching as a career

The percentages breakdown for each of the constructs of theme 2 are accordingly illustrated in Figure 3 below.

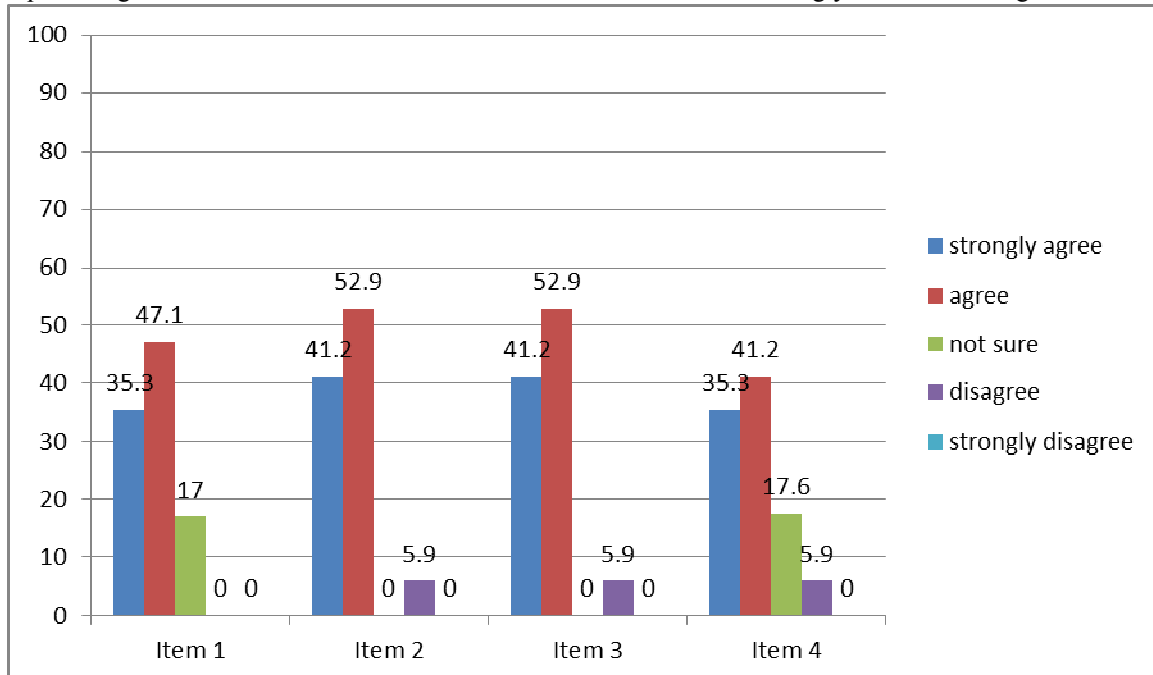


Figure 3: Breakdown Percentages of Items Related to Theme 2: Professional Development

Similarly, with the professional development theme, most of pre-service teachers expressed strongly agree and agree. This can be seen in the highest percentage of the figure through Item 2 and Item 3, where the pre-service teachers' attitudes towards teaching had improved and they had better understanding of a teacher's work (Figure 3). The mean score for this theme was high: 4.35. For each category, the response elicited was

predominantly agreed and strongly agreed, respectively. As in the above, this shows that the theme “professional development” reflected in the student’s journal was agreed upon by the majority.

*4.2.3 Pre-Service Teachers’ Perceptions: Community Understandings and Connections*

Item 1: I saw school students could work independently as a group to carry out a program involving their peers

Item 2: My friends played an important role to impart relevant knowledge and skills to the students

Item 3: My friends played an important role in contributing the success of this program

Item 4: I learned the importance of team work and how to cooperate with my peers

Item 5: I could connect to the students

The above items of the questionnaire reflect theme 3. The breakdown of the percentages is illustrated in the bar chart below (Figure 4). The overall mean score for this theme was high (a mean score of 4.27). As shown clearly in the bar graph, more positive responses were elicited from the pre-service teachers; most of them responded strongly agree and agree.

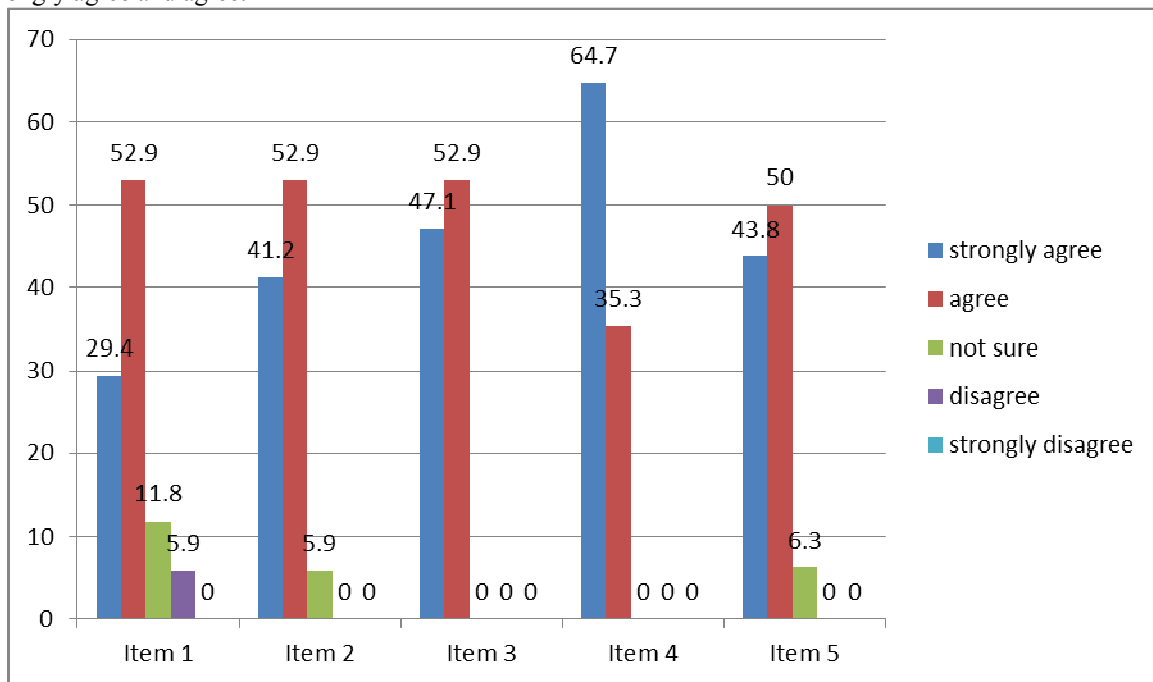


Figure 4: Breakdown Percentages of Constructs Related to Theme 3: Community Understanding and Connection

The analysis of the reflections has shown that these positive feedback of the questionnaire are in agreement with the positive comments from pre-service teachers’ reflection. Their reflections indicate that their peers played an important role in contributing to the success of the program and they had learned the importance of peers in team work. Positive ideas were also reflected under understanding role of community groups and volunteers and developing community connections.

*4.2.4 Pre-Service Teachers’ Perceptions: Academic Connection: Creative and Critical Thinking Skills Development*

Item 1: I taught the students how to argue using ARE: Assertion, Reasoning and Elaboration/Evidence.

Item 2: I taught the students how to elaborate ideas

Item 3: I taught the students the importance of gestures and facial expressions

Item 4: Thinking games before debate explanation were fun

Figure 5 below shows the breakdown percentages of the above items of the questionnaire related to the theme 4, academic connection. As depicted from the bar chart, more than 60% gave positive response. The mean score for this theme was also high; 4.60.



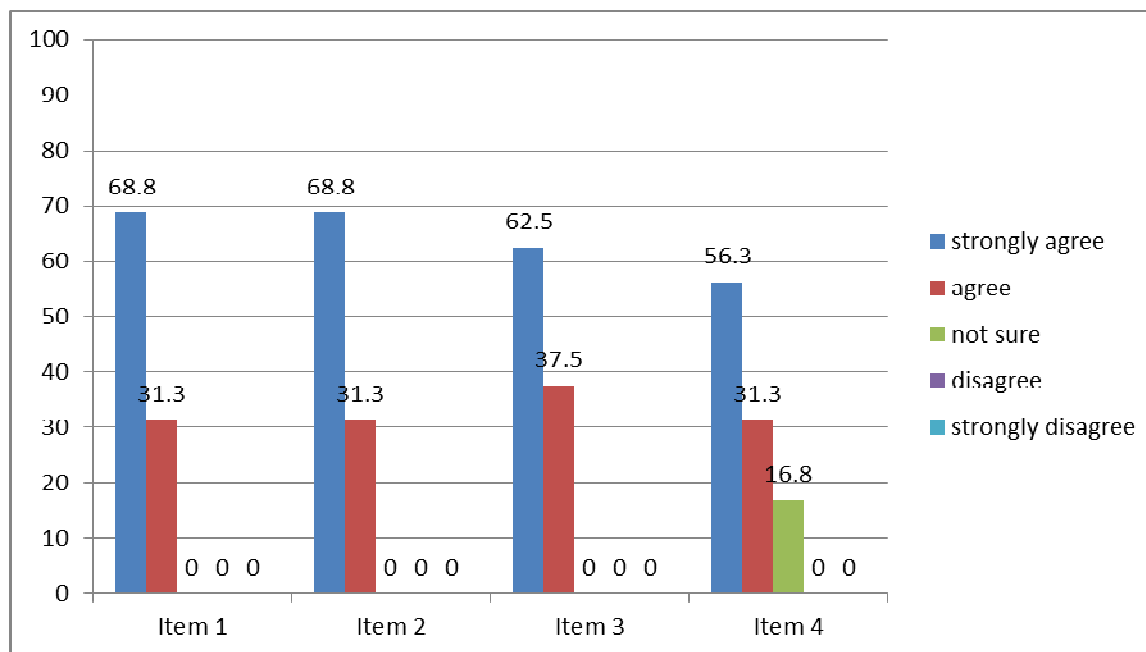


Figure 5: Percentages Breakdown of Constructs Related to Theme 4: Academic Connection

## Conclusion

The analysis of pre-service teachers' reflections has shown that after undertaking community service practice, they experienced personal development, professional growth and social connection (Donniso & Itters, 2010). Another theme emerged was the academic connection which was closely related to creative and critical thinking skills development. The reflections clearly showed how students' confidence and civic responsibility were fostered through applying the academic content knowledge and skills (Carrington & Saggars, 2007). Moreover, the analysis of pre-service teachers' perceptions of debate as community service revealed similar result; i.e. integrating service-learning with debate activities promoted students' academic, personal and professional development. It was also revealed how service-learning directly benefitted the school students in gaining knowledge and skills to voice and express their opinion through debate. Thus, indirectly it meets the school and national educational requirements (Donniso & Itters, 2010). Furthermore, it is suggested that SL provides a career orientation; a context to prepare the new teachers for the workforce (Wasserman, 2009). This is clearly depicted in the findings of pre-service teachers' reflections and survey. Therefore, it can be concluded that service-learning promotes personal learning, professional knowledge and civic growth (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

## Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank all the students, teachers and pre-service teachers who participated in this study. This research received the Putra Grant of UPM.

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