Touching Hearts Through Service Learning: The Taiwan Experience

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Taiwan has focused greater attention to student volunteerism in higher education around the year 2000.

Most of the projects presented to the Ministry of Education (MOE 2010) and Executive Yuan Youth Commission involved:

• 1) student organized groups and student clubs going to impoverished or neglected areas of the country during the summer months.

• 2) These service-learning activities were then not integrated in academic curricula for higher education.

• For instance, a ten-day trip to remote areas and students gave lessons in math, science, computer, social studies and English to elementary schools.
The aims:

• This model of rendering service aimed at solving Taiwan’s most urgent educational needs; like
  • 1) improving school children’s academic performance
  • 2) enhancing children’s interests in certain subjects.
Moving towards a globalized involvement

• But as Taiwan has become more developed, Taiwanese students felt the need to extend their learning outside the boundary of their campuses and their country.

• The MOE report (2010) shows more groups were organized every year for students to devote substantial amounts of their time and energy to render services in Asian countries, like Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, China and India.
The Importance of understanding what constitutes a successful service learning experience

• The combination of both the abundance of college students participating and the number of schools involved underscore the importance of defining and fully understanding just what constitutes a successful service learning experience.
What service-learning entails

1) Students or participants learn and develop active participation in thoroughly organized service
2) The service is conducted in and meets the needs of a community.
3) It is coordinated with an institution (elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education), or community service program, and with the community;
4) It helps foster civic responsibility;
5) It is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
6) It includes structured time for the students and participants to reflect on the service experience.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37)

Reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan stimulated the first group of volunteers to help others too.
The Parable of the Good Samaritan was a source of inspiration for the first volunteers.

The first group of 6 participants decided to volunteer in some rural areas in the Philippines to teach aspects of Taiwanese culture to Filipino elementary and high school students in their Social Studies classes.

As all the participants were English majors and they would be using English all throughout the project, it was an opportunity for the volunteers to further enhance their language performance and abilities.
The EDSL project was conducted for a period of 10 days at the end of the spring semester (end of June to early July)

A) teaching as the major voluntary work in elementary and/or high schools,
b) house-building in slum areas as a minor activity. (Gawad Kalinga Housing Project)

On the average, each participant rendered 8 teaching hours and 3 hours of house-building work.
The degree of participation varied each year; however, more participants clearly preferred teaching elementary students rather than those in high school.

Volunteer work in house-building did not require previous preparation or skills. It was a hands-on experience done through the GK Housing Project, a successful Philippine-based Project for slum dwellers.

Volunteering work consisted of transporting building materials, house painting, mixing cement with water and a bit of masonry.
Monetary matters

• All the participants voluntarily joined and paid for their plane fares, although government and private sectors provided some funding.
The project involved several steps:

(1) announcement of the project in the university bulletin board,
(2) initial meeting of volunteers, answering questionnaire,
(3) input on the educational and cultural situation of the Philippines;
(4) training on teaching techniques;
(5) lesson planning and making teaching materials;
(6) doing the project in the Philippines, and
(7) reflection and evaluation of the project.
TEACHING EXPERIENCE
### Number of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Freshmen</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Freshmen: n=18 (43%)
- Sophomore: n=14 (33%)
- Junior: n=8 (19%)
- Senior: n=2 (5%)
- Total: n=42 (100%)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOPICS TAUGHT</th>
<th>NO. OF SCHOOL</th>
<th>NO. OF STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Taiwan’s History, geography, tourist spots in Southern Taiwan</td>
<td>1 school (Angat)</td>
<td>285 (E) + 43 (H) = 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Taiwanese pop culture, New Year Festival, A-mei Aborigines</td>
<td>2 schools (Angat &amp; Infanta)</td>
<td>410 (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Traditional Taiwanese weddings, Mid- Autumn festival, Taiwanese tourist spots</td>
<td>3 schools (Angat, Infanta, Zambales)</td>
<td>412 (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Taiwanese desserts, folk arts, toys and games</td>
<td>3 schools (Angat, Infanta, Zambales)</td>
<td>270 (E) + 152 (H) = 422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Taiwanese geography, Chinese New Year celebrations, night markets</td>
<td>3 schools (Cebu &amp; Bohol)</td>
<td>621 (E) + 339 (H) = 960</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
At the end of the Philippine trip, all participants completed the semi-structured questionnaire requiring both quantitative assessment and qualitative comments to evaluate their volunteer experience.

The quantitative questions used Likert-type ratings for participant satisfaction and project success.
Open-ended questions examined the relationship between their experience and _____

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) self-knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What did you learn about yourself after participating in this project?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you find to be the most satisfying aspect of your experience as a teacher?</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>2) cultural diversity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has your understanding of Filipino culture been changed by your experience in the Philippines?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has your experience in the Philippine made you more open and tolerant to people who have a different cultural background than yours?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Open-ended questions examined the relationship between their experience and ___

3) **social issues**
Give an example of how your house-building experience influenced your attitude towards poverty and slum dwellers.

4) **attitude toward service**
Give an example of how your participation in this project has influenced your attitude towards service to others, especially to the less fortunate.

Would you recommend this project to others?
Results

1) 95% wrote about their experience in their composition classes, in their own scrap books and diaries, posting their impressions and pictures on their emails, blogs and lately through the online Facebook.

2) Sixty percent (n=25) rendered some forms of volunteer service after the service-learning was over; like distance tutorial to underprivileged children;

3) 26% (n=11) continued to keep in touch with their “Filipino students” through electronic means,
Results

1) 38% (n=16) sent gifts and donations to the schools where they had taught.

2) Ninety percent (90%) stated that the project was “meaningful and fun” even if they did not do something big.

3) Several participants (55%) stated that they learned to connect with other people, especially with children and foreigners without feeling afraid and insecure.
Volunteer satisfaction

1) The positive response the elementary school children displayed towards them,
2) the personal warmth and connection that they felt that they had established with the children they taught;
3) their feeling of satisfaction with a sense of achievement and of being able to teach successfully in English.
4) Participants experienced satisfaction as they adapted their teaching styles to suit their students’ English levels.
5) Satisfaction came equally from the children’s enthusiasm to learn and be involved in the activities that they had prepared with care.
The participants’ hearts were indeed touched by the children’s excitement about learning, as shown in their raising their hands, their smiles and laughter.
A further gauge of participants’ satisfaction with the service-learning project is whether or not they would encourage a friend to volunteer for the same service-learning project. 95% (n=40) reported that they had already recommended it to their friends.
Self-knowledge

The majority of participants indicated that they had learned something significant about themselves as a result of their volunteer experience.

Seventy percent (70%) wrote that they had “developed as a person,” and that they had become more patient and more tolerant towards others. Another aspect participants had discovered was that they were more caring and compassionate than they thought.

Their self-knowledge also increased in terms of feeling more self-confident in teaching.

Sixty percent (60%) expressed improved self-esteem since they had done something worthwhile and meaningful.
Participants (60%) also found some directions in their future career, as their teaching experience indicated their propensity towards teaching children.

- 95% percent of the participants stated that the service-learning project helped them to realize how blessed they were and to be grateful for the things provided by their families.
Understanding Cultural Differences

- Nearly all of the participants (98%) reported that this volunteering work exposed them to a culture significantly different from their own.

All of the participants expressed the importance of being exposed to other realities of life. From one of the participants, we can see a keener sensitivity towards people from a wide range of background:
A participant’s comment

• “We have been exposed to American and European cultures because of our education and the media and we think that they are the best. We have neglected to appreciate the cultures of our neighboring countries. In fact, we have so many stereotypes about Filipinos and other Asians working in Taiwan. But actually there are so many beautiful Asian customs and traditions we need to value and practice but we young people tend to follow the not-so-commendable trends of the western world. I begin to realize that we have been blindly led by the media and now I should be more aware of other existing values and life realities.”
Awareness of Social issues
Awareness of Social issues

- All the participants realized that they were fortunate to be born in “comfortable homes,” in “sheltered and protected family environments” and that they possessed too many things, yet they complained and were unsatisfied with their lives.

- 95% expressed growing awareness of social inequalities in educational opportunities and resources and that they need to address this injustice one way or another.

- 85% expressed that they were “lucky” to have everything and now they “have to share their time and resources” to the less fortunate, especially giving them better education.

- Yet, the same participants also stated that the Filipino children were poor but were happy, while most Taiwanese have many material things but were quite unhappy. Indeed, the participants felt compassion for the poor and felt the need of empowering them through education. Fifty percent (50%) of the participants donated some of their pocket money to the children in a dumpsite.
At the onset, all the participants had already expressed their desire to “help others in need” and this desire became a renewed commitment to service after the completion of the project.

95% of the participants reported that helping others gave them a certain feeling of happiness and fulfillment.

70% indicated that serving others can take different forms and that each person can do something to help others.

Participants renewed their commitment to service for the following reasons: “altruistic motives,” “to pay back” to the society for whatever they got, to get a sense of solidarity with others, to have a sense of achievement for doing something good, to feel happy and good and to give a sense of meaning to their lives. As one participant noted:
A participant’s comment:

- I did learn a lot from this trip, and I started to reflect and reexamine my life after the trip. The most important of all is I want to do something good. In other words, I also want to be the one who can spread the good seeds to others.
The joy of giving

• Ninety-five (95%) of the participants realized that the project was short and that the few hours of teaching was a small gesture but it can have an influence in the lives of the children they taught.

• All of the participants felt the joy of giving; however, what they had received in their hearts was more than what they gave in terms of service.
Conclusion

• The Taiwanese participants in this project recognized that service-learning was a source of self-discovery, as well as a significant part of their educational experience and as a catalyst for greater social awareness and continued civic commitment.

• The underprivileged people they came in contact with were touched by their concern, which engendered hope.