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# Service learning among university students through working with South Asian children

Cheung Ming, Alfred CHAN

*Lingnan University, Hong Kong, sscmchan@ln.edu.hk*

Meng Soi, Florence FONG

*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

Wing No, Helen LAU

*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

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# **Service Learning Among University Students through Working with South Asian Children**

**Prof. Chan Cheung Ming, Alfred, Fong Meng Soi, Florence and Lau Wing No, Helen**

## **Introduction**

The benefits of service learning for the intellectual and personal development of students have been discussed in the past few decades. Jacoby (1996) defines service learning as, “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development”. The idea of using a service-learning approach in teaching curricula is “far from new” (Gray et al, 2000) and the scope of it has been expanding substantially in tertiary education overseas, though it is still not pervasive in Hong Kong. The Lingnan Angels is a service-learning programme designed to offer opportunities for Lingnan University students to learn through serving South Asian children. The programme design has been based on the experiential learning theory (ELT), which is commonly adopted as the theoretical underpinning for service learning (Sheckley & Keetom, 1997). This is a pilot programme for university students in Hong Kong, which was launched by APIAS, Lingnan University, in September 2002. The objectives of the programme are as follows,

1. To provide training and service-learning opportunities for a group of university students in Hong Kong;
2. To examine the learning process and impacts on students through serving deprived children in local primary schools; and
3. To explore any implications of service-learning programmes for the university students in Hong Kong.

## **Theoretical Framework**

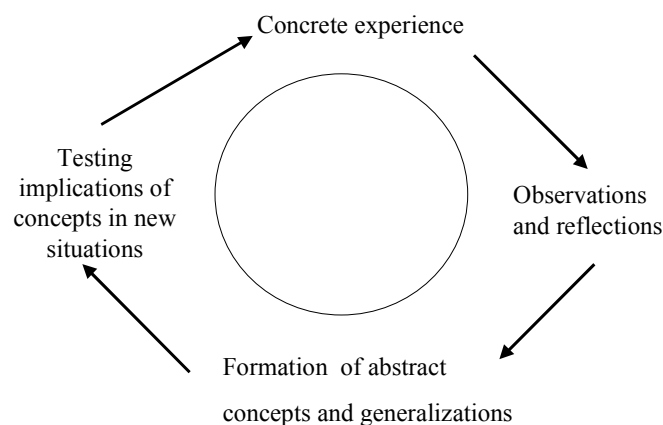
Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was used to guide the overall design and implementation of the Lingnan Angels programme. The essence of experiential learning is to facilitate a reciprocal relationship between practice and learning in which the practice strengthens and reinforces the learning while the learnt knowledge and skills also reinforce and strengthen the practice (Kolb, 1984; Sheckley & Keetom, 1997).

Figure 1 shows the four-stage model of experiential learning. A learner has to gain concrete experience at first, then, by constant reflection and observation the learner internalizes the learnt experience into an abstract conceptualization. Then, the learner transforms and generalizes the concepts into concrete knowledge and finally applies it in a similar situation and makes modifications if necessary. The learning therefore begins and ends with real life experiences, and will continue throughout life. The four stages have explained the process through which the



learner acquired the new knowledge and skills. ELT can illustrate that learning is best when beginning with real experience. So, it is assumed that through uncommon life events one is more capable of reflecting what meanings they have observed in life, and thus making abstract concepts easier to understand and apply. The ultimate assurance for successful knowledge internalization is of course to actually experiment with it in real life.

In addition, three implications of experimental learning can be addressed in the model. Firstly, learning is best conceived of as a process focusing on personal growth in terms of knowledge, communication skills, and self-competence, instead of only academic results or performance. Secondly, ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought, but are formed, re-formed and transformed through experience. Thirdly, learning is a continuous process grounded in experience (Kolb, 1984), where experience is vital in guiding the learning process.



**Figure 1**  
The Experiential Learning Model

## **Subjects**

A small study group was investigated for this pilot study. A total of sixteen Lingnan University students (N=16; Female=11 and Male=5) aged from 18 to 21 years old were recruited to participate in the programme in September 2002. Among them, eight were first-year students while the rest were third-year students. The students had poor academic performance in both written and spoken English. They also faced difficulties in relevant communication skills when conducting project work in their disciplinary subjects including business studies, social sciences and Chinese literature.

## **Procedure**

The programme adopted the ELT processes and principles. The learning process and the programme implementation were elaborated as follows:

## **Service targets**

The students, named “Lingnan Angels”, were first oriented to the service targets (the first real life experience was meeting these children). The rationale behind choosing these children was that they are members of ethnic minority groups (Vietnamese, Nepalese and Pakistani) in the predominantly Chinese community in Hong Kong (97% Chinese population). Most of these children live in rural areas of the New Territories with little social support in the community. Because of their darker skin colour and lower social status, this group of children is discriminated against, or totally ignored by our society. Among them, many are new arrivals residing in Hong Kong who know little Chinese but have been allocated to nearby schools using Cantonese (one of the Chinese dialects) as the teaching medium. They receive little language preparation and support from the schools. All participating children came from single parent, unemployed, or ex-drug abusing parent families. In all, twenty-seven children who had been in Hong Kong less than one year were referred by Ng Wo School (N=6), Chi Ging School (N=19) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) (N=2). They were all studying in primary schools, from primary two to primary six. It is expected that the university students can gain meaningful learning experiences through serving this deprived group.

## **Training**

In the first five months (from 10/2002 to 02/2003), four training workshops were delivered to equip the university students with the skills for working with the South Asian Children. Training workshops/mini lectures were provided by supervisors and social workers aimed at equipping the Angels with the necessary skills for delivering services to the South Asian children. Contents included communication skills with children and parents from Islamic faiths, using English to teach survival Cantonese and information about Hong Kong systems, and programme and activity organization skills. Programme co-ordinators who were experienced course instructors in APIAS were in charge of the whole programme and provided training and supervision for the sixteen Lingnan Angels. Experienced social workers from Social Welfare Department provided expert guidance and consultation to prepare them for handling the simple problems manifested by these children e.g. settling fights.

## **Service learning process**

The Lingnan Angels (study group) were requested to provide self-designed after-school services for the South Asian Children on a weekly basis, which was regarded as a good learning experience. Supervisors and social workers offered guidance during the implementation of the programme. Concrete experience played a crucial role in this learning stage. The Angels acquired concrete experience through serving the selected South Asian children. Various after-school services were delivered by the Angels including tutorials and classes on local culture. Three mass programmes were also conducted, including the Happy Party, Peak and the Science Museum Visit, with the aim of widening their exposure and enhancing their understandings of Hong Kong (apparently these children had never been out of the Yuen Long district), and a long term rapport building, consisting of telephone contacts and delivery of birthday presents.

### **Experiential learning practice**

Through their actual contact with, and provision of, services for the South Asian children, the Angels acquired a better understanding of the ethnic cultures, family situations, customs and social problems faced by their service recipients. For example, the Angels observed that most of the Pakistanis were vegetarians due to their religion; polygamous marriage was very common in South-Asian families and women played only a minor role in South-Asian families. During the interactions with the South-Asian children, not only did the Angels form concrete experience, they also underwent the “observation and reflection” stage in the experiential learning cycle. The two processes were facilitated by the exercise of filling in a weekly log by the Angels of the after-school services and outdoor activities, together with their personal reflections on the experiences. These were then raised for discussion during the reflection meetings, with particular efforts to relate them to their studies. For instance, one angel wrote a local-tour marketing proposal assuming these new arrival families as potential customers; and another looked at ethnic discrimination in her social science assignments.

The essence of experiential learning is the continuous process of learning from experience. Therefore, the learning process does not end with the completion of the tasks or experimentation. Learning is described as a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience (Kolb, 1984, p.25). Once the Angels had tested their new strategies through active experimentation, they again formed concrete and successful experience, and this acted as the new frame of reference for later learning and practice. The discovery and acquisition of new knowledge after each active experimentation did not only enrich the experience of the Angels, but also improved their practice, resulted in higher quality skills and allowed the transformation of their knowledge to higher order concepts in guiding a generalization of life orientation.

### **Assessing process**

Gray et al (2000) argue that there are assessment methods for service-learning programmes. The performance of the service providers is more important than of the other parties. Therefore a number of assessment mechanisms were developed to evaluate the performance of the Angels during programme implementation. Three methods were employed to evaluate the programme. These included the log sheets used to keep records of the service experience, periodic reflective meetings to discuss service experiences of the Angels, supervisors and social workers, and self-administrated questionnaires to evaluate their performance. Two researchers at APIAS of Lingnan University acted as field observers to conduct independent evaluation for the programme.

The table below summarised the learning process and implementation of the programme:

**Table 1**  
**Implementation process of the Lingnan Angle Programme**

Learning process	Involved parties	Tasks
1. Training stage (Observation & reflection)	Supervisors (Lingnan University & Social Welfare Department)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver training workshops &amp; give advice, visits to centres/schools</li> <li>• Share experience, contracts</li> </ul>
2. Service learning process (Formation of abstract concepts & generalizations)	Target group (Lingnan Angels)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design &amp; implement after-school services &amp; mass programmes</li> <li>• Provide personal contact &amp; support, identify the needs of children</li> <li>• Write logs, fill in questionnaires to evaluate the performance</li> <li>• Discuss experience in reflection meeting</li> </ul>
3. Service learning process (Testing implications of knowledge/skills in new situations & form concrete experience)	Service recipients (South Asian Children )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend workshops/tutorial/events provided by Lingnan Angels</li> <li>• Give feedback</li> </ul>
4. Assessing process (Transformation/ confirmation of learned knowledge/skills)	Researcher Collect data, analyse results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observe and evaluate the performances of the Angels &amp; children</li> </ul>

## Data analysis

As the study is exploratory in nature the data collected are mainly qualitative. Content analysis was used to examine the learning process and impacts of the programme, the results of which will be presented in qualitative texture with some extractions and illustrations from the study group. The data for content analysis were reflection logs, questionnaire results and comments provided by the Angels, teachers, and social workers. These qualitative comments gave us insights on the learning outcomes of the students (Angels) with reference to those aspects ascribed.

## Results

The preliminary results were found by evaluating the nine-month performance of the Angels (September 2002 to July 2003). Most students demonstrated better social skills in terms of communication and organizational skills with children and team-mates. Moreover, they were more likely to appreciate the culture of ethnic minorities; and possessed better problem solving skills in terms of handling emotional reactions. Though improvement in academic results was not identified due to the relatively short period of learning time (i.e. barely nine months), the Angels did feel more competent in speaking English and showed an improvement in writing and presentation skills, and they could present their project work in class with greater confidence. Below are extracts from their log entries:

“...having a good communication with others [team mates] is important coz this is the way to organize activities for the children in an effective way... I learn how to organize outdoor activities with partners and give instructions etc... The cultural trip today really let me have closer interaction with Ali and June[children] and I learn more about Jenny[the angels] whom I don't like very much before...”

(Car, Female, Dec 2002)

“...Hadia and Mubashir prefer playing among themselves rather than with me or others...I have to think about how to draw their attention in the next tutorial... Well, English might not be a good way based on today's experience, may be later when I learn more words from others (a real feeling to learn more). I will try using Cantonese and body language instead... Well, it does work to get better understanding of the kids by talking with their mothers...”

(Jenny, Female, Dec 2002)

“... I felt bad as I was often being ignored in the group and my English was poor too in the first month working with the angles and children... I recognize my improvement in these three months' services. I feel more comfortable to present my ideas in public using English... I learn how to cooperate with my team-mates. When I don't have time to prepare materials for the tutorial class [for Pan Asia Children], my team-mates would offer help automatically. We support each other as we are a team. Also, through planning activities for the kids, I learn more about what they like and dislike...I learn how to work with others efficiently...”

(Eunice, Female, Mar 2003)

In regard to the understanding of the culture of other nations, the Angels have better understandings of the issues related to race and ethnic cultures through serving the South Asian children. Most importantly, they developed their motivation to learn and appreciate other's cultures.

“...Even though their life style, living habits and costumes etc are so different from us...I find I get used to their body smell and behaviour... Today I have surfed the net to learn their country issues {Pakistan} which I have never been to...”

(Fung, Male, Nov 2002)

“...I recognize their ethnic clothing, learnt their eating habits, religious belief..By talking to their mothers, now I can tell a lot of their traditional culture and customs...”

(Car, Female, Feb 2003)

“...Today I learnt that the children I served, Humid, Jasvinder, Hussain were born by three different mothers but of the same father, they are now living altogether. I was very unhappy to learn that such marriage pattern existed in today's Hong Kong. The sexual discrimination among the boys is quite serious too, girls seem to be ignored in the group activities... I gradually learn to accept different culture and be open-minded...Their family-oriented culture and religious-oriented life also impress me...”

(Yan, Female, Jan 2003)

Regarding the Angels' ability in problem solving, they have better control of their emotional reactions when handling their own problems.

“...I was easy to lose temper but I found I have improved having joined the programme especially when looking at their smiling faces... I enjoy playing with them. Sometimes it is really physical exhaustive to enforce classroom discipline but I have learnt to be patient...”

(Fung Male, Mar 2003)

### ***Presentation Skills/ Self Confidence***

“...The programme is not related to my major discipline but I do improve in my presentation skills and writing skills coz the programme give me many chance to plan the teaching materials for the students and I get many practice opportunities...”

(Yan, Female, May 2003)

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The paper has tried to provide illustrations of the learning process and implementation procedures of the Lingnan Angels programme by integrating the experimental learning model in practice. It has identified some positive impacts on learning for the university students in terms of communication skill advancement, feeling more competent in spoken and written English, appreciation of ethnic minority cultures, and handling emotional reactions.

Several implications could be indicated for the implementation of service learning programmes in Tertiary Institutions. The Lingnan Angels programme has been implemented as an add-on to the formal education curriculum. It adds values for university students to learn from real life situations, making classroom knowledge much more interactive with the society. Instead of passively receiving information from an instructor in the classroom, the Angels gain direct learning experience through implementing their self-designed educational activities for the South Asian children. The experience could be beneficial to their learning motivation and identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

The programme also offered them opportunities to practice English and present their work to the governmental officials and public, thereby building up their confidence. Needless to say, the intensive contacts with South Asian children and their families have made them aware and appreciative of non-Chinese cultures. Such learning experiences provide a prime-pumping effect for their future mode of learning, via a cycle of formation of abstract reasoning based on life experience, then testing the same in other situations so as to obtain further evidence for the universality of these concepts, and finally transforming life experience into a higher order of life long learning models. The initial findings showed that the approach is worth taking further and recommendable for other Tertiary Institutions in Hong Kong.

Though the Lingnan Angels programme has proven the positive impacts on university students' learning, it could not provide a scientific measure of its effectiveness in terms of learning areas. From the preliminary findings of the programme, it seems that service learning is effective in terms of personal growth eg, communication skills and cultural knowledge for the slow learners, but the impact on other students, such as school achievers still remains unknown. Further studies should include a variety of samples with different service settings. In the foreseeable future, it is also important scientifically to develop a measurement

instrument to evaluate the outcome performance of the service-learning programme.

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## **About the Authors**

**Prof. Chan Cheung Ming**, Alfred, Director, Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS), Professor in Sociology & Gerontology, Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Professor Alfred Chan serves as a professor in the Department of Politics and Sociology and as Director of the Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, Lingnan University of Hong Kong. His recent work includes health and social care instrument development, older people's quality of life and caregiver's meanings to care, public service consumer satisfaction surveys and development of an action research protocol for service-learning programmes.

**Fong Meng Soi**, Florence, Senior Project Officer, Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS), Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Florence Fong currently works as a senior project officer in the Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, Lingnan University of Hong Kong. Her research interests focus on service-learning programmes for secondary school and tertiary school students, social competence skills enhancement for the elderly and development of programme evaluation protocols.

**Lau Wing No, Helen**, Project Officer, Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS), Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Helen Lau is now working as a project officer in the Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, Lingnan University of Hong Kong. Her work mainly focuses on supervising students in community service activities. She is an experienced programme instructor for the service-learning programmes in Hong Kong.