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Proposal for Service-Learning Award 2013 (category ageing)

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Title of the service-learning project: Colours of Dementia

Colours of Dementia

Dementia is one of the commonest concerns of ageing. According to one study, there are an estimated 24 million people living with dementia worldwide (Label, 2013). In Hong Kong, the population of those aged 65 and above is expected to grow from 13% in 2011 to 30% in 2041 (HKG, 2012). If we include those over 60, the number of people with dementia is expected to increase by 222% from 103,433 in 2009 to 332,688 in 2039 (Yu et al., 2012). To cope with the growing burden of ageing and dementia, increasing numbers of programmes to promote active ageing and maintain a healthy brain are being executed around the world. However, although measures that target the elderly are necessary, measures that prepare society to accept and care for the elderly and those with dementia are equally important. College students are the future leaders of society. Their connection to the elderly and those with dementia is crucial in encouraging positive social changes in an ageing population. Service-learning can play an important role in helping young people to get
to know and connect with the elderly. This paper proposes a service-learning programme of artistic creativity to facilitate expression among people with early dementia to help them to better communicate with others.

**An Integrated Service-Learning Research Scheme**

Competency-based service learning, as defined by Bringle and Clayton (2012), is “a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community” (pp. 114-115). Using the arts and creativity for an early dementia service-learning research scheme SLRS in this proposal fits with the subject knowledge of an elective course “Art and Well Being” offered by the Department of Visual Studies at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the course provides students with specific knowledge that ranges from advanced neuroscience and theories of anthropology and art to studies of cognitive psychology and art therapy, and the relevance of this knowledge to the effect of art on the well-being of individuals and communities. In the course, students learn relevant knowledge and hypotheses about the intrinsic nature of art as a language for expression and communication. As a kind of image writing, art relies mostly on the senses rather than rationality, and thus transcends cognitive and intellectual limitations. Art facilitates expression when language fails, as occurs in dementia. Many of the theories taught in the course can be applied to
real-world situations, but can only be realised in full by actual engagement in genuine creativity.

Clinical studies show that the use of art for dementia has a great effect both on those suffering from dementia and their carers (Kahn-Denis, 1997; Douglas et al., 2004; Hannemann, 2006; Eekelaar, 2011). Dr Bruce Miller of the University of California-Los Angeles Alzheimer’s Centre found that many Alzheimer patients, despite their language dysfunction, could still paint precisely and beautifully. More significantly, the images that they produced were largely a revelation of their memory and imagination (Laine, 2003). These images are the visualisation of the thoughts and feelings of those with dementia that can be recognised by their carers or relatives and appreciated by others (Killick & Allan, 1999). The title of the proposed service-learning programme is ‘Colours of Dementia’. Colours refer to the images produced by the patients. They are, on the one hand, traces of the individuality, fading memories and inner self of each patient, and remind us of their distinctiveness as an individual person. On the other hand, the colours are channels through which we can read the world of dementia when words and language are increasingly failing to communicate. With their specific knowledge of art as a language, students participating in the programme are required to design, run, review, and evaluate a series of well-structured artistic workshops for dementia patients and their carers.
Service-learning demands active learning, collaboration and cognitive apprenticeship, which Kuh (2008) claims results in high-impact pedagogy. With an explicit focus on the subject knowledge to be used in the programme implementation, the students start their active learning by putting conceptual theories into actual practice through the structural design of artistic activities that promote the use of creativity and images to aid expression. In the process of planning and running the workshops, the students are required to work as a team. The sense of a shared team spirit and collaborative knowledge building allows the students to experience a kind of joint ownership of the work processes and final outcomes of the service (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011), which could never be attained in a classroom.

**Objectives of Colours of Dementia**

The service provided by Colours of Dementia goes beyond ordinary leisure activities to offer carefully structured artistic and creative tasks through which those with early dementia can use art as a language. The aims are as follows:

1. encourage behavioural activation in persons with early dementia through artistic creativity;

2. improve the quality of life of persons with early dementia through the joy and fun of art making;

3. forge a better alliance between persons with early dementia and their
relatives and carers through recognition of the images created;

4. enhance the students’ understanding of dementia;

5. promote communication and connection between the students and the elderly;

6. improve the students’ social awareness of the social issues related to ageing;

and

7. promote the students’ sense of civic engagement and social commitment.

**Intended learning Outcomes of Colours of Dementia**

The intended outcomes benefit both the students and the early dementia persons and their relatives and carers. At the end of the service, the service clients will have attained the following:

1. joyful experiences of art making; and

2. better expression of their feelings and thoughts through creativity.

When the service is completed, the relatives and carers of the clients will gain:

1. a better understanding of the feelings and state of mind of the service clients;

and

2. a better connection to the service clients through better knowledge (or rediscovery) of them as individuals.

The students will have:
1. the realisation of art as a language for expression and communication;

2. an actualization of using art as facilitation to help people in need;

3. a better understanding of dementia;

4. a better connection to elderly people;

5. a greater awareness of the social issues related to ageing;

6. an experience of great satisfaction through teamwork; and

7. a greater flexibility and ability to solve problems.

**Structure of Colours of Dementia**

The service is delivered in a highly structured manner to best suit the needs to its target clients.

**Specific Service Group**

The service is targeted at people suffering from early dementia. Specific partnerships with groups such as the Hong Kong Alzheimer’s Disease Association are important to identify the target group.

**Training and Pre-Service Preparation**

Students are required to take 10 to 12 hours of art facilitation training conducted by professional art facilitators. Research on the basic aspects of dementia is also required.

A pre-service site visit to the organisation and information supplied by partners help students to address specific concerns about space, environment and constraints in their
planning.

**Service Sessions**

Students are required to design, plan and run a series of six to eight creative workshops with a clear theoretical and thematic framework. A clear session plan is prepared for each workshop. Throughout the execution of their plans, students must observe the details of the actions and responses induced by the activities. Adjustments are then made accordingly where required. At the end of each session, the observations are discussed and recorded. This post-session review not only encourages the students to reflect on the causes and effects of their plan, but also helps them to articulate their understanding of their service clients and how future plans could achieve the best outcomes.

**Assessment of Colours of Dementia**

The effects of the programme on the clients are assessed by their responses to the creative activities and the work that they create in the workshops. The effects on relatives and carers are evaluated through semi-structured interviews. Any feedback on a recognisable image, a revealing response or the re-discovery of a lost sentiment is taken as evidence of a better alliance between relatives and carers and the dementia person.
As a service-learning programme, the assessments focus on the effects on the students, and include the following:

1. pre- and post-service questionnaires designed by the Office of Service-Learning;
2. documented session plans;
3. students’ feedback and reflections gathered during two consultations with the faculty and staff of the Office of Service-Learning;
4. a group report-back presentation; and
5. an individual reflective essay submitted at the end of the service.

**Conclusion**

A primary goal of higher education is learning that lasts (Mentkowski & Associates, 2000). Service-learning allows students to apply their subject knowledge to meet community needs. According to Stelljes (2008), direct service involves an emotional or psychological connection between students and their service clients. This connection induces cognitive development such as personal reflection on identity, a shift of motivation toward service, the justification of different values, and a better awareness of social issues. The process of this development illustrates Dewey’s (1963) vision of education as development within, by and for experience (p. 28). More
significantly, the direct visualisation of the inner thoughts of early dementia persons through their art work connects the students to the elderly as individuals. The very different images produced illustrate how each elderly person has his or her own story and character. This realisation prompts the students and carers to see the individuality of elderly people, even though they all come from a group that comes under the umbrella of ‘dementia’. This sense of ‘personhood’ is important in substantial human relationships.

Colours of Dementia gives college students a personal and emotional experience with elderly people. The connections forged encourage students to think about the meaning of ageing, associated social issues and their roles in society. It is the fundamental belief of the programme that good service-learning is a pedagogy that induces cognitive development and brings about transformative change. The programme aims to fulfil Dewey’s mission that “education should foster students’ natural desire to give out, to do, to serve” (1990, p. 15).

(1690 words)

References:
Balnes, P. (2007) *Nurturing the Heart: Creativity, Art Therapy and Dementia (Quality Dementia Care Series)*. Alzheimer’s Australia (supported by Australian government).


