

On Becoming Leaders: Malaysian University Students, Community Service and Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

It is undeniably true that the young we raise today are the reflections of the leaders that we are going to present tomorrow. Having said this, it is thus imperative to better equip the youngsters - in the context of higher learning institution, the students - with valuable skills required to achieve a promising future. In a higher learning centre, producing leaders for, and of the nation might take different forms. Immersing the students in community services, service learning and acts of volunteerism is one of the common designs for leadership growth in many universities all around the world. This conceptual paper thus looks at the positive outcomes of students' engagement in community-based activities. Besides, this paper also explains how these two community-based activities, with their numerous benefits, enhance the leadership skills of our students.

Keywords: *Malaysian University Students, Community Services, Service Learning, Volunteerism and Leadership Skills*

Introduction

According to Hoffmann, Parker, Sanchez and Wallach (2009, p.1), community service work is "... work that is conducted by the community members for the community members". It is a work that aims at giving numerous benefits to the people involved with enhancing learning and social responsibility being one of those. Community service, practiced in learning institutions often takes a form of "service learning", which according to Eyer & Giles (1999, as cited in Webster & Worrell, 2008, pp.170-171) "... is a process combining learning and service and is based on the teachings of the social philosopher, John Dewey". In American schools, colleges and universities, service learning courses are designed for students to:

...participate in a service activity for a nonprofit organization and then "reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, as cited in McCarthy & Tucker, 1999, p.555)

As a combination of learning and servicing the community members, disadvantaged groups, less fortunate individuals and others, community-based activities are thus hoped to bring mutual benefits to the communities, universities and students (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Webster & Worrell, 2008). The same goes to Malaysian universities and their students where community-based service is done in various forms, often shaped and designed as to meet the needs of the students as well as the needs of surrounding communities - the locals, natives and orphans among many others.

As it is known that the involvement in community-based activities can bring a lot of benefits to the students (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Delp, Brown & Domenzain, 2005; Wade, 2001 and Zimmerman, Krafchick & Aberle, 2009), this conceptual paper will discuss those numerous positive outcomes, focusing particularly on the leadership skills gained and enhanced when students involve in community service, service learning and voluntary work.

Community Services and Malaysian Universities

According to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2008, as cited in Watson, Hollister, Stroud & Babcock, 2011), the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has revealed a new practice published under The Malaysian Qualifications Agency's First Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA). This new policy emphasizes on "teaching, research, consultancy services and community engagement" as "the core interrelated academic activities" for all Malaysian higher learning institutions (p.90). The requirements for community engagements, as stated in COPIA:

- i. There must be a policy and programs for active student participation in areas that affect their welfare, for example, peer counseling, co-curricular activities and community engagement;
- ii. The Higher Education Provider (HEP) must encourage connectivity of its staff and students with the local community around it, including through cultural, social and community service activities;
- iii. The Higher Education Provider (HEP) should actively participate in socioeconomic activities of the community in which it is located.

Community-based activities are ways to engage university students with the surrounding people. A call to form cooperative work and partnerships between the higher learning institutions and the surrounding communities as mentioned in COPIA, is timely since universities certainly have a lot of things to offer.

Community-Based Activities, Volunteerism and Service Learning: Positive Outcomes on Students.

There are many benefits that one might get from community service activities and course-based service learning. Vogelgesang et al. (2000) pointed out several positive outcomes these two interconnected activities have on students' academic performance, social values and beliefs, leadership and career and plans for future service. Involving 22,236 college and university students, their research found that community service and course-based service learning are academically beneficial as both "... are associated with greater self-reported gains both in critical thinking and in writing skills, and higher college GPAs" (Academic Outcomes section, para.2). With such apparent outcomes on students' academic performance, it is even suggested that "...service-learning has a place in the curriculum, and should not be relegated solely to co-curricular efforts" (Academic Outcomes section, para.5). Besides, the community-based activities these students had involved in do affect students' social values and beliefs as they believed that involvement in these programmes could form their "...commitment to promoting racial understanding, activism" and their "...belief that an individual can effect change in our society" (Values and Beliefs section, para.2). Furthermore, a growth of students' leadership skills is also evident as they have to plan and manage the activities which demand their critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills among others. The post test of this research also shows "...that students who participate in community service--regardless of freshman year career choice--are more likely than their nonparticipant classmates to say they plan to pursue a service-related career..." (Career Outcomes and Plans for Future Service section, para.2). This shows how community-based programmes can mould university students into becoming potential social contributors whose good academic and tertiary education experience have a lot to offer.

Delp, et al (2005) who studied youth involvement in POWER (People Organizing for Workplace and Environmental Rights) Project found out that the project has made the students aware of their and their parents' workplace and environmental hazards as well as their rights as teen workers. Involving students from three predominantly Latino schools in Los Angeles, University of California, Los Angeles Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (UCLA-LOSH), and the local community-based organizations, the students who were reported as currently working or had worked in the past were exposed to job safety, critical analysis skills and environmental leadership as a way to empower these working students. Besides being educated via specially designed curriculum, the participating students who mostly come from Hispanic immigrant background were sent for short and long-term internships at community-based organizations. Through this POWER Project, students were not just educated on the matters relating to their job safety, workplace hazard and environmental concerns. More than that, active participation in this carefully designed project has actually empowered them in dealing with matters like wage disparity, sexual harassment, violation of workers' right, gender discrimination, workplace abuse and exploitation (Delp et al., 2005). According to these researchers, students' participation in this community-based project has shown positive outcomes such as increased:

- (1) awareness of their rights and their knowledge of resource organizations such as unions and government agencies ...
- (2) self-efficacy and competency "to work together to get more done" ...
- (3) increased consciousness of workplace abuses and the societal factors that make youth, especially girls and immigrants, vulnerable to those abuses... .
- (4) increased consciousness of themselves as part of a community that is affected by workplace and environmental abuses and their motivation to "make a change." (Delp et al., 2005, pp.277-9).

This proves that students' involvement in this POWER project can bring changes into their well-being and that of others. Servicing their own people with mostly the same workplace problems, has as well built their youth leadership as the students are made aware of their role as the potential agent of changes in and for their predominantly Hispanic immigrant community (Delp et al., 2005).

In addition, Wade (2001) admitted the benefits of involving students in social justice-oriented service learning programmes. According to her, the students who are directly servicing the community are able to examine the problems affecting the community which will later lead them to the "...efforts that might be necessary beyond direct service to lessen the problems they are witnessing firsthand" (2001, p.1).

In the same vein, Zimmerman et al. (2009) argued that service learning contributes to the participating students' "...sense of social responsibility which allows students to feel more engaged and motivated to become involved with social movements that support their values". Besides, students' engagement with the society through the course-based community activities can also enhance students academically "...as they are able to tie course content into practical application" (Zimmerman et al., 2009, p.196).

Simons and Cleary (2006, p.316) stated that "service learning not only contributes to community relationships and engagement, but it also provides students with an opportunity to observe the benefits of helping others". Graduates whether they realize it or not, are benefiting themselves by helping others through practicing interpersonal skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, event management, etc. To further develop the skills, exposure to national and international voluntary activities will be such a good help. Students may have to work with different people from different background and cultures, social values, ideologies, issues and others which require them to fully take hold of leadership skill.

Adding to the literature, AIKandari and AlShallal (2008, p.574) listed numerous benefits of students' engagement in community-based activities, such as helping "... students to develop leadership skills, become more aware of multiple cultures, community issues, and personal and social values, such as knowing and accepting people in different cultures, working with collaboration, and a warning of national and community issues".

Amazingly, some students are looking forward to join these community services and voluntary activities since they like to help people and they get pleasure from doing those activities. Students value sincerity and honesty in the activities whereby it is "... more effective because it emanates from free choice rather than being coerced" (McLellan & Youniss, 2003, pA8). Holzweiss, Rahn and Wickline's (2007, p.136) research output stated that "... some students stayed involved in their organizations because of the enjoyment it gave them while others cited opportunities to improve skills such as leadership as a reason to remain involved". Therefore, the more activities they are involved in, the more exposure they will experience and the more benefits they will gather.

Apart from academic and social enhancement of the students, community-based activities, are also effective in promoting "social justice" (Zimmerman et al., 2009; Wade, 2001, Delp et al., 2005) "multi-culturalism and racial understanding" (Wade, 2001 ; Vogelsegang et al., 2000), "moral development" (Boss, 1994; Gorman, 1994, as cited in Zirmelman et al., 2009) and many others.

Community-Based Activities and Service Learning: Enhancing Student Leadership.

Leadership is one of the vital elements in the ancient and modern societies. The success and failure of a nation depends a lot on its leadership. Thus leadership should be the focus of younger generations as to ensure the survival of any nation. Even though some proposed that leaders are born, not created, leadership skills still need a full nurturing from respective authority. Therefore, everyone has to gain a lot of knowledge on leadership skills and apply the skills whenever necessary. Enriching one's knowledge of leadership and enhancing the acquired skills can be done through one's involvement in various activities -- in this respect, community-based activities. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said "Everyone is a leader and a leader must be responsible towards his followers" (Riwayat Tirmidhi). This shows how essential leadership skills are as every one of us is indeed a leader who is responsible to the Creator, himself, family, society and others, the one who is answerable to the Creator for every action done.

In higher education, the practice of leadership is highly emphasized. However, how do students learn leadership? Similar to management techniques, leadership can be learned through experience and education (Arendit & Gregorie, 2005). Current leadership theories suggest that leadership development is a learning process (Brown & Posner, 2001). To succeed in their future careers, students need these aspects of leadership like the ability to find sources of information, to manage and to empower others (Walker, 2006). As such, a more intentional focus on leadership development could provide undergraduate students with full motivations to take advantage of leadership opportunities, which can be limited at this stage of their lives. Kouzes and Posner (1995) in their research on leaders and leadership "... found that people reported learning how to lead from three sources: trial and error, observation of others and education" (as cited in Oplatka & Waite, 2010, p.51)

Community-based activities, voluntary act and service learning courses enhance students' leadership skills in many ways. Students need to collaborate with other people as a team to ensure the successfulness of any voluntary activities or community services. Being the future leaders, students will be trained on "a sense of urgency, form a powerful guiding coalition, create a vision, communicate that vision, empower others to act on the vision, plan for and create short-term win, consolidate improvements and keep the momentum for change moving, and institutionalize the new approaches" (Thomas, 2009).

According to Adair "leadership exists on different levels" with team leadership being one of those (2007, p.55-56). As can be clearly seen, many of the university-community engagement activities are done collectively rather than individually. The ability to work harmoniously as a team in order to ensure the successfulness of any activity is the other element of leadership that can be easily gained through voluntary activities, community services or service learning. Team-working as we know demands higher understanding, consideration and respect among the team members. Thus the ability to form a good and working team to accomplish the objectives of the community-based activities can create a leader in each participating student as "each team member" according to Adair (2007) should be seen "... as a leader in his or her own way" (p.55). In discussing university student leadership, team working and community, Hilliard (2010,

pp.93-97) said "student leaders are invaluable assets to the growth of the academic, social and cultural development of the campus environment" who would "...equip their peers with knowledge related to team building and high importance of a team and improve campus physically and community relations".

In addition, leaders as mentioned by Wagen, (2007) should focus on "giving clear guidelines, facilitating efficient work" and "...energizing people". Students involved in community-based programmes are expected to apply these since giving clear instructions, laying down common rules, helping and motivating the team members are the inescapable parts during the designing and operating of community work. He continued to say that participating students have to "concentrate on developing tools for organizing and controlling activities, as well as on innovative ways to inform, lead and motivate" other "volunteers who may need maturity within minutes or hours" (2007). Being involved in these activities, as proven by Wagen could develop students into becoming future leaders who would later utilize their skills in training the next leaders.

Furthermore, participating students will get the exposure in handling logistics which involves "getting things organized, getting thing and people in the right place at the right time and pulling everything down" (Wagen, 2007). All of these are required from students involving in many voluntary activities and community services in order to really fully take hold of the leadership skills.

Conclusion:

Kuh (1995, as cited in Holzweiss, Ralm & Wickline, 2007) reiterated that "the involvement principle is simple but powerful: the more time and energy students expend in educationally purposeful activities, the more they benefit" (p. 125). This is proven true since students really involve in experiential programmes like community services. In discussing the benefits of students' community-based service engagement, Holzweiss et al. (2007) also stated that "some students stayed involved in their organizations because of the enjoyment it gave them while others cited opportunities to improve skills such as leadership as a reason to remain involved" (p. 125). Community-based activities can be a good avenue for the students to enhance leadership skills. Thus we should encourage the students to engage more with the community, given that such engagement is more than academically fulfilling. Engaging themselves with the community is indeed self-rewarding, knowing that the knowledge that they gain from the university is utilized and wisely put at a good place.

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