

Service Learning: An Experiment and Reflections

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Abstract

This present paper is the reflection of three months service learning program organized by the School of Education of the Central University of Punjab in one of its adopted backward village named Nandgarh. The program was meant to improve the academic achievement, social interaction and ethical culture of the students from 6th grade to 10th grade of the village through activity based teaching pedagogy. As a whole 69 students participated in the program. Both pre and post tests were conducted on the identified curricular areas like English, Mathematics and Science. At the end of the program, significant improvement was observed in the academic achievement of the students along with the change in their ethical culture. The students and their parents were extremely satisfied with this program and suggested for the continuance of the program further. The pre-service teachers attained a sense of professionalism through classroom management, activity designs and the development of interpersonal skills during service learning. Therefore it is recommended that service learning may be made a part of teacher training at all levels.

KEYWORDS: Service learning, Pedagogy, Academic achievement, Pre- service teachers, Community Service

Introduction

The acquisition of knowledge or skill has different modes. Many a times we learn through related tasks. Learning from one task helps to learn the other task in a better way. We have experienced to learn effectively through multitasking i.e. learning a lesson in one class and teaching the same to the peer group. Motivation of students to learn helps to perform better in teaching. Experiential learning or service learning is the application of classroom knowledge in the community setting to meet the needs of the society. One feels satisfied if he is able to combine two tasks and get positive results. Service and learning are such two tasks which can be successfully paired. Classroom learning and teaching to community are blended in such a way that both are enriched by one another.

This experiment was conducted in the School of Education of Central University of Punjab (CUPB) at one of the villages adopted by CUPB i.e. Nandgarh where in the pre-service teachers were given opportunity to teach the students from 6th grade to 10th grade of a rural school in Bathinda district of Punjab to gain practical teaching experience and improve their skills along with the satisfaction to serve the community.

The main **purpose** of this program was to provide academic assistance to the students belonging to the disadvantaged sections of our society. Besides academics, the pre-service teachers of the Centre were encouraged to groom the students of the

village with regard to general conduct and etiquettes. They were also encouraged to create environment awareness. Eight pre-service teachers willingly took the initiative to teach students of a village, who were very poor and could not afford extra coaching. They prepared a proposal and started working on it from October to December, 2016.

The classrooms of a primary school were arranged to conduct the classes in the evening after the teaching hours of the department. The students created a learning environment there and learnt to facilitate learning. They developed very cordial relationship with school students, sarpanch of the village and parents of the students.

It was **hypothesized** that their academic achievement, social interaction, ethical culture and thinking skills will improve. This program was named as Free Coaching Centre of CUPB. It was a 6 week program. After getting permission from the Sarpanch of the village, principal of the school of the village was consulted. Seven groups were formed. Every group was led by one pre-service teacher. They provided academic assistance to the rural students as per the schedule. Attendance record of the students was maintained by them. All pre-service teachers were instructed to maintain proper record of the topics taught by them. They were encouraged to use different pedagogies to enhance the achievement of the students.

When the children and parents of the village came to know about this program from their panchayat members, their response was very positive. Initially, 57 students were part of this program. With the passage of time, their number kept on increasing and by the end of the first phase of teaching, 69 students attended the program. All secondary level students were having problems in Mathematics and English subjects, whereas elementary students had problems in understanding the languages. The pre-service teachers took a pre-test before starting their teaching to explore the needs of the students and plan their teaching-learning process accordingly. Activity based teaching pedagogy was used by the pre-service teachers of the Centre for providing better understanding of the subjects. At the end of the sixth week, post achievement test was conducted to know the improvement of academic coaching given to the rural students. Towards the end of the first phase of the program, feedback of students was also given to their parents and feedback of parents about the students' performance was taken.

The data revealed that there is a significant improvement in the academic performance of the school students of all classes. However, the students of elementary classes gained much more than the students of secondary classes. The increase in the number of students has been found to be more in elementary classes than secondary classes.

After the qualitative and quantitative analysis of Service Learning program, it is **concluded** that:

1. Elementary students of the village Nandgarh have shown keen interest in academic coaching given by the pre-service teachers of Centre for Education. Their academic performance test reveals that there is significant improvement at elementary level students than the secondary level students.
2. Village students want more academic support in English and Math.

3. The scholars of the Centre got field exposure and tried to understand the ground realities. They felt extremely satisfied in serving that community, where there is dire need of such support.
4. The scholars felt that the village students were lacking in understanding of basic concepts in Math and basic language skills.
5. Everyone (students, parents and community members of the village) feels that this activity should continue.
6. The scholars felt the need of providing awareness about hygiene and health to the village students.

As service-learning is a form of experiential learning that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience and strengthen communities and it is a method in which the students learn & develop through active participation in an organized service which is conducted to meet the need of the community. Therefore, our pre-service teachers actively engaged themselves in meaningful learning and service activities to meet the specific learning goals and community needs. Service Learning facilitates a student's growth in academics, social maturity, leadership, communication and collaboration skills. The intellectual foundation of service learning is laid on the ideas of John Dewey who considered education as an engaged experience (Plater, 2011).

Pre-service teachers can have an edge considering the benefits from the service learning as they can apply the theory in the field for better understanding and reflection on their experiences. They attain a sense of professionalism through classroom management, activity designs and the development of interpersonal skills during service learning (Chien, 2017). Good quality of service learning is found to have a positive impact on the civic engagement, career awareness, academic achievement and socio-personal development (Billig, 2002) as well as on the cognitive skills and achievement motivation of students (Bringle, Phillips & Hudson, 2004). Through the interaction of participants with the community, their level of confidence in speaking the language also gets increased (Hellebrandt, Arries, & Varona, 2003; Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). This has been experienced by our pre-service teachers that the students were very eager to learn. The number of students started increasing day by day. They apparently looked like enjoying the classes. The smiling faces and restlessness showed the keenness to come again the next day inspired the pre-service teachers. Owing to the above discussion on observation and findings of service learning program, it is **recommended** that:

1. The young children were found to be very regular in their extra coaching classes after school; it indicates that they are interested in studies. However, inadequate efforts to engage them in academic activities effectively in their schools by the teacher/management may be the reason of their disinterest to study in schools. Even the parents and panchayat members of the village shared such observation. Thus, the training of new techniques of engaging the students in the class needs to be given to elementary school teachers.
2. There is a significant improvement in the academic performance among students of elementary level and school students have developed keen interest as well, thus, such program need to be initiated by other higher education institutions in other villages as well.

3. This has been unanimously observed that village students are very poor in reading, writing and understanding the English language and their lack of interest in Math indicates their low level of analytical skills. Surprisingly, the students have been found to be weak in writing and understanding their mother tongue-Punjabi, too. In the present era of society, one cannot ignore the importance of English and Math without understanding the value of mother tongue (Punjabi) and national Language (Hindi). Thus, more emphasis on developing language skills is required especially at elementary level.
4. Though orientation /training programs are being organized for in-service teachers. However to be honest, these have been found to be cosmetic/ritualistic. Such programs may be organized in collaboration with university departments in order to make them effective and focused.
5. It has also been observed that the students lack basic hygiene and social etiquettes. Therefore, it is necessary to initiate regular training in basic hygiene and interpersonal skills and special attention be given by the teachers and school administration.
6. The pathetic poverty level reflected from the behavior of the students suggests that there should be some basic minimum requirements to be provided to them as social duty of the administration and the public.

In nutshell, learning to serve should be made an integral part of teaching to create effective or excellent teachers by providing them the opportunity to serve and learn together.

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