

LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need to practice “Service Learning” as an effective way of learning for the university students in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a very fertile land to practice service learning which advocates volunteer work to enhance academic experience. The volunteering university students could be both male and female and from Bengali and English medium background. The English students can tutor underprivileged children to help them write better composition in English. The science students can tutor the demanding but poor students. They can also experiment things in real life contexts. The BBA students can demonstrate classroom learning in some small and medium enterprises. Moreover, the volunteering university students can serve the humanity by creating awareness among the slum dwellers about common health problems. Besides, they can talk or stage short performances on the bad effect of drug addiction at some English and Bengali medium schools. Later on, they would do reflective writing and by this way their writing would be better gradually. The writer hopes that service learning has its prospect, validity and reliability in Bangladesh.

Key words: service, learning, community, interaction, volunteerism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Service learning, as the name itself suggests, is a sort of learning through service. If we consider learning and teaching of English in Bangladesh, we see that it has long been a matter of great concern since the independence of the nation. NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) has introduced modified and revised English textbooks for classes ix, x, xi and xii. Given the students coming for higher education in English medium universities after completing HSC or A level, almost all of them need development in writing composition. Knowing the fact that students have studied different subjects by attending traditional classes, most students do not know how to think critically and participate in the learning process. Service-learning can be a very effective tool to motivate learners to flourish their hidden talent by serving the communities enriching their academic competence and performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community

service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (servicelearning.org). There are three specific words that demand explanation to know better what service learning is: learning, service and community. As we know that students learn things from formal instructions in classrooms in Bangladesh, they do not have any opportunities to serve communities while learning. However, since days back to early nineteenth century, service learning has been praised, practiced, and integrated in the curriculum in the United States of America. In the 1990s, service learning got academic recognition from authorities to be incorporated fully in curriculum.

Some people might argue about the goal of service learning in relation with academic progress; they may think that service learning would hamper the expected growth of students’ learning. But in a society where lots of demanding communities are there, service learning could help students become skilled at the achieved knowledge in the classroom. According to Jennifer Alter (2008), there are two goals of service learning: one is to revise existing course to incorporate service learning and another

is to encourage students to use their time and talent by helping their community.

The key to service learning is to make a link between community service and classroom studies (learningindeed.org). From the writer's point of view, learning would be better if the students could experience their classroom knowledge in interaction with the community. For instance, a group of students of Computer Science and Engineering can serve communities who are in need such as, police headquarters, some schools incorporating what they have learnt in classroom. Later on, they will be writing a reflective report on their service, problems, successes, and recommendation for further improvement. By this way, students could learn better forgetting about the academic rigidity.

One of the major goals of education is to empower the learners. However, can the instructors be successful to make their learners empowered only by classroom teaching? If the students can not relate the subject matter of their lessons with real life situations, the knowledge remains bookish and the learners can not utilize the classroom understanding when that is in need. Rosenberg (2000), as cited in the article "Why Service-Learning?" by Bruce W. Speck, assumes that students are not being empowered in the traditional classroom; rather they are actually separated from the means of empowerment.

University students, who are going to be future helmsmen of a nation, need to feel for the helpless so that they can make a difference in the community. They can participate in service to society taking the responsibilities on their shoulders. The traditional system of education does not support any activities outside the classroom. Forman and Wilkinson (1997) says that service learning "fosters the development of skills and knowledge needed for participation in public life" as cited in the above article by Mr. Speck. The researcher wants to cite the comment of Rosenberg in the above cited article by Mr. Speck:

"More than volunteerism, service learning combines community work with classroom instruction, emphasizing reflection as well as action. It empowers students by making them responsible in a real world context, while giving them the support, encouragement, information and skills to be effective".

Kate McPherson (2005) opines that service learning is a method of teaching through which students apply their academic skills and knowledge to address real-life needs in their own communities. In the article "Service Learning in Special Education", Lori Armstrong Lynass advocates to implement service learning in teaching as it is "a valuable tool for helping students to become engaged in successful learning".

By involving themselves in service learning projects, the learners can develop leadership skills, and learn how to evaluate the ideas of others in a group. Service learning is a proven technique that facilitates a student's growth in academics, social maturity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and leadership skills (Michigan Learn and Serve Study, Meyer, Hofchire, and Billing, 2004).

Robert Schoenfeld (2006) says that service learning not only engages students in meaningful service to address real life needs in the community, but also enriches the knowledge they achieve from classroom participation.

III. PROBLEM AREA

In Bangladesh, learning is basically confined in classroom environment. Most teachers, guardians and even the students think and believe that teachers should explain and clarify all the problems in the class. The researcher has observed some classes in the secondary and higher secondary levels where he hardly found any initiatives to give learners any sort of autonomy to solve the problems and learn the things.

Being an English language student and teacher, in particular, the writer has seen the development and barriers of language learning and teaching in Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh is a multi-lingual country, English has been taught as a second language from primary to higher secondary level since its emergence. To know how to communicate in English was a matter of pride and power once in this country. But gradually it has become an inevitable aspect in the field of education because of the growing demand of English knowing people in government and business sectors. In spite of various initiatives taken by government and some NGOs, most of the university students are not so very competent in real life communication in English. It seems to be evident that Bengali

medium students are prone to memorize the things so that they can get them “common” in the examinations. It might be noted here that students coming from English Medium background are a bit better in oral communication than those from Bengali medium. But the matter of regret is that if you search for a good write-up, you will hardly find any.

Service learning can be instrumental to any sort of teaching and learning in universities. We know that students have to go for internship to obtain degrees for some courses in Bangladesh such as Medicine, Social Welfare, BBA, and some engineering courses. But service learning is not yet incorporated in the curriculum for any courses. We should not be confused about the term service learning with internship. Service learning, as we know, does not talk about the usage of acquired knowledge in practical life, or experimental practice of perceived understanding from classroom participation; rather, it tells about the integration of classroom comprehension in interaction with the community.

IV. HOW TO GET STARTED IN A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

After motivating students to engage in learning through service, professors can do the following:

1. Divide the class into three or four groups (6-8 students per group)
2. Choose a president (to lead), a vice-president (to support the president), a scribe (to keep a record of the group’s discussion), and a reporter (to speak to the class about the project development). The rest should be called researchers as it is important to get every student involved.
3. Have the groups know the needs in the community. (Schoenfeld, 2006)

V. THE SUCCESS OF SERVICE-LEARNING INITIATIVES

The success of service learning projects is remarkable. By directing themselves to this way of learning, students learn better developing their concern about the needs of the community. Bruce W. Speck, in the article “Why Service-Learning”, shared some comments of some researchers (p. 8). Astin and Sax (1998), said on a study they conducted, “the findings reported show clearly that participating in service activities during the

undergraduate years substantially enhances the students’ academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility”.

Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) report “Service learning programs do appear to have an impact on students’ attitudes, values, skills, and the way they think about social issues”. Henson and Sutliff (1998), after integrating service-learning into a business and technical writing classroom, say, “Integrating service-learning into a regular class stimulates both teaching and learning”.

VI. THE WRITER’S EXPERIENCE OF PRACTICING SERVICE LEARNING

As a teacher at the Centre for Languages, BRAC University, the author has a wide range of experiences of teaching English language. To try how service-learning works in relation with English learning, the author talked about his interest in the classes and asked for some volunteers to serve the community. The researcher explained his plans to his students and inquires if some felt really provoked to serve others. Afterwards, he found some motivated students among whom he selected a few according to their needs and gender. After teaching them pre, while and post writing processes, the researcher took a pre-test (a sample writing) of his students. Then he selected a UCEP (Underprivileged Children Education Program) school in Mirpur where only the working children study. Some of them work as maids, some work in mechanical workshops, some are street children, and some are children of rickshaw pullers or domestic helps. The most important thing is that some of them can not have meals three times a day. Yet the children go to schools in that kind of dilapidated condition because they are very eager to complete their secondary education. However, the children do not have access to quality education as the teachers are not provided training with modern methodologies and techniques.

My students taught the underprivileged children the writing process what they had learnt from classroom. They took preparation on their own to teach the school children. The teacher only guided them and gave necessary feedback. After their service, they wrote argumentative composition on some topics based on global and social concerns. The difference between the pre and post test is very significant. The post-test write-ups were more

organized having specific ideas, good development of ideas, supporting details with examples and explanation, and good conclusion. The feedback from the school authorities and teachers was excellent; they told that they had never experienced that sort of learner-centered teaching that really helped the students. And the students of the school expressed their confidence telling that they could write on their own then on any topics they were asked to.

The volunteering BRAC University students were the most beneficiaries of the said service learning project. They told their guide and the Pro Vice Chancellor that they had learnt how to get in time for work, how to take responsibility on their own, how to communicate with community, and how to get things done by working as a team. At the same time, students have developed their sense of serving the people in need and distress. They also expressed their satisfaction for being clear of the contents they had been taught in the classroom.

VI. OBJECTIONS TO SERVICE-LEARNING

Some academics think that service-learning is very time consuming and it requires many resources. They believe students have to learn so many things in a course which is not possible through service within the scheduled time frame. They think as well that it requires too many resources to conduct a service learning project which is really difficult to find and organize. However, the professors can select some contents of their courses to be dealt in service learning projects which would motivate the students throughout the semester. The writer hopes professors and learners would certainly get the multi-faceted benefits of service-learning as it makes the future leaders by helping them learn how to communicate in groups and society. This is also evident that the learners would know the needs of the communities. At the same time, the teachers would find their students doing better in tests on the contents they learnt through service.

VII. Conclusion

To “educate students for a life as responsible citizens” (Bringle and Hatcher,1996), not merely for a career, service learning should be

incorporated in the course curriculum of almost all the subjects in higher education as universities have required resources (students, faculty, libraries and research expertise). Though the service - learning needs a bit more attention than classroom teaching, the result could be the best. The learners will be engaged in community service and they will be enhancing the classroom experience by doing that. The sooner the authorities take initiatives to include service-learning in curriculum the better we would be able to make a difference in our society.

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