

AN ASSESSMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING  
OUTCOMES IN SERVICE-LEARNING ENGAGEMENT:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN A  
MALAYSIAN INSTITUTION OF  
HIGHER LEARNING

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## **ABSTRACT**

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community service with instruction to instill civic attitude and enrich students' learning experience. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) states service-learning as one of the ways to develop students' 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. However, there is not much research done on service-learning in the Malaysian context. This study is prompted by views that Malaysians in general lack civic attitude and Malaysian graduates lack academic skills. Therefore, the study aims to assess undergraduate learning outcomes in service-learning engagement based on a case study in a Malaysian higher learning institution and find out whether service-learning is able to develop civic attitude and academic skills.

This research is founded on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory. It is a phenomenological study using qualitative research methodology. Data was collected for textual analysis from students and lecturers through semi-structured interviews of students, individual reflective journal of students, group reflective report of students, semi-structured interview of lecturers, reflective journal of lecturers and observation of students.

Students were asked to describe their lived experience of participating in service-learning project. The participants of this study were year one and year two diploma students from various disciplines taking a compulsory general studies course, namely Civic Consciousness and Volunteerism in a private higher learning institution in Malaysia and the lecturers who taught them. The course requires students to carry out a group project, which benefits the community within a

semester. The service-learning projects carried out by the students were categorised into three themes, i.e. environment, filial piety and underprivileged children.

The findings show that students experienced various civic, academic, and personal and social outcomes, including awareness of community issues, sympathy, compassion and respect for the affected community, the intention to be involved in charity activities in the future, teamwork skills, communication skills, leadership skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, planning and organising skills, sense of achievement, happiness, gratefulness, and realisation of own weaknesses. Most of the lived experiences shared by students were positive. The findings suggest that service-learning has the ability to develop students' civic attitude and academic skills.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised /read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, as a thesis for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and /or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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## LIST OF NON-ENGLISH WORDS

<b>Non-English</b>	<b>English Translation/Explanation</b>
<i>alam</i>	world
<i>anak yatim</i>	orphan
<i>bahasa</i>	language
<i>bungkus</i>	wrap
<i>chow</i>	to go away in Hokkien dialect
<i>jimat</i>	being thrifty
<i>kampong</i>	village
kesian	pity
<i>lah</i>	a particle in Malay language which is used for emphasising
<i>loh</i>	is used just like <i>lah</i> in Malay language. <i>Loh</i> is used by the Chinese ethnic groups when they speak Mandarin or other dialects
<i>nasi lemak</i>	a popular Malay food. Rice cooked in coconut milk and is eaten with hot spicy sauce and garnishes including boiled egg, cucumber, anchovies and peanut
<i>OKU (abbreviation for orang kurang upaya)</i>	people with disabilities
<i>orang tua</i>	old people
<i>rendah diri</i>	humble
<i>sabar</i>	patience
<i>senamrobik</i>	a form of aerobics. The word is a combination of the Malay words <i>senaman</i> (exercise) and <i>aerobik</i> (aerobics)
<i>wah</i>	an exclamation which means “wow”

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

Service-learning teaching pedagogy or more commonly known as community engagement teaching pedagogy is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience of students, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities (Seifer & Connors, 2007). In higher learning institutions in Malaysia, this teaching pedagogy is slowly gaining momentum and recognition, especially with its inclusion in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) where service-learning is stated as one of the ways to develop students' 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The focus of this phenomenological study is to assess the learning outcomes of service-learning engagement from the perspective of students who participated in service-learning programmes in a higher learning institution in Malaysia. Service-learning has its roots in experiential learning and can be traced back to John Dewey, the American philosopher and psychologist who advocated that education needs to produce democratic citizens who would be able to understand the needs of the community and contribute to the welfare of society. Dewey (1900, 1916) believes that education's main function is to create social change and reform. The purpose of education is not to acquire a set of pre-determined skills, but rather to develop a person's full potential and the ability to use these potentials for the greater good of humankind. Dewey added that to prepare students for the future is to train them to have the ability to use all their capacities and capabilities or have the control to do so. In *The School and Society* (Dewey, 1900) and *Democracy of Education* (Dewey, 1916), Dewey claims that instead of preparing citizens for ethical participation in

society, schools in America were producing passive students by concentrating on mastery of facts and contents. Education was preparing students to comply passively with political structures and authorities. It does not encourage the pursuit of individual and communal exploration or reflection. Students were not trained to become autonomous and ethical humans who are capable of seeking social truths through reflection and critical discourse. Higher education was seen as a monopoly of higher learning institutions.

Dewey believed that we reflect and use the knowledge from our experiences to grow and enhance ourselves. As one of the most famous proponents of hands-on learning or experiential education, Dewey states that education is important not only to obtain content knowledge, but more importantly, to learn how to live. Dewey (1916) stated that:

An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience ... is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory... but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as a theory. It tends to become a mere verbal formula, a set of catchwords (p. 144).

Another educator whose philosophy also helped shape service-learning is South American, Paulo Freire who through his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) emphasised a form of education that aimed to empower those who are economically and socially marginalised. Freire, made the distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed, and differentiated them in an unfair society. He argued that education should allow the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity and to overcome their

oppressed condition. However, Freire also stated that for this to happen, the oppressed person must play their part. He stated that:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption (p. 54).

Freire added that for true liberation to occur, the oppressors must be open to the idea of rethinking their way of life and to reexamine their own role continuously in the oppressive system. He suggested a new relationship between teachers, students and the society where teachers are not the sole provider of knowledge, rather they provide a platform for students to critically analyse issues or problems faced by the society to bring about social change. Freire believed education could not be separated from politics; the action of teaching and learning are political actions. Freire defined this connection as a main principle of critical pedagogy. Teachers and students must be made aware of the "politics" that surround education. The way students are taught and what they are taught are done to serve political agendas. Teachers, themselves, have political perceptions which they bring into the classroom.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, service-learning pedagogy received a boost through the work of cognitive psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky. Cognitive psychologists highlighted that learning involves the creation of meaning and is highly individualized. In the early 1990s, service-learning began to gain prominence as a legitimate teaching pedagogy and many academics in colleges and universities

in the United States of America (USA) incorporated it into their existing course syllabi or created new courses across a broad spectrum of disciplines. Campus Compact, the national coalition of higher learning institutions in the USA dedicated solely to advance campus-based civic engagement, reported that during the 2008/2009 academic year, an estimated 1,198 member campuses contributed approximately 366 million hours of service to the communities, worth about \$7.6 billion, through campus-organised programmes (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010). It is estimated that about 7% of lecturers use service-learning in their teaching in the USA (Campus Compact, 2010).

### **1.1 Background of the study**

In 2015, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) was unveiled as a master plan to ensure that higher education is keeping abreast of the ever changing global trends. It identified 10 paradigmatic shifts to achieve the aspirations of both system and students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). The student aspirations in the blueprint are designed around six primary attributes: ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills, and knowledge which form the core of Malaysia's higher education system.

The first paradigmatic shift is to produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates. Malaysia envisages its graduates to become global citizens with a strong Malaysian identity, ready and willing to contribute to the harmony and betterment of their family, friends, society, nation, and global community. To achieve these outcomes, the Ministry of Higher Education and higher learning institutions intend to focus on developing more holistic and integrated curricula and enhancing the learning ecosystem to prioritise student development. One of the key initiatives is to increase the use of experiential and service-learning teaching

strategies in order to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) also states that Malaysia will continue with its emphasis on knowledge and skills, as well as on ethics and morality.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) shows that the country is continuously trying to improve and enhance various aspects of higher education, including the learning experience of students. Providing higher education to the current generation of young people is a challenging task. Higher education now caters to the masses; and in the globalized world, graduates may need to work in environments which are unfamiliar to them and carry out tasks which are totally new to them.

Higher learning institutions are expected to prepare students for their future jobs and workplaces; some of which may not exist at the moment. In addition there is also an emphasis on producing students to be self-employed or entrepreneurs who would create jobs, rather than becoming job seekers. Students need multidisciplinary integration, experiential education, soft skill development, global perspective, ethics and corporate social responsibility training (Navarro, 2008). As a result, greater attention needs to be given to students, to teaching, and to the curriculum (Boyer, 1990). The recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) need higher learning institutions to rethink how to best prepare students for jobs in the future. AI requires people who are able to “tell machines how to best perform a job”. Due to the fast pace of changes in AI and automation, students cannot be prepared for a specific job because by the time they graduate, the job may not exist or machines may be able to do them better than humans or the job itself may have a short life span. It is due to this, that higher learning institutions need to provide broad knowledge or skills which allow graduates to adapt to changes. Students in higher learning institutions need to