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The Impact of Service-Learning on Improving Students' Teacher Training: Testing the Efficiency of a Tutoring Program in Increasing Future Teachers' Civic Attitudes, Skills and Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

Service-Learning is becoming a powerful educational tool that helps students emerge from the theoretical world to the world of practice by linking community-service with academic content through learning objectives. This paper investigates the impact Service-Learning on improving students' teacher training by testing the efficiency of an online tutoring Service-Learning program (i.e. E-S-L) and the functionality of the educational platform hosting the program, entitled PedTut. The present paper also serves as a contribution to the discussion of integrating educational platforms in the service process by limiting time and space boundaries and making it accessible for students to put their knowledge into practice for the benefit of the community.

Keywords: Service-Learning; tutoring; civic attitudes;subjective happiness; self-efficacy;

1. Introduction

Service-Learning (S-L) is an educational philosophy that directs learning to the well-being of the community and is currently earning its well-deserved popularity in contemporary pedagogy. S-L is a pedagogy characterized by

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reflection that combines community service with well-structured opportunities for learning (Heffernan, 2001). Inspired by the progressive educational trend of John Dewey (1910), education in S-L is focusing on developing students' potential through the greater purpose of sustaining local community.

The precise meaning of the term S-L implies that the service (activity and/or program) is designed as to meet the needs of students' local community, is coordinated with an academic institution or a community service program, is meant to develop students' civic responsibility, it is integrated in the school's curricula and offers students a temporal sequence of reflection upon the completed service experience (Billing, 2000). More precisely, S-L has been defined as a curricular tool that "…seeks to engage individuals in activities that combine both community service and academic learning. Because Service-Learning programs are typically rooted in formal courses (core academic, elective, or vocational), the service activities are usually based on particular curricular concepts that are being taught" (Furco, 2002 apud Rusu et al. 2014). Moreover, according to the National Society of Experiential Learning, S-L is defined as any service experience closely monitored in which the student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience (Billing, 2000). Thus, to clarify, a distinction among various service programs and S-L needs to be made: each existing service program can be characterized by its primary intended purpose and focus. Volunteering, for example, has serendipitous and unintentional outcomes and the focus relies on the beneficiaries of the service (e.g. visiting the local hospital to sit with elderly patients that need company) (Furco, 2011), whereas S-L has predesigned outcomes derived from operational objectives of the academic context and curricula. S-L equally focuses on both the recipient and the provider of the service: for the provider (student), the learning is enhanced by the service while for the beneficiary (community), the learning optimize or magnifies the expected effects of the service. Likewise, service programs of internship and field education only focus on the beneficiary variable, enhancing their learning experience with hands-on or co-curricular activities (Furco, 2011).

The emblematic characteristic that shapes S-L as a powerful curricular tool is the specific learning process that develops during a S-L program. Thus, learning becomes social, emotional, cognitive, multicultural and interpersonal (Simons & Cleary, 2006). More precisely, through S-L, students develop skills that help them observe, identify and distinct between other people's emotions, manage (perceive, evaluate and express) their own emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, cope responsibly with new interpersonal situations, enhance academic performance (Elias et al., 1997 apud Durak et al., 2011). Also, S-L offers, through multicultural learning, the opportunities to explore and to understand multicultural perspectives by harnessing and investigating the individual differences in cognitive patterns revealed during the learning process (Alexander & Chomsky, 2008).

Most of the educational institutions that have implemented S-L in their curricula have prospected the development of students' civic and diversity attitudes (Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Moely et al, 2002; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Buch & Harden, 2011). By virtue of the fact that S-L programs also employ attaining educational goals through operational objectives and permit applying academic attained knowledge in real-life situations, such programs might contribute to the academic and personal development of the participating student. The existing literature supports these premises: S-L helps develop writing skills, critical thinking, they help raise the students GPA scores (Astin et al., 2000; Conrad & Hedin, 1991), expand problem-solving skills and moral thinking - the higher effects obtained at this level are due to specific, S-L tutoring programs (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). At the psychosocial level, S-L programs help develop personal and social responsibility, positive social attitudes, civic action, political awareness, appreciation of diversity attitudes, self-efficacy levels and the feeling of being able to "make a difference" in the community (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988).

We consider that, students, in general, and particularly the ones that have decided to enroll themselves in training programs aimed to offer them competences in Pedagogy (i.e. full undergraduate programs in Educational Sciences or training modules), represent valuable resources for the implementation of S-L activities. These students are expected to further work in educational contexts with children or other students and become educational, civic but also human interaction models for the youth of our society. In this context, students could benefit from the S-L related competencies that evolve by virtue of enrollment in such tutoring, service programs. Moreover, online, E-Service-Learning programs, such as this particular one could facilitate the development of such related competencies through the elimination of time, space and communication barriers and facilitation of accessibility for students with disabilities.