



Tertiary Students' and Lecturers' Perception on the Benefits of Volunteerism and Community Service Project Involvement

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ABSTRACT

The study explores tertiary students' and the lecturer's perception regarding their involvement in a special community service project sponsored by the local business organization and co-organized by the local University and the selected rural secondary school in Malaysia. The project that was conducted for two months provided free tuition classes for eighty primary school students from a rural school to learn English, Science, and Mathematics. Twenty undergraduate students from a university in Malaysia acted as the tutors and they were trained by four lecturers who were the leaders of the project. After the project ended, the student facilitators were asked to reflect on the impact of the project towards them in a reflective journal note and two lecturers who were the leaders of the project were asked to answer a semi structured interview questions to analyse their feelings regarding their involvement in the community service project. The findings showed that the project was regarded beneficial and rewarding to the student facilitators as it gave them a chance to improve their soft skills particularly their communication, organization, and cooperation skills. Moreover, the lecturers viewed that even though they were some obstacles faced, the community service project was a success and has an impactful outcome as it not only benefit the rural students but also helped in providing good community service experience to both their undergraduate students and they themselves the leader of the project.

Keywords: Community Service, Volunteerism, Tutoring, Soft Skills Development, Communication Skill, Organization Skill, Cooperation Skill

1.0 Introduction

This study investigates tertiary students and their lecturers' perception on the involvement in a community-service project co-organized by their university and a primary school situated in a rural area in Malaysia. The project received funding from an International organization known as KHIND Starfish Foundation which served to provide support for the underprivileged community via university students' involvement. The project was held for two months whereby it provided free tutoring services for two subjects which were English, Science and Mathematics as these were the subjects that were considered as difficult to master by the selected eighty underprivileged primary school students. The main aim is to discover how the project has benefited the undergraduate students' particularly in terms of how the project has helped them to improve their soft skills, particularly their communication, organization, and cooperation skills. In addition, they were also asked regarding their opinion and interest in getting involved in future community services and volunteerism organized by their university. Moreover, the study also looks at the lecturers' point of view regarding the benefits of the project and the obstacles that were faced in organizing it. This study is significant as to date there is little existing literature and research being covered on this related topic particularly within the within Malaysian context. Therefore, this study contributes to this field of knowledge and will be useful to educators, students and researchers who are interested in finding ways to improve tertiary students' soft skills via university-based community service projects.

2.0 Literature Review

Although it is important for tertiary level students to be competent in communication skills many of them still face difficulties in mastering it (2000). Among the problems faced are due to the lack of practice, particularly in public speaking. It is reported that many Malaysian tertiary students are not competent in speaking skill (Ting et al, 2017; Ismail, N 2018). In fact, many students who graduated with bachelor's degree still do not have a satisfactory communicative level. Their communicative weakness, particularly in public speaking, has an impact on their chances to be employed. It is reported that one of the reasons that hinder Malaysian graduates' chances to employed within three years after they graduate is due to the poor performance in job interviews due to the weakness in communication skill (Ting et al, 2017).

Studies have reported that there are many reasons for the weakness such as lack of practice particularly in the natural setting (Herlinawati et al, 2024; Ismail et al. 2011). Psychological barriers faced by the students which include factors like lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes in front of peers

of others, lack of self-confidence and so on (Ismail et al. 2021). Therefore, it is important that students are provided with the chance to practice outside of the classroom and be involved in activities that provide them with the chance to practice speaking in front of the public.

According to Kaufman and Lionel (2000) it is common to find graduates to be literally speechless when they are placed to speak in public. One of the reasons is they lack the skill and confidence to do so and become apprehensive (Ratan Singh et al, 2012). A higher rate of communication apprehension can impact on a person's behaviour, relationships, the perception of others, occupational choice and employment opportunities and education. Therefore, undergraduates should be given the opportunities to participate in activities that provide them a chance to practice speaking especially in authentic situations (Wan Mustapha et al, 2009; Yoke & Ismail, 2021).

Moreover, undergraduates can benefit from being involved in University-based community service projects which are organized by the university. For example, undergraduate students should be encouraged to be volunteers and be involved in helping the community (Astin & Sax, 2001; Ismail et, 2018). According to Goodman, and Tredway (2016) getting involved in a university-based community service projects has the potential to enrich the students' experience and knowledge in various aspects and enhance their soft skills particularly in aspects like communication, organization, and cooperation. Studies have reported benefits of enhancing tertiary students' soft skills such as leadership, negotiation, cooperation via students' involvement in community service projects (Keshwani & Adams, 2017). Students are also encouraged to push the boundaries and be inspired with successful role model who contributed much to the society and strive to continue pushing to the next level of engagements from university level to the district, national and international.

It is important that undergraduates are given the chance to be involved in various university-based community service projects which help them to communicate with others outside of their classrooms and in authentic situations (Astin, & Vogelgesang, 2001, Ratan Singh et al., 2012). Involving university students in a community service project such as one which provides a cross-age tutoring service to some primary school students is a good move which can bring some positive outcomes not just to the tutees (the primary school students) but to the tutors (the university students) involved as well, especially in terms of their communication skill. Evidently cross-age tutoring brings a lot of benefits not just to the tutees but to the tutors as well. Research in the field (Astin & Sax, 2001; Eycler, & Giles, 2000; Ismail et al, 2018; Ismail et al, 2023) emphasized three commonly cited benefits which are the learning of academic skills including language communication, the development of social behavior and classroom discipline.

One of the reasons cross-age tutoring works may be that tutors and tutees speak a more similar language than do adult teachers and students. According to Kaufman and Lionel (2000) the tutees who are being taught by a peer or someone closer in age to them feel freer to express opinions, ask questions and risk untested solutions. The interaction between instructor and pupils is more balanced and livelier; therefore, this then stimulates the tutors to communicate well with the tutees. The feeling of being accepted by their tutees encourages the tutors to speak using the target language and this will significantly improve their communicative performance (Greenwood et al, 2003).

Moreover, many undergraduate students also lack organizational skills such as they are not very adept in organizing schedules, or events. Therefore, this lack of organizational skill will affect their chances of securing a good job in future as a lot of career choices requires workers to be organized and are adept at organizing events, schedules, or job-related tasks. Therefore, it is important to provide undergraduates with organizational skills particularly in a natural context. Such an opportunity will prepare them to tackle work-related tasks and able to be a good organizer in future (Chetty & Bhagwan, 2023).

In addition, other soft skills that are important for future employment among graduates is cooperation skills (Goodman, & Tredway, 2016). The ability to cooperate with others is essential as it will ensure the person is able to work well along with others. Hence, undergraduate students must be given the chance to work and show their cooperative ability as well as nurture their sense of willingness to participate in an activity that cultivate cooperative values. Being involved in university-based projects that involve working with the community is a good way to get the students to practice cooperation, not only among team members but also with the organizers, the community leaders and the general public who are involved in the projects.

3.0 The Research

The objective of the study is to analyse a group of Malaysian undergraduate students' perceptions of their involvement as tutors in a cross-age tutoring service (a community service project) and to discover how it benefits them. Moreover, the study also looks at the opinion of their lecturers, who were involved as the project leaders, regarding the benefits of the projects to the undergraduate students involved as well as the obstacles faced in organizing the project and how it can be improved in future.

The student facilitators (SF) were twenty undergraduate students from a university in Malaysia who volunteered for the cross-age tutoring project. The project requires the student facilitators provide English lessons for eighty primary school students in a rural area in Malaysia for two hours once a week for about two months. After the project the subjects were asked to write a reflexive journal note to reflect on their involvement as student facilitators. Moreover, two out of the four lecturers who were involved as the project leaders have also agreed to answer four semi-structured four interview questions regarding how the community service project benefits the undergraduate students in terms of their soft skills particularly, communication, organization, and cooperation skills. Furthermore, the interview also asked about the lecturers' opinion regarding the obstacles faced in organizing the project as well as suggestions for future improvements. The data for the journal entry and interview were analysed descriptively. The six-step stages for qualitative data analyses suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were employed which are by immersing oneself in the data or data immersion, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes whereby the focal idea of each of the themes included are then identified, analysed, and reported in the findings.

3.0 The Main Findings

3.1 The findings of the data from the reflexive journal entry

The analysis of the data from the reflexive journal revealed that the student Tutors (ST) felt that their involvement in the community service project has improved their soft skills.

3.1.1 In terms of the benefits of the community service projects, the student facilitators reveal that the project has improved their communicative ability and they become more confident in communicating and sharing their knowledge:

The project gave me a chance to practice speaking in front of real students, real audiences (ST1)

After the project I feel my ability to communicate with others is so much better. It gave me a chance to improve my speaking skill when I taught the students (ST10)

The project provided me a chance to improve my public speaking skill because after teaching the students for two months I am more confident in sharing and imparting knowledge to others (ST 3)

3.1.2. The student facilitators mentioned that the project gave them the chance to improve their organizational skills:

I feel that the project has helped us to become more organized. I am able to organize my time and managed to finish my tasks which include helping to prepare the lesson materials to be used for teaching the rural students (ST10).

It is not easy to organize a project and helping my lecturers organize this community service project helped to improve my organizational skills. (ST18).

There are a lot of things to do when organizing a big project like this and this helped me to become better at preparing and organizing. I also learned from mistakes and was able to improve and to be better organized after being involved as the facilitator and tutor for this project. (ST16).

3.1.3. The student facilitators feel that their cooperation skill has improved:

It is a good project because not only do I get a chance to cooperate with everyone involved to make this project a success. it really helped me to be better at cooperating with others. (SF 15).

This project needed everyone to be cooperative to ensure its success. Therefore, I have done my best to cooperate with all my team members in order to make it run smoothly, particularly in preparing the teaching materials, planning the activities, organizing and so on. I feel that after the project ended, I became a more cooperative person and able to work better with everyone. (ST19).

It gave me a good chance to cooperate with others. So, I think community work is very helpful in giving me the chance to work along well with others and contribute to society (ST2).

3.2 The Findings from the Interview

3.2.1 The analysis of the data from the interview revealed that the lecturer (L) feel that the community service project was very beneficial to the rural students (the tutees) their undergraduate students (the tutors), and themselves as project leaders:

This community service project is very beneficial to all parties involved, particularly the rural students who received free tuition classes and also our undergraduate students who volunteered to be the tutors as they got the chance to improve their soft skills and able to serve others within the community (L1)

This community service project is very useful to our undergraduate students as it gives them a chance to improve their soft skills particularly in communicating, organizing, and cooperating with one another (L2).

It is not easy for our undergraduate students to complete the tasks involved in tutoring the primary schools' students, but it gave them good practice in organizing, and they were able to communicate well with their tutees. Also, the project gave them a chance to cooperate with us, their lecturers, and also various parties such as among their teammates, the community. So, they are able to enhance their cooperative skills as well. It is also a very rewarding and good experience for us lecturers to be able to lead this project and be involved in serving our community.

3.2.2. The Community Service Projects Obstacles

The lecturers' view that there were several obstacles and challenges faced in organizing and running the project:

It is not easy to organize this project. Among the obstacles and challenges faced were to train our undergraduate students to become good tutors and it takes quite some time to get them to understand their roles and carry it out well (L1)

As project leaders one of the biggest challenges was, we need to secure the funding for this project and luckily, we managed to get from an established company which is Khind Ltd. via its' Khind Starfish Foundation which provides grants for tertiary students to be involved in community service work (L2).

Another obstacle is logistics and transportation. The project was carried out in a primary school in a rural area, so we had to travel quite a distance to get to the school and since there was no lodging provided to our undergraduate students, we have to drive them daily to and from the primary school (L1).

Also, there were initially a problem in preparing the right teaching and learning materials that will suit the primary school students as they were quite weak at the subjects taught particularly English. But with the help of their teachers, we are able to prepare the right materials to suit the student's level and train our student tutors to teach the kids (L2).

3.2.2. Suggestion for Improvement for Future Community Service Projects particularly in terms of logistics and transportation for the undergraduate students:

For future projects involving remote areas or those situated in far distances like this rural school, it is better if the university or the school can provide lodging for the tutors so that they do not need to commute daily (L1).

It would be better if the university could also provide transportation such as university buses for our undergraduate students to commute to the rural areas where they carry out community service work.

4.0 Conclusion

It is important that undergraduate students are given the opportunity to enhance their soft skills in university-based projects particularly in a natural setting. The ability to master various soft skills such as communication skill is one of the most difficult skills to master and has been reported to be among the factors that hinder graduates from being successful in job interviews as well as being employed in their selected career. Hence, it is pertinent that more effort should be placed towards exposing undergraduates to the environment where they can easily practice communicating in a natural setting (Ismail et al, 2018). Furthermore, even though they may be some obstacles and challenges faced in organizing and running such projects, getting undergraduate students to be involved in community services also offer a lot of benefits to them in terms of providing them a chance to enhance their communication, organization, and cooperation skills. Therefore, a university-based community service project can provide an ideal opportunity for undergraduate students to do so and the findings in this study have proven so. Furthermore, it was a win-win situation for the primary school students who were able to receive free tuition and also benefit the undergraduates' students and the lecturers' involved as they were able to contribute to society.

5.0 References

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