

Academic Service Learning for Sensitizing BEd Undergraduates on the Future Professional Role: A Design Based Research Initiative

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Background and Rationale

Improving teacher quality is a recurring problem. Although a number of teacher development programs prevail in Sri Lanka, new initiatives are sought to improve the quality of teachers (World Bank, 2011).

Academic service is a teaching method which promotes student learning through active participation in meaningful planned service to the community related to course content. It is founded on theories of experiential learning, transformation theory, critical reflection and education as preparation for civic responsibility (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003).

This study was an outcome of the exposure to service learning in California State University (CSU), Chico, USA during the United States Institutes for Scholars program in 2011. The service learning program in CSU is not confined to teacher education but open to all undergraduates.

Service learning is absent in teacher education programs in Sri Lanka. This study focuses on the exploratory design process of an intervention to be implemented in the BEd program conducted by the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo. Research questions are:

1. How does academic service learning in teacher education pose as an effective strategy for linking theory and practice?
2. What are the service learning interventions in teacher education reported in literature?
3. How could service learning interventions be introduced in the BEd program?

Methodology

The utilized design based research (DBR) methodology has three phases: assessing the needs and defining objectives, designing material/artifacts, and evaluating material. This paper addresses the design phase of the study. DBR uses mixed methods. The design of the intervention was based on two steps:

1. Case study of the CSU, Chico Service Learning Program

This study collected data from Focus group interview with ten students, two lecturers, artifacts and documents such as video clips and publicity documents.

2. Identification of possible interventions from relevant literature.

The literature review is a critical phase in DBR because it facilitates the creation of draft design guidelines to inform the design and development of the intervention.

Outcomes

Case study outcomes on CSU Chico service learning program

- Service learning opportunities are linked to the students through a student-led non-profit volunteer organisation
- Undergraduates need to apply from the list of opportunities, selecting the relevant service learning opportunities that are linking with the theories discussed in class.
- All students and staff interviewed are highly satisfied with the experience gained by the service learning opportunities
- The main challenge faced by the program is the lack of teachers who can motivate the students towards engaging in service learning and make effective assessments.

Outcomes of the literature survey on teacher education service learning interventions

- Teacher candidates when enrolled in the methods courses conduct a service learning project as a course assignment (Bates, 2009).
- Encouragement to continue service learning across the entire final year of the teacher preparation program, rather than confining it to the methods course, is an option to help teachers build a strong foundation and comfort level with service learning pedagogy to carry with them into their early career years (Bates, 2009).
- Service learning as a first year transition tool for teacher education programs in higher education (Donninson and Itter, 2010).

Initial design solutions drafted based on the analysis of case study data and literature outcomes

Following can be regarded a draft design solution that may be tested in the next phase of this design based research:

The BEd assignments on the core subjects in the first two years can be based on service learning. In designing the assignment, the following three basic questions can be raised by the lecturer:

- What skills or knowledge do I want my students to learn or use?
- Who in our community could benefit from my students' use of these skills and knowledge?
- How can students use their skills or knowledge to help others?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Service learning could be an effective solution to developing skills and attitudes of student teachers as they would begin to conceptualise themselves as future teaching professionals with the service learning experiences. These skills would be both soft and hard skills. At the onset, service learning should be initiated by the faculty rather than through a student led organization. The design solution derived from the study should be implemented in order to evaluate the outcome. However, motivation and commitment of university faculty members need to go beyond the traditional classroom roles to learn how to incorporate service learning into their university courses.

References

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