

Building Resilience of University Students in Business Students Through Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

Building resilience is an important element to achieve social and academic success for young adults in Taiwan. Resilience assets which include problem solving skills, communication skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose can help ease the pressure when facing tremendous economic and societal change. Nevertheless little attention and research is put in fostering students' resilience in the higher education. It is believed to be a critical part and should be integrated in the higher education curriculum.

The aim of this paper is to explore the students' development of resilience in a service-learning course in a business school in Taiwan. Service-learning is a pedagogy often used to enable students to apply classroom-learned knowledge in a real world context. By participating in this course, students are required to voluntarily offer professional services to selected non-profit and community-based organisations. The learning activities are especially related to marketing and advertising, from marketing planning, advertising and promotion design, to evaluation of the final outcomes. Action research has been chosen as the research methodology because it is a way to allow the contextual and cultural factors be fully articulated and examined in the research. The types of data include study and research journals, open-ended questionnaire, individual and group interviews, and digital records of the classes.

The result has shown that the students have experienced a great deal of difficulties, emotional turmoil and even ideas to withdraw throughout the process of service delivery, as it is similar to working in the real world context. Social support seems to help easing the negative emotions and reluctance while peer encouragements providing comfort to restore confidence. As the results of solving problems and managing stress throughout the process, the students have demonstrated at end of the course their increase of resilience through the following: (1) they were able to internally transform negative emotions to positive learning forces; (2) instead of blaming external factors, they have reflected on themselves and learned from the experience; (3) they have more empathy towards other members of the group; (4) they acquire better communication skills; (5) their self-esteem has boosted. The findings may provide educators and researchers insights in resilience building.

Keyword: resilience, service-learning

1. Introduction

On the contrary to the traditional Taiwanese values of persistency and suppressiveness, the young generation is widely known for their lack of emotional intelligence and tendency to disengage when difficulties occur. The industry has long voiced their need for graduates with high level of resilience, yet the higher education in Taiwan has not responded with sufficient emphasis on resilience building in the curriculum. Traditional classroom lecturing and examination assessment may be limited in terms of offering an appropriate context facilitating students' development of resilience. It is argued in this paper that service learning as an alternative teaching method can fill this gap and respond to the demand of the industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Service Learning Method

Service-Learning (S-L) is a form of experiential learning which helps students to learn while giving service to the community (Jacoby and Ehrlich, 1996). S-L is a philosophy of "human growth and purpose, a social vision, an approach to community, and a way of knowing" (Kendall 1990 p.23). Unlike other teaching methods, S-L experiences place students in real-world situations where they can address real-world needs. They can have first-hand experience understanding the complexity and reality of social issues. Through reciprocity students can actively engage in forming their own pedagogical schemata via experiential learning in a course-relevant context (Jacoby, 2003).

S-L experiences thus may facilitate action and reflection and result in meaningful learning. Kolenko et al. (1996) have identified three key components of S-L experiences; they are (1) personal insight, (2) understanding of social issues, and (3) application of skills. Personal insight and understanding of social issues are direct results of the fact that S-L projects challenge students to solve problems with no right answers and with real-world consequences (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). For business school students, they can gain new insights into both the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of business activities in the society (Fleckenstein 1997). Consequently it is found that S-L can increase students', for instance, communication skills, social commitment, academic learning and moral development (e.g. Wells and Grabert 2004).

2.2 Resilience

In addition to the performance-related skills which students obtained throughout the process, we argue that S-L experiences can also have impact on students' personality development. In this paper our focus is placed on resilience. The concept of resilience is defined as "a class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaption or development" (Masten, 2001). Luthans (2002, p702) refers resilience as "the positive psychology capacity to rebound, or "bounce back" from adversity, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress, and increased responsibility". Reivich and Schatte (2002) also describe resilience as it does not only help individuals to face adversity, but also the need to bounce back from positive but overwhelming events. Luthans (2002) has placed resilience theory in organisational settings and considered it a capacity which can improve work performance.

2.3 Fostering Resilience

Resilience is the result of individuals interacting with their environments and there are "protective factors" that shield them from the influence of risk factors (Zautra et al., 2010). With regards to external environment, Benard (1991) identifies three key protective factors that together can help fostering resilience: (1) a caring and supportive relationship with at least one person; (2) opportunities for individuals to participate and contribute meaningful service to the social environment and (3) consistently clear and high expectation for the individuals. Caring relationship conveys understanding, respect, compassion and respect which could establish the sense of safety and trust. High expectation communicates firm guidance, challenge and belief in one's innate strengths and assets. Opportunities for meaningful contribution include having opportunities for responsibilities, making decisions, giving voice and being heard and contributing one's talents to the community. Leadbeater et al. (2005) further categorise the protective factors based on proximity; from families (e.g. healthy family routine, supportive parents and extended family supports), schools (e.g. access to good schools, mentoring teachers), communities (opportunities for meaningful activity) to social policies.

Masten and Wright (2009) suggest six ways of protective system. They are (1) relationship and social supports that provide secure base, closeness and reassurance; (2) intelligence (cognitive skill associated with good adaption) or problem-solving skill; (3) self-regulation skills (the capacity to control one's behaviour); (4) mastery motivation and self-efficacy (the capacity to direct, plan and manage their behaviour in seeking mastery with positive view); (5) sense-making (constructing meaning and a sense of coherence in life); and

(6) cultural tradition and religion which provides security, comfort and meaning. Luthans et al. (2006) suggest three strategies that can structure organisations to help building resilience in employees. First is the risk-focused strategy which relies on the prevention and reduction of stress or risk. It includes developing the culture of trust and reciprocity between the management and the employees. Second is asset-focused strategy which relies on the enhancement of personal and organizational resource. It includes human capital (skills, knowledge, abilities) and social capital (social network of support). The third strategy is process-focused strategy that relies on the cognitive ability of employees. It includes self-efficacy development activities like mastery and success experience, persuasion and positive feedback.

We argue that theoretically S-L can, even though its main purpose is to enable students applying their skills in real world, also be an appropriate approach to facilitate fostering resilience. Educational environments, like universities, allow students to establish social relationships with their peers and lecturers. As the bond continues to strengthen, students also develop a sense of belongingness being a valued member of the community and the feeling of being empowered (Sagor, 1996). The primary protective factor identified by many resilience studies is a healthy social relationship which provides support, love, trust and encouragement. The relationships developed in educational environments thus become a strong supporting foundation for students to be courageous and aim to face the challenges set by S-L. Secondly S-L provides students with real-world projects in which they can actively be involved with real-world problems and make contributions. S-L finds not-for-profit organisation which many of them focus on the welfare of the minority groups in the society. Comparing with the traditional classroom lecturing, working with the needs of these not-for-profit organisations can be more relevant, practical and concurrent with the society. Lastly S-L has high expectations on students that they need to be actively involved with the real-world projects, develop possible problem-solving solutions and practice them. In short, they need to act like the professionals. Additionally S-L encompasses many other internal assets which can help resilience building (Meade and Rudow, 2009). When corresponding to the factors identified by Masten and Wright (2009), for instance, S-L enables students to have a high degree of contact with the service recipients (social relationship); and intentional integration with academic subjects (intelligence or problem-solving skills).

3. Methodology and Pedagogical Design

Action research is the chosen methodology to explore students' development in resilience throughout S-L. It is a process whereby researchers implement an action, and then check to see if it works as expected. In other words, it makes explicit links between action and reflection (Winter, 1996; Dick, 2002a). Action is a way to let the contextual and cultural factors be fully articulated and examined in the research; whereas reflection is the process of continuous and critical self-evaluation, in which one is engaged with learning from experience (Dick, 2002b). Reflection allows the researchers to unravel both conscious and subconscious taken-for-granted perspectives, so that problems and issues can be redefined (Ellis and Kiely, 2000). Reflection opens up new options of action, while action can test and confront the reflection. As a result, fresh insights and new understanding can be developed (Coghlan, 2001).

The rationale of using action research is threefold. Firstly, action research is considered a suitable method for researchers who are directly concerned with the situation being researched (Reason and Bradury, 2001). The authors are university lecturers at business schools and are deeply involved with the research context in this project, which is the students' learning environment. Secondly, action research can involve multiples parties in the research environment, who not only provide feedback to test the effectiveness of the model but also help to improve and adjust the actions in the process (Rowan, 2001). In this research, many parties are involved in a S-L project. They include, for instance, the students and their continuous feedback of the pedagogical design, as well suggestions and evaluations of their performance from their lecturers and mentors at the participated organisations. Lastly action research has the capacity to be responsive and flexible to the discoveries researchers find along the process (Coghlan, 2001; Dick 2002a; Dick 2002c). The research process in this project is dynamic and complicated, in which timely changes may be needed to respond to unforeseeable needs and unpredictable circumstances of the students and the participated organisations.

Bearing in mind of the research aim, data collected for this research should project and reflect not only students' learning experience and performance in the course, but their relationships and interactions with the community not-for-profit organisations and the lecturers. It is expected that through multiple data sources, data can be cross-examined and meet the requirements for data triangulation which ensures the quality of the end results. The types of data include study and research journals, open-ended questionnaire, individual and group interviews and digital records of the classes. They are summarised and explained in table 1.

Types of Data	Collection Methods	Details
Descriptive	Teaching Journals	These include in-class notes, teaching logs, course preparation documents and meeting minutes;
Researchers' Reflection	Research Journals	These record the research processes, and the impressions, reflections, feelings and thoughts of the researchers and their team;
Students' Learning and Reflection	Learning Journals	These record students' learning experiences and developments in thoughts;
	Open-Ended Questionnaires	These become a critical channel for students to voice their thoughts and concerns, especially when they do not feel comfortable to express themselves verbally;
	Focus Group Interviews	Based on the project group they are assigned to, students as a group can express verbally their learning experiences, thoughts and concerns.
	Individual Interviews	At the end of each term, students are interviewed individually to express themselves
	Digital Records of the Classes	These include video clips, photos and sound recording of the classes
	Student Coursework	These include assessed essays and presentations.
	Other Documents	Other written documents students may have
NPO's feedback	Open-Ended Questionnaire and Interview	These record NPO's feedback and suggestions in the process

Table 1 : Data Types and Collection Methods

A two-year project from September 2008 to July 2010 is conducted for this research. It is embedded in a third-year optional module of "Advertising Design and Management." Each year, approximately 50 students major in business and/or design at a university in Taiwan are involved and they are divided into groups of 8-10 people. Each group will provide services to one non-profit community-based organisation. The participated organisations have been previously screened by the lecturers and they emphasis mostly on the issue of environmental protection. Activities are especially related to marketing and advertising, from marketing planning, advertising design, promoting, to evaluation of the final outcomes. The advertising messages are based on the particular purposes of the organisations. Students are expected to finish a marketing strategy report, an advertising visual design, and a press conference.

4. Data Analysis

The data was collected at both the beginning and the end of each academic year. The evidence supporting our argument that S-L encompasses protective factors which facilitate resilience fostering are presented based on the categorisations by Mastern and Wright (2009) in the following sections.

4.1 Initial Response

For the majority of the students involved in this project, this is their first encounter with the real world outside university campus. Whereas the level of complexity is controlled in classroom and knowledge is abstract, students constantly felt frustrated and overwhelmed with the multiple layers of the real world settings. With their lack of experience, little problem can trigger disproportionate emotional responses and become a serious drawback. The data have shown that many of them faced all kinds of problems and obstacles, including lack of trust and communication with their mentor in the non-profit organisations, and

having to respond to unforeseeable circumstances.

(NGO mentors) generally do not have much contacts with us!...What gives them the right to just come in and ask for the work result?...Spontaneous demand for changes like this...How can we find time to respond?...There's many unexpected circumstances...(We) feel like giving up...

Most of the problems students faced were common in the real practice and settings; yet for the students, they were all significant issues that could influence the result quality of their project. As their initial responses, the students tend to (1) find excuses or putting the blame on the others; (2) have difficulties to promptly respond to unplanned demands; (3) incline to give up.

4.2 Social Support and Attachments

One of the first things students discussed when explaining their new experience with problems in the real world is the support and encouragement from their peers, lectures and mentors. Such support is considered one of the protective factors for fostering resilience identified by Bernard (1993).

Support from Lecturers

The lecturer has encouraged us...She said that the most important thing is what we have learned from the experience and the project... (H065)

The lecturer also recorded in the teaching journal:

When the problem happened, they came to me immediately and ask for help. They were quite frustrated. I encouraged them and told them that this is a common situation in the real work settings... We have to see what kind of mistake we made and how can we learn from the experience (AT035)

The support from the lecturers appears to be helpful and becomes a source of comfort. In addition the role of the lecturers has transformed to facilitators for self-reflection.

Support from NPO Mentors

When the conflict occurred, he (NPO mentor) also phoned to cheer us up...He said things such as don't worry...He spent so much time on this...(A075)

During photo shooting, he was there all the time...He also helped us to find the models...In the past year, he was really helpful (A076)

The data suggest that support from their NPO mentor is also an important source fostering students' self-confidence and resilience. By fully participating in the projects and maintaining a good relationship with the students, the students felt that their hard work was appreciated. Thus they would feel motivated to continue excelling even when facing difficulties.

Support from peers

We feel as a team we should be more united because we share the same goals and determination...We should insist on what we think is right, rather than following what we are expected by the NPO...(D108)

It is demonstrated in the data that the support from their peers and teammates allow students feel motivated to face again the challenge and tasks. They regularly communicate with each other and try to develop a sense of group cohesion. The trust and encouragement from each other enables students to creatively use limited resources to overcome difficulties(Laible et al., 2000; Wilkinson, 2004).

4.3 Self-Regulation and Meaning Making (including Reflection and Positive View)

The data have also shown students' capacity to control their own behaviours despite their feeling of frustration towards the setback.

They (teammates from the other subject group) think they can do the task without us...But we think there's a lot we can learn from each other...So we decide to still try to get involved without their agreement...(I096)

Maybe I have grown from experiences so now I will no longer dwell in the feeling of frustration for too long... I will try to pull myself together as soon as possible...(H174)

Even during times when the group is not as united as expected, the students are still willing to invest more time and efforts, control their emotions and focus on the goals. Besides, students also indicate their capacity to motivate themselves, transform negative emotions into positive forces, as well as learn from reflections.

As the result I start to find it easier to reflect about myself and the experience...I think about what we haven't achieve? How we could be better? Any aspects we should also consider in our project...(H205)

I want to know more about the reasoning...That is, I become a person who want to explore more about the cause, possible impacts and possible solutions...(H201)

It is obvious from the data that students have learned from the S-L experience; they start to examine more rationally and carefully of the issue with positive outlook; they also become courageous to honestly face themselves and seek improvements when problems occur. They are more resilient to pressures and are able to manage their emotions more healthily. As a whole, we believe this is psychological resilience (RaK and Patterson,1996).

4.4 Problem-Solving Skills (including Communication Skills and Intelligence)

Communication Skills

Now I have learned that when communicating with other people, you have to learn from see things from others' perspective instead from your own...using the words people can understand is also important.....you cannot just say what you think so straightforwardly. (A098)

We know better how to communicate with them (NPO mentors) in a more effective way, with a more appropriate attitude and speaking tone, as well as with more understanding of their needs...(K188)

We learn to be more open-minded and accept different approach...(I183)

Students after completing the project have sharpened their communication skills through becoming more empathetic to others and being able to express the same ideas with different approaches. This, we consider, is another piece of evidence which indicates the increase of resilience in the students(Werner, 1995).

Intelligence

Also the data has demonstrated that students develop a holistic understanding of the subject.

I used to know the subject as various independent pieces...Now I know better of them as a whole and how to put the puzzle together...It is like a managing a operating procedure from the start to the end...(C131)

Marketing really is far from what is described in the textbooks...There are more details, elements and circumstances involved in the process...I get to know the subject from a different perspective...(B358)

Problem-solving skill

I think I'd be more careful and practical in the future...I don't think I'll be as naive and live in a bubble...you only get realise how much problems you have to solve once get involved...(H376)

The moment when the coursework is submitted marks an end...The lecturer has to give you a mark anyway...But in real life your work would be rejected if it is not good enough...You have to learn to deal with almost all kinds of problems...(D117)

Students become more practical, realistic, systematic and thorough in terms of planning and executing the project. They understand better of their goals and are more capable in solving problems which hinder

their pursuit of the goals. And the developed problem solving skill becomes another protective factor in fostering resilience(Werner, 1999)

4.5 Agency and Mastery Motivation System

S-L provides students with opportunities to participate and execute a project. When the students take active role in their project, they recognize that they need to do something different and take active steps in a new direction is a key initiating system to turnaround(Masten, Obradovic & Burt, 2006).

The module is really different...I feel more confident about my ability and the future...(C187)

The other modules become relatively easy peasy comparing to this one...I feel different from other students who did not take this one...(K359)

Many students have expressed an increase of their confidence once completing this module. They feel they have matured and appreciate this experience. Such self-confidence not only is an important source of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), but also helps individuals have a more positive view and put more efforts to succeed (Bandura, 1997).

5. Discussion & Conclusion

In conclusion, through the engagement in practice such as professional service, service learning is able to practice in the real world to the module and campus that the students have encountered some reality shock which they have seldom experienced in other modules. In other words, it is a another form of situated learning which suggests the significance of participating the activities in the social settings and interacting within communities in the learning process(Wenger, 1998; Armitage et al., 2008). Furthermore, the evidence demonstrates that by the support and help from their teachers and peers, the students were able to learn to transform their negative emotion to positive learning force. When facing problems and difficulties, they have also started to reflect on themselves and try to learn from the experience instead of blaming others. In addition, the students' communication and problem-solving skill as well as self-esteem seem to be boosted. It appears that service learning is able to provide social capital (social network and support and human capital(knowledge, skills and ability) Luthans et al. (2006) proposed to foster resilience. Service Learning appears to be a pedagogy that high education professionals can endorse to help illuminate student strengths and build on existing ones. It is hoped that the findings may provide educators and researchers insights in resilience building.

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