

Student Centred Learning (SCL): New Learning Approach in Malaysian Tertiary Education System

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Abstract

The Malaysian education system had gone through several transformations in the past decades. Numerous approaches had been introduced and practiced by students and teachers to enhance the learning system at higher learning institutions. Lately, many scholars had carried out their research activity on Student Centred Learning (SCL) which is presumed to be an effective way of learning in this current century. Scholarly findings had proven that, with the thriving of many technology edges, the present generation prefers to learn by themselves rather than being guided or directed by teachers. As such, further exploration on Student Centred Learning (SCL) and its causal factors (Volunteer Motives and Service Learning) are necessary in providing appropriate and new learning strategies. The study population will involve two major groups of degree and diploma students in one of the private universities in Malaysia. For each major group, the experimental group and control group will consist of 150 students each. Hence, a total of 600 students will be involved in this study. Analysis methods in this study will be using multiple regression analysis, confirmatory factor analysis / structural equation modeling and partial least square. The unit of analysis will comprise students from community services and co-curriculum courses at diploma and degree levels. As randomization will be involved in group make-up, sample selection is based on simple random sampling. Findings will indicate that Volunteer Motives and Service learning have significant relationship with Student Centred Learning. The results will also show that Volunteer Motives has strong relationship with Service Learning. Discussion of the practical implications of the study's results highlight the actions recommended as necessary for the three main target audiences, namely, student populations (which includes students from Higher Learning Institutes), the governor of Private and Public Universities and Colleges, and the Government, in deciding appropriate policies and strategies to improve and enhance the teaching and learning environment in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Student Centred Learning, Service Learning, Volunteer Motives and Community Service.*

Introduction

A particular incongruity that exists today in the education system in Malaysia is its drive towards producing graduates (in light of heterogenic student population) who all undergo programmes with converging learning outcomes in terms of graduate attributes, while being concerned with implementing a teaching and learning environment that puts the student centric learning a priority, in that students take responsibility for their own learning experience. For most private institutions, the push for student centred learning (SCL) comes from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) through the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) to implement specific courses such as community service and co-curriculum (CSC) that build effective communication skills, apply critical thinking skills in problem solving through scientific means, apply self-leadership and teamwork skills, and utilize information management skills that fortifies lifelong learning. Besides CSC, other courses such as presentation skills, critical thinking, ethnic relations, communicative language and

entrepreneurship make up the soft skills oriented subjects as part of all diploma and degree programmes. Efforts to grow SCL, via CSC courses, are meant to foster learning paradigm rather than instruction paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and improvement in student performance (Froyd & Simpson, 2008).

In addition to building SCL, CSC courses, also known as service learning (SL), are also meant to leverage Higher learning Institute's own initiative to build its students behavioural values in a blended learning environment. The question is, can Volunteer Motives and SL influence SCL favourably? A simple research using a true experimental design can be used to determine whether such influence exists and if it does, the nature of the relationship can also be explained. Such confirmation helps to further enhance and support Volunteer Motives and SL to build, grow and sustain SCL for improved student performance at places of studies and later, at the workplace.

Whilst SL is a possible intervention in the education environment to create or enhance SCL, the inherent qualities of students from the aspects of volunteer motives need to be considered. These intrinsic behavioural dispositions or values are considered to be implicit driving forces that can influence student performance in a student centric teaching and learning environment. Hence, it would be interesting to know how volunteer motives influence SCL directly and with the intervention of SL, indirectly. With SL viewed as a mediating variable, a descriptive-correlational research method would be appropriate to investigate all possible cause and effect relationship among the key variables discussed above in a one-shot study design, in addition to the true experimental design mentioned above.

Ultimately, this research will bring numerous benefits in understanding various issues related to challenges faced by students in taking responsibility for their own learning with teachers acting as facilitators, rather than as instructors. With better understanding of students' volunteer motives, relevant actions can be taken to redesign facilitation of student centric teaching and learning. More inputs can be derived on how SL, through CSC courses delivered in a blended learning mode can enhance SCL for student performance in their studies.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are to determine:

- (i) Perception of students on their self-directed learning before and after service learning
- (ii) Significant differences among the key variables involved within group and between groups
- (iii) The relationship between the independent and dependent variables under study viz: (a) volunteer motives and student centred learning; (b) volunteer motives and service learning; (c) service learning and student centred learning.
- (iv) Whether or not there is a model fit amongst the independent and dependent variables through a confirmatory factor analysis

Literature Review

Student Centred Learning

The notion regards student centred learning can be attributed to the works done by Hayward in as early as 1905 and to work done by Dewey in 1956. Carl Rogers was known to have expanded this approach into a theory of education in the 1980s and later connected to learning approach by Piaget (developmental learning) and Malcolm Knowles (self-directed learning). Some of the student centred learning elements as indicated by Lea, Stephenson & Troy (2003) are: (i) The reliance on *active rather than passive learning*; (ii) An emphasis on *deep learning and understanding*; (iii) *Increased responsibility and accountability* on the part of the student; (iv) An *increased sense of autonomy* in the learner; (iv) An *interdependence between teacher and learner*; and (v) *Mutual respect within the*

Learner-teacher relationship; and (vi) A reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both the teacher and the learner.

According to Galilei & Bronowski (2010) student centred learning is broadly based on constructivism as a theory of learning, which is built on the idea that learners must construct and reconstruct knowledge in order to learn effectively, with learning being most effective when, as part of an activity, the learner experiences constructing a meaningful product for their individual development. Student centred learning is also quite similar to *transformative learning* in that it involves a process of qualitative change in the learner, that may possibly include volunteer motives and even service learning, as an ongoing process of transformation which focuses on enhancing and empowering the learner, developing their critical ability in accomplishing learning outcomes creatively and innovatively. Student centred learning further enhances these personal qualities and affects various other factors effecting student performance. It can be said that student centred learning supported by e-learning technologies in a blended learning environment can further develop students' ability to incorporate international outlook in their thinking process and learning outputs due to quick access to information and knowledge.

Volunteer Motives

According to Ellis (2001), in order to safeguard skills and knowledge that will help volunteers acquire meaningful employment, studies have suggested that there is a conviction by individuals volunteer. It has also been cited in other studies that more serving motives are directed towards enhancing job skills or career opportunities by those in their late teens and mid-thirties. A practical approach to find out the psychological reasons on why people participate in volunteering would be of great help in understanding volunteering. Based on the assumption that motives are function of goal attainment, this model provides a range of motives from altruistic to self-interest to clarify volunteer motivation (Stukas, Worth, Clary & Snyder, 2008; Standerfer, 2002; Husbands, McKechnie & Gagnon, 2000).

The six dimensions of the model include: 1. Values - an act to hold on to deeply held beliefs as well as the significance of helping others; 2. Understanding - wish to learn about yourself and others through partaking in volunteer work; 3. Career - a way to improve one's career and/or employability; 4. Social - a means to please the influence of importance of others; 5. Esteem - a wish to feel even better about themselves through volunteering; and 6. Protective - a means to break out a sense of loneliness through volunteering (Husband *n set al.*, 2000). Given the intent of the present study, although all of the motives found in this model offer insight into volunteer behavior, in this model particularly, the career, social and esteem motives, were used to establish a key fundamental motivational framework connecting workplace volunteer behavior to engagement. By examining these motives, this study added to the volunteer motivation literature by offering a unique empirical test of the model.

Volunteer Motives and Student Centred Learning

A list of top twenty-eight motives for volunteer work was compiled by Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen (1991). After going through the literature on volunteer motivation, they developed a list of motives for direct service volunteers in human service, that were mentioned most often, 28 in all. They then conducted survey interviews with 362 volunteers. The volunteers rated each of the motives on a one to five Likert Scale. One of the motives was found not important at all and five were found to be very important. Fifteen motives received an average of three or more on the five point scale.

It can be said that volunteerism is the driving force that motivates a person to participate in a community service. Students' motivation in carrying out service learning voluntarily is essential in order for them to take responsibility for their own learning via community service and co-curriculum, guided by the teacher. Hence, logically, student centred learning is dependent on students' attitude towards volunteerism. This is strongly attested by the Maine Commission of Community Service (2012) in its extensively articulated and evidence based report titled "*Infusing Service-Learning into Learner-Centered Education in Maine Schools.*"

Service Learning

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) defined service learning as the combination of classroom instruction with community service, focusing on critical, reflective thinking, as well as personal and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in activities that address local, community-identified needs while developing their individual academic skills and outreach commitment to their community (Gottlieb & Robinson 2006). In the past decade, colleges and universities have made greater efforts to involve students in community service, particularly *service-learning*, a special form of community service designed to promote student learning and development. For the purpose of this research, service learning can also include co-curriculum initiatives that have community development elements in a very broad sense. Proponents of service-learning believe that it stimulates academic performance, increases students' understanding of the responsibilities of living in a democratic society, and encourages students to become involved in the social problems facing their communities. Hundreds of college and university presidents, mostly of the major higher education associations, and a number of highly influential scholars actively support the development of service-learning programs on college campuses (Gray, Ondaatje & Zakaras, 1999).

Volunteer Motives, Service Learning and Student Centred Learning

Both service learning and student centred learning have common objectives in enhancing the soft skills of students in areas of communication, leadership, independent thinking, self-directed learning and be able to apply critical thinking to make informed decisions. Service learning opportunities to do something worthwhile creates a better society through community service, improves attitude on one's own life situations, generate opportunities for relationships that enhances communication skills, educational experience, providing challenging activities, etc. Eventually these opportunities or activities have influence on student centred learning (Maine Commission of Community Service, 2012).

Research Methodology

Research Design

A true experimental design approach will be used in this research. The true experimental design, involves two groups within a programme category, participants randomly selected, pre-tested and post-tested to determine the effect or perception level upon their service learning via community service and co curriculum on their ability to perform their self-directed or student centred learning. The two groups involved are the experimental group and control group from each programme category. The participants are selected through randomization, so that any differences that appear in the post test should be the result of the experimental variable, rather than possible difference between the two groups selected at the onset of the research itself. The second part of the research design is hypothesis testing based on the relationship between variables as encapsulated in the research framework for SCL (see Figure 1). This will be conducted at both diploma and degree levels, separately.

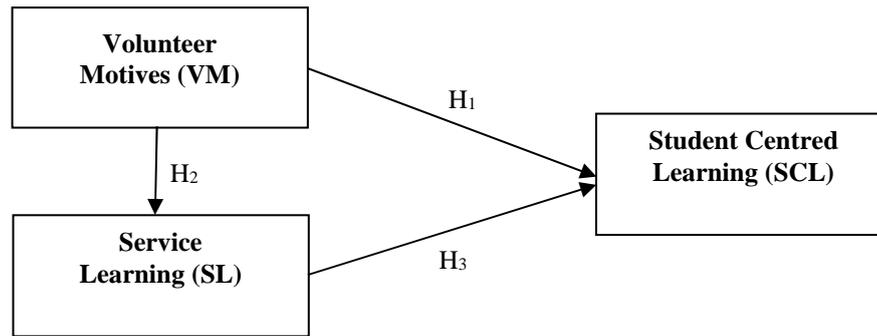


Figure 1: Research Framework on Student Centred Learning

The hypotheses postulated for test are stated below:

H₁: There is relationship between volunteer motives and student centred learning.

H₂: There is relationship between volunteer motives and service learning.

H₃: There is relationship between service learning and student centred learning.

Instrumentation

Instrument or survey tool (adapted from previous research) will include close ended questions (mainly) while instrument content validity will be determined using Partial Least Square (PLS) analysis. Instrument reliability test will also be determined by using PLS analysis.

Study Population, Unit of Analysis and Sample Selection

Population for this study will involve two major groups of degree and diploma students in one of the higher learning institutes in Malaysia. For each major group, the experimental group and control group will consist of 150 students each. Hence, a total of 600 undergraduate students will be involved. The sample or unit of analysis will comprise of students of community service and co-curriculum courses at diploma and degree level. As randomization is involved in group make-up, sample selection will be based on simple random sampling.

Analysis Methods

The current study will involve descriptive statistics, paired samples t-tests, Pearson Product-moment correlation, one-way repeated measures ANOVA, multiple regression analysis, confirmatory factor analysis / structural equation modeling and partial least square. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) will be used as the medium to analyse the descriptive and inferential statistics for this study.

Data Collection

Pre and post-test survey questionnaires will be used as the instrument to collect the quantitative data from the respondents. The data collection process will be administered and guided by selected research assistance. Experimental design will be adopted to serve the objectives for this study. The same participants will be taking part in each condition of the independent variable. Each condition of the experiment includes the same group of participants.

Conclusion

This study had given importance to the current challenges and concern faced by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia. Findings of this research are presumed to give significant impact towards the Malaysian plan to transform the current higher education system which was highlighted in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2007 to 2020). The key purpose of introducing the concept of student centred learning through community service module is basically to create holistic entrepreneurial and balanced graduates in the future. Undeniably, it also helps in preparing the students for the job market with relevant soft skills such as team work, communication and presentation skills, volunteerism and leadership skills which had been identified by the government as 21st century skills. This research will be able to help monitor students' progress in student centred learning with hard evidence and real data. It will also provide leads and ideas in managing and developing service learning in order to build students' character and courage to think rationally, cultivate good human relations and behave independently and confidently while they are studying as well as in their future workplace.

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