SHARING EXPERIENCES AS VOLUNTEERS IN A PEER SUPPORT ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Setting up peer support projects is a worthy move towards student-centered learning especially at the undergraduate level. Peer support is recognized as a cooperative learning strategy that provides peer interaction. In the context of this paper, peer support refers to a voluntary project by a group of ELS students assisted by several lecturers to enhance the mastery of English language among low-proficiency undergraduate students. This paper aims to report on the journey of the students from the English Language Studies (ELS) who participated as volunteers in this peer support project for two semesters. Data for this study was collected at all three stages of the project via interviews and informal discussions with the volunteers. It reports on the experiences and challenges faced by this group of volunteers and it shares positive roles played and experienced by them. The findings also suggest that such efforts by student volunteers must be acknowledged and more efforts must be shown by students who need assistance in English to engage and benefit from their peers.

Keywords: English language, peer support, volunteerism, low proficient learners, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

With busy lives, it can be hard to find time to volunteer. However, the benefits of volunteering are enormous to a community. Volunteering does not have to involve a long-term commitment or take a huge amount of time out of a busy day. Volunteerism plays an important role and the benefits of volunteerism are immense Countries such as the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have given importance to volunteerism programmes (Smith, Kirsten, Leventhal, Handy & Bradnevy, 2010). The programmes have expanded knowledge of cultures and developed relationships in the communities. For example, learners work in pairs to read academic materials, read literature books and brainstorm ideas in research. In these countries too, it was found that there was a high correlation between academic attainment and volunteerism. Specifically, in the USA, a report acknowledged the invaluable experience obtained from volunteerism existing body as a civic engagement of the community provided much needed economic opportunity. It strengthened the idea that volunteering in civic and service societies are both beneficial for the individual participating in the service and provides support for the community. The reason for this is increased civic engagement can help youths develop the skills and experience to embark on efficient career paths.

In this Information Communication Technology (ICT) age, the breed of volunteers is eager to contribute to making changes in society. They want to use the time available to contribute to society after study or work. They are excellent in technology and enthusiastic to do the job (McKee & McKee, 2012).

Volunteerism has also found an important place in education as learners can be encouraged to be creative, reflective, expressive and opinionated about what they see around

them when they volunteer for a course. It is for this reason volunteerism has been found to have a special place in education in the past as well as present.

Volunteering is defined as getting involved in tasks in organizations without remuneration (Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Hustinx, Handy, Cnaan, Brudney, Birgitta, & Yamauchi 2010). Volunteerism is generally defined as agreeing to do something without coercion or paid minimally or not at all for a person or a group. In general, volunteers spend time and money in order to benefit a person or a group. If there is a problem, volunteers in big or small groups try to solve the problem. The challenge to be dealt with is usually a problem faced by a group or a community (Wilson, 2000). They have strong beliefs on a cause and are inspired to undertake tasks to solve social or educational problems. The reward is self-fulfillment and the volunteers develop self-satisfaction when objectives and goals that are set are also met. In general, it is not outcomes-based, rather is focused on the volunteers' experience (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). The global outcomes and civic duties permeate the principles of volunteering as students can build their social networks across states and nations (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). In general, there are three types of volunteerism namely altruistic motives, utilitarian motivations (Cnaan, & Goldberg-Glen, 1991) and social purposes (Cappellari & Turati, 2004). Firstly, altruistic motivations comprise helping others, providing support due to religious beliefs (Cnaan, & Goldberg-Glen 1991). Secondly, utilitarian motivation relates to building new skills, professional experience, and being involved in activities for the benefit of future paid employment (Cappellari & Turati, 2004). The third category involves the capitalization of social volunteerism with friends and colleagues.

A research by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) involved students' literature activities in a community. The volunteers experienced a variety of experiences and there were diverse reasons why students volunteered to participate in the activities. Thus, it is crucial to understand student volunteer experiences and the relationship these experiences have with student learning (McFadden & Seaton, 2017). A study with seven students involved in an interdisciplinary volunteer project revealed that that volunteerism provided a variety of opportunities for students to learn from rich learning experiences.

Socio-political and socio-cultural implications also impact volunteers' motivations to volunteer, and reflect societal characteristics of volunteering (Hustinx, et al, 2010). Students who are volunteers by putting voluntary detail for their resume usually make episodic volunteer participation but do not participate much. Conversely, those with altruistic reasons for volunteering spend more time and participate more frequently in voluntary tasks (Handy, Ram, Cnaan, Hutinx, Chulhee Kang, Brudney Leventhal, Holmes, Lucas, Meij, Birgitta, Ranade, & Yamauchi, Zrinscak, 2010). Putting volunteer opportunities to a platform to promote values signify increased engagement in volunteering activities within university programmes. Voluntary experience shows added value for future employers which is critically needed for employability among students after graduation.

When teaching English, for example, volunteers tend to have high motivation if they are inspired to tutor their peers who are weak in the target language. They have a strong drive to succeed in their mission to make a difference by tutoring their peers. Happiness and satisfaction come with being able to help others learn and succeed in acquiring the target language. They feel compelled by a sense of duty to help people who are struggling with the rules, patterns or simply fail to acquire the language (Terrion, 2010). Lecturers need to explain the value of their work so that the volunteers become interested and highly motivated to teach skills and knowledge to their less proficient peers. The foundations of the theories which support volunteerism in teaching ESL speaking include constructivism and collaborative learning to increase motivation.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Piaget and Vygotsky are the two strong proponents of constructivism. Piaget provided a great contribution to the field of education when he maintained that to the child actively constructs knowledge and naturally has a deep sense of self-discovery. He supported the idea that individuals construct their knowledge through their actions and the people or environment that supports an individual. He focused on cognitive processes in learning (Piaget, 1972).

Correspondingly, Vygotsky felt that cognitive aspects of learning were crucial. He believed that even though the cognitive aspect is important, the social aspect has a major role in learning. Hence, he emphasized the social and cultural aspects in learning as he maintained that learning should be done collaboratively as cognitive functions are triggered by social interactions. Besides, he put forward the idea that learning is the process by which learners were integrated into a group or community. Students should be given a platform for collaboration with peers and lecturers until they can be independent. In short, social constructivism, through its basic premise of learners' development through social interactions, is pivotal in learning. Besides this, peer feedback or review, and collaborative work whether pair work or group work should be integrated into learning activities (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, & Hansen, 2011). This would benefit learners if peers or senior students provide support through volunteer teaching because they would be less intimidated with their peers compared to their teachers.

Vygotsky (1978) subsequently pioneered research which focused on the crucial part social interactions play in human development. The *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) has been defined as:

> *"The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers"* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

ZPD is based on constructivism whereby individuals create their understanding based on prior knowledge. If one is to apply this to voluntarism, then volunteers have a crucial role to play, as they can act as the supportive people of students of poor proficiency to help them learn and construct their meaning. Thus, learning need not be merely academic but instead, be experiential and explorative.

Based on these concepts, volunteerism can be integrated with ideas of constructivism and ZPD as students are encouraged to teach less proficient students and provide support them with knowledge and skills. According to Kebaetse (2010), scaffolding is a strategy which works as a support for the learner to enable less proficient learners to achieve the objectives within the zone of proximal development facilitate learning rather than provide knowledge or skills for the learner. Subsequently, he puts forward the idea that scaffolding promotes independent and meaningful learning.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget's concept of scaffolding form the bases of constructivism in learning. Constructivism has a special place even for past as well as current educational practices. Moreover, learning should have the goals of gaining learners' interest and motivation, simplifying tasks for easy management purposes, focusing on supportive learner solutions and giving clarity for the learners so they can use their background knowledge in their own learning.

In sum, constructivism such as integrating learners' engagement in activities; promoting collaboration and the opportunity to engage multiple perspectives on learning contents; supporting learners in setting their own goals and regulating their learning; and encouraging

learners to reflection in the learning process are the features for effective learning (Noraini Said & Lee, 2014). Thus, volunteerism in education can foster collaborative learning and less proficient learners, for example, will feel more motivated to learn new skills in the language.

There should be a need for discovery among learners who are also volunteers, as learners extract information from a variety of sources in this information age. Based on the proponents of constructivism, learners should be inspired to solve problems or analyse an issue which they desire to solve collaboratively (Kirschner, et al 2006). Learning should be engaging, be related to student interests and challenges which students want to explore together with the enhancement of group work. (Friend & Cook, 2010). Based on this point, students need to conduct research and base it on their understanding of the issue rather than depend on their teachers to provide them with guidelines to solve that problem. It is for this reason volunteers have a major role to provide support for students so that they so that pupils can be involved in direct engagement (Tobias & Duffy, 2009; Taber, 2016)

Pramela, et al.(2016) maintained that a lot of teaching has been put into English courses but the undergraduates do not have much exposure to practice presentation skills in English as the medium of instruction is in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language). There is neither room nor avenues for these students to practise written or oral presentations in the English language. This is because introducing presentations in English for other core courses taught in Bahasa Malaysia is not possible at this time. It is a fact that the ability to present ideas in front of an audience is a skill much needed by graduates of today. In short, studies integrating peer support groups as a learning tool among a range of learning contexts have shown positive results for both the tutors/mentors and the tutees/mentees. The tutors have to understand the content taught thoroughly or master the needed skills extremely well before sharing with tutees. The experience of the tutors can also benefit the tutees greatly as the barriers that exist may be reduced compared to the anxiety they may feel with the teachers/instructors. Learning then becomes easier, free from anxiety and more autonomous as both learners and teachers become involved in the cognitive processes for their development. Hence, this paper reports on volunteerism by students from the English Language Studies (ELS) programme to engage the low language achievers with their learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design where the required data was collected via interviews and informal discussions. The study comprised 10 student volunteers and 30 students who were identified as low proficient learners. The volunteers were selected from the ELS programme were in their 2nd year of study then. These students were called volunteers or mentors and their roles were to provide peer support during the English project. Initially, ten volunteers signed up for this project but leaving only eight active ones. A total of 30 first-year limited users of English who obtained Band 1 or 2 in the Malaysia University English test at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia participated in this project. The 30 students were selected was based on purposive sampling and are called mentees who received the coaching and peer support.

The interview questions mainly focused on "how the volunteers felt about the peer support project", "their experience during the project" and "how they learnt to tackle issues or challenges that emerged during the project". They were also asked whether the project benefitted them and whether they will continue to serve as volunteers in similar projects or other community based projects.

The mentees were also excited to get the support they needed. However, the numbers dwindled as weeks passed by and supporting such a noble aim for the project or the community

of learners became a challenge. Much effort was needed to make their efforts a success. Mentors who tried to be engaged with their mentees through WhatsApp discovered that their efforts were a great challenge. The mentees were reluctant to put in efforts as there were no instrumental rewards such as academic points and recognition by the faculty. Besides, their workload from the other courses piled up and they were unable to cope with the academic demands. Besides this, they were uncomfortable using social media. Many of them were introverts and they were not proficient enough to share or be expressive with WhatsApp. Lecturers who were also part of this project were removed from the WhatsApp group to make the communications among mentors and mentees more relaxed and comfortable. A variety of activities were planned to ensure that engagement and social interaction were developed with the mentors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings will be reported according to the three stages on how the student volunteers felt at the beginning and during the project and at the end. It will also share how motivated they were throughout the project and lastly about their experience as volunteers and as undergraduate students.

At the beginning of the project

For the first question, the feelings and reflections of the volunteers were collated. The volunteers were very positive as they explained that it was an opportunity to share and make new friends. A volunteer expressed excitement and it can be interpreted it as an opportunity to give her full support.

All the 7 volunteers were excited but shared different sentiments. Volunteer 1 felt this an opportunity to share a little of his experience and support the students on learning English. Volunteers 3 and 4 were both excited to join the project but V3 expressed being nervous to be involved. V4 said through this project, she hoped to learn more from the mentees.

Volunteer 2 said,

> *I am quite excited to be able to volunteer in this program because I could make new friends, and also help those who needed assistance in English. At the same time, I could also make use of what I have learnt and share with these friends. At first, I felt a little bit intimidated because I knew that the volunteered mentors were going to be the source of information and guide for the mentees. V5*

So, she felt that she needed to prepare herself well to help them learn the language better throughout this project.

> *But later on, I felt that it wasn't much of a burden at all. We tried to communicate in English as much as we could, and they seemed to understand my explanation well. V5*

Although she was scared at the beginning, she said,

> *English language students always had the opportunity to help others with low English proficiency. I consider this an honour. V7*

During the voluntary programme

The volunteers carried out a lot of fun activities. According to V3

> *...the program itself was a good platform for me to improve my skills, and to use all of those things that I have been taught about throughout the project.*

> *I think some the students still lack confidence in using English, and I feel like somehow partially responsible since I couldn't assure them enough about making mistakes and trying.*

V4 felt strongly that was a very good experience. The strength of the project was the enthusiasm of the lecturers and the effort put into by them in making this program successful. However, the lack of commitment came from the participants, the mentees. The mentees also found it hard to come for the meetings because of their tight schedule with lectures, assignments and extra-curricular activities. Thus, even though the importance of master English was obvious among the mentees, they showed very limited commitment for this project.

V5 strongly feels that,

> *.... we do have passive mentees but I believe that we have a very strong group of mentors and my friends and I was excited. Our lecturer always guided and motivated us each time we meet to report our progress to her.*

V6 saw this program as an effective means to help the students with low English proficiency to learn the language better. Unfortunately, the outline of activities and agenda structured for this program was lacking in every part. The time frame was short and it was difficult to find a suitable time for the mentors and mentees to meet regularly.

V7 commented that the program was a good effort made to raise concerns about the importance of English among non-English major students. The only setback was that it was difficult to arrange a specific time for mentor-mentee meetings.

According to V8,

> *… my experience as a volunteer for the peer support program was good as it helped me learn how to be a one-to-many tutor. Although I was briefed clearly, my mentees had their plans on what they want to be guided with. So, there were a few misunderstandings at the beginning. I gathered everyone, even though they are tired, they would still come to improve their English*

V3 tried to communicate more with them, improving our student-to-student relationship and making them use more English. V3 also made the mentees less threatened by allowing them code-switch to *Bahasa Melayu*.

V5 and V7 needed active participation from the students so they created WhatsApp group to be able to communicate better with each other. The issue of shyness and not being very proactive did not help much with the WhatsApp group. V6 said that due to time constraint, their efforts were not well received. Being Year One students, they could not manage their time well as they were pressed with activities at College level.

V8 had to change his plans. At first, he was planning to help them with their vocabulary and basic communication. But, some of them would like to focus more on their grammar, and some were afraid to speak. Thus, instead of teaching them vocabulary, he coached them on how to be comfortable using English in their daily conversations.

The mentors sought ways to improve the program by improving communication and the mentor-mentee relationship. The mentors worked hard to build strong cooperation among mentors to solve problems among mentees and to improve the project. However, the mentees were shy and passive. Both mentors and mentees were moving in different directions whereby the mentors focused more on vocabulary and basic communication. In contrast, the mentees preferred to learn grammar and for them, it was the most important objective in learning English.

Motivation and Challenges

According to V3, when the mentees started to realize how fun and amazing the activities were, they were more motivated in terms of the importance of mastering English.

What made matters worse for these volunteers was demotivation from the part of the mentees. The mentees' attitude towards the program dampened V2 and V4 and V5's motivation
V5 said,

> *I am sorry to say that it did dampen my motivation. Inactive participation decreased our motivation to further help them.*

Initially, V6 was getting to know them and help them when they started to speak the language while having a conversation. She wanted to be the helping hand to them especially when they showed positive feedback. But slowly, due to the time constrain, their excitement dampened.

There were quite supportive and participative at the beginning but towards the end, everybody was busy with their studies and activities, they lost contact with the mentors. V7 blamed himself for me not putting enough effort to help them.

Some volunteers felt that the mentees' attitude showed an increase in motivation when undertaking some exciting tasks but some had opposite views. The mentors were correspondingly motivated when the mentees showed high motivation when they were involved in the activities. V8's spirit was high, and he continue all efforts to coach them. However, this motivation started to decrease as the project progressed which also affected the mentor's enthusiasm to help.

Benefits of the Project

V2 shared that as an undergraduate student, to be able to mix around with students from other disciplines was a good thing. She confessed that if not for her involvement in the project, she would have only know her course mates. Furthermore, this project allowed her to teach, to share and to befriend. Whatever learnt, whatever tips that she received would surely help her in the real world after graduating.

> *It actually gives the opportunity for us to share the experience on what we have and also to allow them to learn to master English right way. V3*
> *This program thought me how to deal with people with different interests. I also learnt how to make something exciting for people who are not interested to draw their attention and make them interested. V4*

As an undergraduate, V5 said his participation enabled him to polish his leadership and soft skills to some point. V6 added on to say that the knowledge shared with the mentees is the knowledge that we acquire and practise throughout our university life too.

> *…., for example language acquisition and proficiency. The more we teach and guide these mentees, the better grasp we will have on what we already know. Communication skills, organization of ideas and teamwork are some of the benefits gained. V7*

Generally, the mentors felt that they had tremendously benefited from the project. This was because they were able to teach and share their experience with mentees from another faculty. Besides this, they felt that it was a rich experience as a teacher. It was such a challenge for them to make the activities interesting in the non-English major groups who were different from their English Language community. Finally, they felt that the teaching experience helped increase their knowledge of the language and soft skills as well such as understanding, leadership, confidence, and cooperation.

If the volunteers were given another chance of participating in similar voluntary peer-support project, they would want to be involved as they see many benefits. It is interesting that even after the arduous task of playing the role of a mentor, they have become even more determined to improve their teaching so that the mentees can improve. The tasks are very demanding on the mentor's time and energy as much reading about teaching English language had to be undertaken. In spite of all the demands, the mentors worked hard to overcome all obstacles.

CONCLUSION

The mentors in this study recognize that learning has a deeper meaning than just regurgitating work from the textbooks. They can put theory into practice and there exists interconnectedness between learning and application to the real world with. Volunteerism activities become a meaningful experience which is linked with their academic contents. Volunteer opportunities for students only strengthen the provision for rich student learning through real-life experience. Besides, mentors tend to have high motivation because they have a sense of achievement and fulfillment when mentees show much effort to improve. Mentors should be always eager to succeed in their mission as happiness is brought by giving and supporting others. This learning process that is collaborative in nature, suit current learning trends that combine knowledge and skills for students' professional development. This is needed for future educators who should never be complacent and see their work as an on-going process, accepting the fact that they are not just teachers but learners, who are always prepared to improve.

In sum, the beauty of volunteerism is that mentors also learn beyond the four walls in the classroom. It allows for critical thinking, creativity, and independence in learning. The learners in this project recognize the interconnectedness of service with learning. They could see their volunteerism activities as meaningful experiences which were linked with their academic journey. It is for this reason, volunteerism is still seen as exercise which is important and recommended in the past as well as today to instill values especially in institutions of higher learning

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