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Changing Students Valuing of Moral Education: From Pain to Gain: A Case of Curtin University of Technology. Curtin University of Technology, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

Everyone recognizes the need for educating youngsters about the importance of moral values, in today's complex world. Teaching moral values to youngsters is easy. However, to make them value what they learnt is not. In Malaysia, Moral Education is a subject is introduced in the primary school and is continued further at the university level as a strategy to ensure that all students are able to discern right from wrong and make ethical decisions. The question raised is, how can we ensure that the knowledge acquired form the subject is internalized, with long lasting benefits to them? One approach is to employ a relevant teaching model. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to propose -implementing a community-based project as a teaching and learning model for Moral Studies, a strategy which facilitates students' learning and acquisition of lifelong values. In this study, the students were required to plan and conduct a charity fundraising event on campus with the intention of encouraging them to view themselves as personal-social interactive beings, who are part of the larger community. A total of 70 undergraduate students participated in this study. A qualitative case study approach using questionnaire was used to investigate learning outcomes of this community service approach to teaching and learning. Based on this study, it was concluded that the community work has improved the students' learning and in turn, the students' valuing of the unit. Most students prefer incorporation of practical activities. They believed that the ethical theories learnt in the classrooms are not sufficient to equip them with the learning of moral and ethics. The findings indicated that the students acquire important moral values from the project such as teamwork, responsibilities, confidence, respect, and appreciation of life .Most students reported that the project enhanced their ability to work in team. This is because the project required the members to be more dependent on the entire group for successfully completing the task.

Keywords: Moral Education, valuing, community work.

INTRODUCTION

The world today is complex. Malaysia being a developing country has undergone rapid changes. The task of higher education is made more challenging with its needs to impart and retain traditional values, while at the same time moving towards a knowledge-based society. As the youngsters are to be the future leaders of the country, it is vital to prepare them with the necessary social skills and moral strengths that can help guide their decision-making behaviours. Surprisingly, most students are not interested in learning about moral values and ethics. Having learned this subject since primary school students were unhappy when they found that they still had to take the unit at tertiary level.

The unit is a compulsory unit for all Malaysian students studying in private higher education institutions and universities, which made it mandatory for students to take it. Being a new teacher, it was a disheartening scenario and it was easy to become defensive when confronted with challenging questions posed by the students. The behaviour reflected by the students in the classes is mostly discouraging and negative. However, these difficulties were not obstacles, rather a challenge to make the classes interesting.

To investigate what really happens between the students and the unit called 'Moral Studies', the author initiated a study on the students' perception of the unit in 2005 (Alwi, 2005). The findings of the study indicated that the students were satisfied with the lecturer's teaching, but somewhat were puzzled why was the unit made compulsory in private higher education institutions. They failed to see the importance and relevance to their study and often stated that it was a waste of time. However, they also suggested a few strategies to improve the unit. One of the strategies was a practical activity outside campus.

Thus, another journey was called for- to find a new and innovative approach for the unit. The search began. Finally, based on the students' responses in the earlier research, the author decided to try to incorporate a community-based project into the unit. This choice is further enhanced by the fact that during the adolescent years, the students are better at relating their socialization processes with the environment surrounding them (Craig, 1996). This means, the students want to find the relevance of the subject they are learning in relation to real life.. What they learn in class somewhat equips them with external morality, but it is through interactions with others that these students can build a coherent set of values. Furthermore, values are not confined to the classroom alone. The society plays an important role in teaching and transmitting these values to the students. Only through such cooperation can values be embedded in the individuals. Dr Suthin Nophaket (2005) states that: "Education is about the development of the whole person. Religious and Moral Education deals with the development of the person in relation to self- awareness, relationships with others, and the realm of beliefs……"

In addition, a study conducted by Allazi & Chiodo (2004) revealed that students' liking of social studies is influenced by their active involvement in the learning process and also by the teachers' enthusiasm of teaching. In other words, apart from acting as a teacher who disseminates knowledge to students, the teacher must be caring, understanding and is able to identify problems that may be faced by the students. The factors that contribute to students' learning are their attitudes towards the environment, the teacher, and the subject matter.

The incorporation of the community service project into this unit is intended to encourage students to contribute to the society through the act of "giving and taking". Giving: a sincere act of contributing to another person; be it material or moral values, and taking: the experience of learning from the unfortunate groups in the society. Thus, the goal of this study is to investigate the students' perception and to evaluate the effectiveness of the community-based project having implemented in the unit. The findings might not reflect the actual scenario nationwide but they are important to help other teachers to reflect on the current teaching styles and approach and to take the initiative a step further in their classroom teaching.

The Moral Studies Unit.

At Curtin University of Technology Sarawak Campus, Moral Studies has been in the curriculum for almost five years. Subsection 43 (1) Act 555 of the Malaysian Constitution provides that every private higher education institution shall teach the following compulsory subjects; Malaysian Studies, Islamic Studies for students professing the Islamic religion and Moral Education for non-Muslim students. As these units are pre-requisites to graduate, every student has to complete and pass the unit. The students have to achieve 50% marks in order to pass the unit. Although the unit is a compulsory unit, it does not carry any credit.. The unit is offered at the pre-university level, undergraduate level, as well as diploma level. In Curtin University, Sarawak, pre-university students are expected to complete the unit in either first or second semester. On the other hand, the undergraduate students are given the choice to take the unit anytime before they graduate. As for the diploma students, Moral Studies is offered during their short semester course. The objective of the unit is basically aimed to "produce students who are moral by successfully internalizing moral values in their everyday lives." The learning outcomes include: to explain basic concepts and the types of moral; to elaborate on specific ethical theories and their critics; and to know the traditions and values of Malaysian community.

The problems faced.
Many issues have surrounded the teaching of Moral in the private higher education institutions. Most students expressed their dissatisfaction with having to take Moral Studies in higher education, again. When asked about the students feeling of having to take the unit, their main reaction is, the government should not force the unit on them. These students argued that, it is not necessary for one who scores A in Moral Studies to be a moral person him/herself. Furthermore, at this age, they are mature enough to make their own decision. They need not be told what they are supposed to do and what not to do.

Another major put off is the fact that the unit is a non-credit unit. Consequently, most lecturers teaching this unit face a similar problem: the students' lack of interest in the unit. The common responses made by the students were; Why should I take the unit? We have taken the unit in our primary and secondary schools. What else to learn?

The sharing of experiences among the Moral Studies teachers had struck a realization that something has to be done to improve the unit in the eyes of the students and the society at large. The crucial question at this point is; how can a lecturer design a task or project that may give a long lasting benefit to the students?

The community service project may not be the perfect way but, it is indeed one of the effective ways to instil values. It is hoped that through the introduction of charity work to Moral Studies unit, it would and could bring a number of advantages. Firstly, it may appeal to moral reasoning and emotion among the students. Secondly, it may promote social benefits that directly related to utilitarianism by putting the interest of others above their selfish needs. Thirdly, it may encourage moral behaviour, such as altruism, benevolence and good intention.

Using community service work to teach moral.
A community service project has been shown to have a powerful influence on the students' learning. Charity work benefits the students in a number of ways - acquisitions of new learning skills, improvement of social skills, and improved confidence and self- esteem (Voluntary work, 2005). Lamsam, De Young, and Piper (2000) who investigated nursing students' experiences in service learning reported many benefits from a service learning approach. They found that these students learned to respect other individuals, enhance their understanding on the needs of others, improve their confidence in interacting with others, and increase their communication skills. All these values correspond with the moral values that Moral Studies is trying to instil in its students. The students' participation in the experiential learning will develop a sense of patriotism and communal values befitting a civil and caring society (Yaacob & Quek, 2005).

Similarly, McKenna & Rizzo (1999) examined the impact of service learning on the students and found that it gave a positive impact on the students. The learning increased the students' understanding of the course concepts, able to relate to the differences in others, and nurtured their self- confidence.

The project.
In this project, the students were required to undertake a study of a particular charity organization in Miri, Sarawak. Based on this, they would have to identify the needs of the specific organization and devise a plan for raising funds for this charity organization. The objectives of this group project were:

- To help promote both intellectual and civic engagement by linking the work they do in the classroom to real-community needs;
- To encourage them to explore their own values through working with the charity organization; and
- To experience the joy of giving.

The project entailed writing an action plan, community work, fundraising activity, in-class presentation and report writing. 40% of marks were allocated for this project. The students took

charge of the direction of their own learning. It was expected that the students were able to engage in varieties of active learning experience which include:

- To foster a caring and compassionate behaviour;
- To create an experience for students to be an involved citizens; and
- To provide valuable opportunities for them to enrich learning through hands-on activities.

How the project was carried out?
First of all, the lecturer identified the charity organizations in Miri and wrote a letter to the Social Welfare Department, Miri, Sarawak. Once we received permission to conduct interviews at the respective organizations, the students were allowed to choose from the list. They selected the charity organization they wanted and then went directly to the organization. Basically, they informed the person in charge about their intention to raise a fundraising event on campus to help the organization financially. These students then, embarked on their quest to raise as much money as they could. This project was conducted during the Curtin Carnival with the assistance of the Student Council who allowed them to open the stalls free of charge. There were food and drink stalls, game's stall, second hand clothes stall, and also handicrafts from the organizations. The money collected was then handed to the respective organizations.

Objectives of the study.
The purpose of this study is to evaluate the students' experience after exposure to community work in Moral Studies unit. It is hoped that, through the data collected and analysis of its results, the lecturer may assess the effectiveness of incorporating a practical activity into the unit.

METHODOLOGY

Sample
The sample comprised of 70 undergraduate students from Curtin University of Sarawak Campus, Malaysia, who enrolled in the unit in Semester 2/2005. Most of them were in their second and third year of studies.

Instrument
Students' thoughts and opinions on such a practical community activity were gathered via a questionnaire which was administered to the students towards the end of the semester. The questionnaire was aiming to answer the following questions:

- Can the community work project counteract the students' negative perception of the unit?
- How do the students perceive the community work?
- What are the values learnt by the students in the course of completing the project?

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first section of the questionnaire comprised of six skills that they had experienced in completing the project. They were asked to rank in order of importance the major skills they had learnt in the unit. The second section consisted of 17 closed-ended questions asking them about their experience in the project. The students responded to the items by utilizing a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 indicating that the students did not agree and 5 indicating that they strongly agreed. The third section of the questionnaire consisted of three open-ended questions that seek to explore the students' expectation of the unit at the beginning and end of the semester.

Data collection
This questionnaire was administered to the students in the final weeks of their tutorial classes to ensure that students had a complete experience of the unit and adequate time was given to complete them. The participants were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire and the confidentiality of the study.

FINDINGS

Values learnt.
The findings indicated that the students acquire important moral values from the project: teamwork (72%), responsibilities (70%), confidence (70%), respect (72%), and appreciation of life (77%). As a social animal, the community project did encourage better interaction not only between the students and community, but most importantly, among the students themselves. Being in a group, the students depended on one another greatly to complete the project. At the same time, they also learned to respect and be tolerant one another because, in the course of the completion of this project, they encountered times when they were forced to make decisions. the students had to learn to make the best they could as they knew the project was undertaken at a campus event where not only their peers would be watching what they were doing, but the public would also be witness to their behaviour . From the visits to the charity organizations, they also learned to appreciate what they have in life compared to less fortunate people whose existence may not even be recognized by other members of the society.

Expectation of the unit at the beginning.
The survey indicated that more than 90% of the students had a negative expectation from the unit (when they first knew that they had to enrol in the unit). Some quotes given below are self explanatory….

- Not much help, no purpose, time wasting; All about the theories and rules; Boring and useless.

End of the semester evaluation.
However, the student' perception of the unit changed as they successfully completed the group project. The quotes from the students revealed the following:

- Moral Studies again? I thought I studied it before during the high school. Well, anyway it might be a new experience for me to meet new people and carry out some interesting projects. It turns out fine in the end.
- Yes, there were some new values which wasn't learn during high school. The teamwork thing is a more valuable experience in my opinion.
- Yes because I was exposed to the many aspects of life. There is the group project that make the class interesting.

Overall, 88.7% of the students expressed their satisfaction after becoming involved in the charity fundraising programme. 70% agreed that the charity work is an effective tool of learning about values. They also strongly believed that the group project must be retained (76%) in the future semester. 67% plans to engage in community service in the future. 72% enjoyed the community service work.

These findings suggested that a deviation from the 'chalk and whiteboard' practice does make a difference to the students' taking Moral Studies.

DISCUSSION

Generally, when the students were first informed about this project, they were quite hesitant due to the fact that they did not fancy having to spend more time on this unit than other 'more' important units. A random question asked during the tutorials found that most of them wanted to complete the project for the sake of acquiring the marks. However, the outcome of this study indicated that the project did indeed contribute to a worthwhile experience to the students even though at the beginning, they were quite sceptical to take Moral Studies again. Most students reported that the project enhanced their ability to work in team. This is because the project required the members to be more dependent on the entire group for successfully completing the task. According to Meyers & Jones (1993), cooperative group project would create a more congenial atmosphere for learning and produce 'positive interdependence.' Most students prefer incorporation of practical activities. They believed that the ethical theories learnt in the classrooms are not sufficient to equip them with the learning of moral and ethics. This corresponds with the earlier research conducted by Alwi

(2005) where the students expressed their preference towards practical activities such as field trip and charity work.

The community work has improved the students' learning and in turn, the students' valuing of the unit. This is clearly shown through the students' presentations. For example, two groups came up with impressive video clips in their presentations. This indicated that the group project has opened another new and meaningful pathway to a more innovative learning among them.

The experiences of the students in completing the group work can be summarized as follows:

- It contributes to personal fulfilment and satisfaction;
- It enables them to give something back to the society;
- It gave them an opportunity to get involved in the community; and
- It helped them gain new skills such as teamwork, responsibilities, appreciation of life and confidence.

One of the limitation in this study is the duration of the research which is short for the study to assess the changes that the students' experience at the beginning and end of the semester. This however, can be addressed by employing interviews conducted in the beginning of the semester to assess students' expectations before beginning the community work. Another limitation is that, the students were asked to respond about the unit after completing the community work. Thus, their reports may be influenced by the community work they had just completed.

It is noteworthy to say that Moral Education teachers should implement community work into their unit. One may start small, such as what had been done in this study. Perhaps, one must also be driven to change the way the unit is being delivered.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to provide a new approach in teaching morals through the implementation of community work in the unit and then, assessing the effectiveness of this community work among the undergraduate students who had successfully completed it. (The findings had proven that in teaching Moral Education in schools as well as in universities, teachers must make an effort to understand the students' needs). Being a Moral Studies teacher, one must show enthusiasm in the teaching itself. At the same time, the teacher must be self-motivated. If one does not show initiative on his/her part, the students can sense this and this can influence their perception of the unit. Although students had a negative expectation of the unit in the beginning, the study proves that it is not too late to change this perception, bearing in mind 3 important keywords: motivation, belief and self-reflection. The teachers' responsibility is to motivate not just the students but also but also himself /herself; believe in what he/she is teaching (i.e., the unit's contents, the importance of the unit, and also the end results of the whole experience), and; be self-reflective, by evaluating his/her teaching at the end of the semester. The teacher must also be courageous to accept any mistakes from his/her part in making the unit a failure. Last but not the least, morals and ethics can be taught. The questions of; "How should I live?" How should I act?" can be answered. However, the answers lie in the values that the child holds. Parents, teachers, politicians, and religious people are all responsible in the inculcation of these noble values. Without the students' interest in trying to find meaning to these questions, the learning of moral and ethics would be difficult.

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