

COMMUNITY AGEING WITH HEALTH AND DIGNITY THROUGH A SERVICE-LEARNING INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

A new compulsory service-learning subject was introduced in the Practices of Health Promotion module of Bachelor of Science in Applied Sciences (Health Studies), run by the School of Professional Education and Executive Development, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. It aims to develop students' ability to apply learned principles and concepts of health behaviour from lectures into a community setting, by completing elderly site services arranged at four selected elderly centres.

METHODS

36 students were enrolled in the subject. An analytical framework was developed based on specific themes, sub-categories and categories. Data extracted from students' reflective journals were put into qualitative analysis software, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner 5 of Provalis Prosuite for analysis.

RESULTS

5 themes and 24 categories were created based on the data analysed from students' reflective journals. The three highest frequency themes are 'Skills learned' (170 text units, 32.6% of total), 'Challenges' (140 text units, 26.8% of total), and 'Elders characteristics' (135 text units, 25.9% of total).

CONCLUSIONS

Communication, teamwork and organising activities to the elderly are the most cited skills learned by students. They have also identified elders' personality and characteristic

when communicating with them. Although there were challenges when interacting with the recipients and centres, students have overcome most of them and have learned better ways to communicate with elders and reacted quickly by changing the content of designed activities provided to elders.

KEYWORDS

service-learning; students; elderlies; site services; communication; teamwork; challenges

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning (SL) is 'a philosophy, pedagogy, and model for community development that is used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards'. [1] It is becoming more popular in education curriculum as it provides an opportunity for learners to apply their acquired academic knowledge and skills into a real-world situation by providing services in a community setting. It does not only help learners to explore their roles and civic responsibility as citizens, but to also benefit the community.

Many studies on SL have shown positive outcomes on different personal development aspects, including improved skills on critical thinking, problem solving, communication, enhanced sense of social responsibility and a deeper understanding of learning concept. [2,3,4] Academically, participation in SL has been found to be a predictor of university graduation rates as SL enhances

academic challenge and improves student's time-management skills which in turn motivates students to persist in their degree, leading to academic success. [5] Comparing students who are enrolled in SL and non-SL module, the former group engages more in collaborative learning with other students and faculty which further strengthens student's academic growth and assists them to reach graduation.

Due to the proven positive outcomes of SL and its wider application in education curriculum, a compulsory SL subject was introduced in the Practices of Health Promotion module of Bachelor of Science in Applied Sciences (Health Studies) by the School of Professional Education and Executive Development (SPEED), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2019. It aims to develop ability of the students to apply principles and concepts of health behaviour to motivate elderly to adopt a healthy lifestyle, and to develop a sense of empathy, social responsibility and professionalism. In the SL subject, 36 students undertook nine weeks of compulsory site services

at four selected elderly centres under the guidance of site supervisors.

In order to examine the learning outcomes of this new SL subject and whether the intended learning objectives have been met, a qualitative analysis was conducted on the individual reflective journals from students. The results indicate that students have learned different skills and overcome most of the challenges when communicating with the elderly. Overall, the main objectives are fulfilled, and students have learned from serving the elderly on how to promote health with dignity in a community setting.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 36 students were enrolled in the SL subject. They were divided into four groups, Group A, B, C and D, and visited four designated elderly centres. The service content is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. SERVICE CONTENTS OF THE SERVICE GROUP

GROUP	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	TARGET SERVICE RECIPIENTS	CONTENTS
A	8	Elderlies in Ho Chui District Community Centre	Dementia Community Support Scheme
B	8	Elderlies living in Sau Mau Ping public housing estate	Home visits
C	12	Elderlies in Ho Wong Neighbourhood Centre for Senior Citizens	Centre activities
D	8	Elderlies living in Chak On Estate	Home visits

CONSTRUCTION OF ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

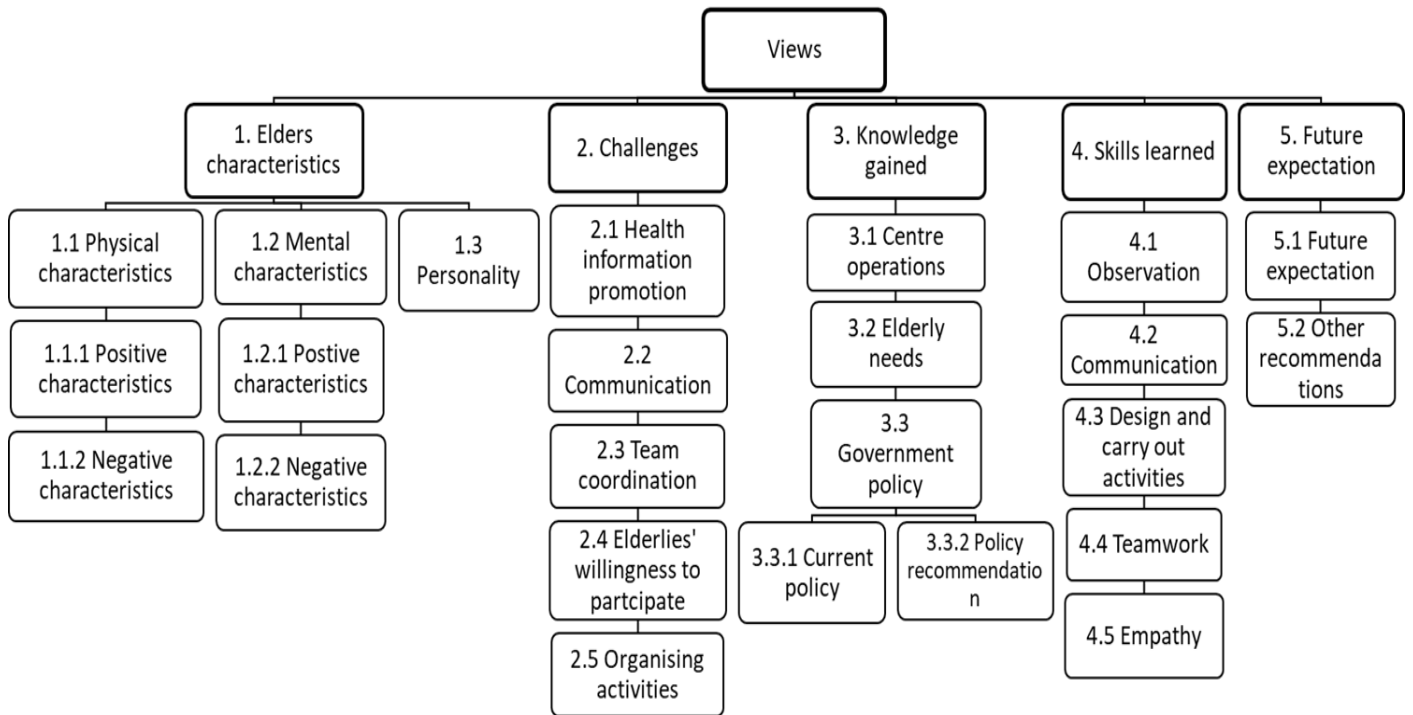
Based on the Grounded Theory approach [6], an analytical framework was developed in the current study, derived from the content analysis of the reflective journals written by the 36 students. 'Text Units' were identified in the content as phrases and sentences that represented the main points of views. 'Categories' were then generated by grouping text units with similar meaning. Some categories were subdivided into 'Sub-categories'. 'Themes' were created by grouping 'Categories' with similar meaning and an analytical framework for the current study was formed.

Figure 1 shows a detailed hierarchy chart of the relations between themes, categories and sub-categories of views collected.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from students' reflective journals was inputted into a qualitative analysis software, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner 5 of Provalis Prosuite for analysis. Based on the coded data according to specific themes, sub-categories and categories of the analytical framework, total frequency counts of text units and percentage of total number were calculated.

FIGURE 1. HIERARCHY CHART FOR ANALYSIS OF VIEWS COLLECTED



RESULTS

Analytical framework for qualitative views – the Themes
 The views were grouped under 5 themes and 24 categories based on the analytical framework. The 5 themes and their associated frequency counts in terms of text units totalling 522 are shown in Figure 2. The top three themes are Theme

4 'skills learned' (170 text units, 32.6% of total), Theme 2 'challenges' (140 text units, 26.8% of total), and Theme 1 'elders characteristics' (135 text units, 25.9% of total).

Top 6 categories of views

The frequency counts in terms of 'text units' of the top 6 categories of views are shown in Table 2 and presented in Figure 3.

FIGURE 2. THEMES OF VIEWS IN DESCENDING ORDER

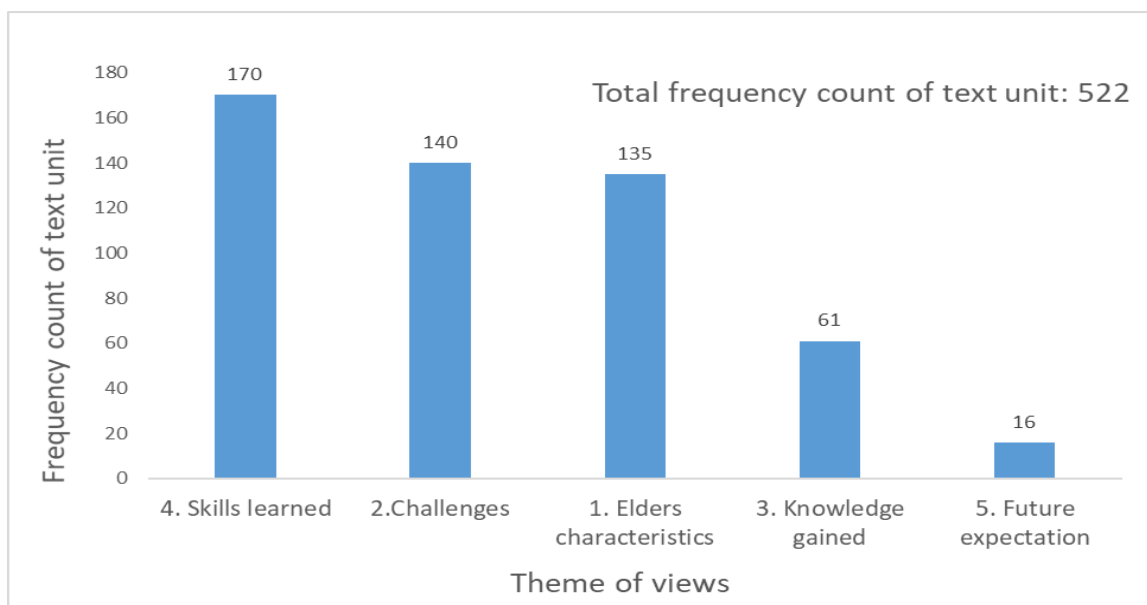
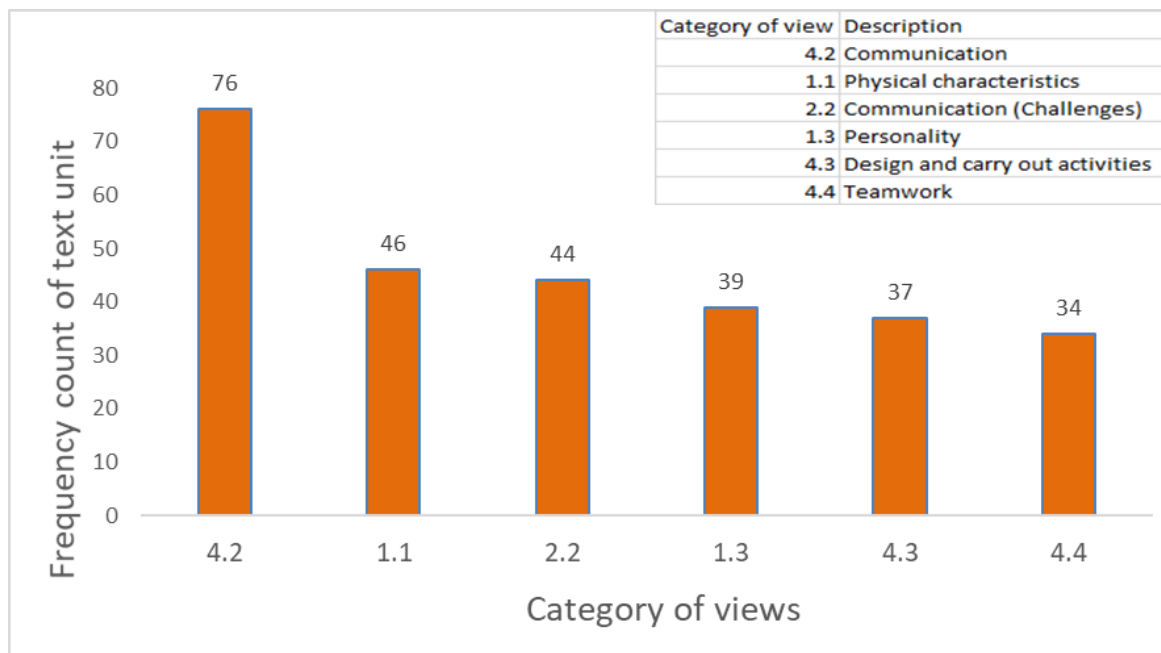


TABLE 2. TOP 6 CATEGORIES OF VIEWS IN DESCENDING ORDER

ITEM	CATEGORY OF VIEWS (ASSOCIATED THEME)	FREQUENCY COUNT OF TEXT UNITS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL NUMBER
1	4.2 Communication (4. Skills learned)	76	15.4%
2	1.1 Physical characteristics (1. Elders characteristics)	46	8.5%
3	2.2 Communication (2. Challenges)	44	8.9%
4	1.3 Personality (1. Elders characteristics)	39	7.9%
5	4.3 Design and carry out activities (4. Skills learned)	37	7.5%
6	4.4 Teamwork (4. Skills learned)	34	6.9%

*Remark: The frequency counts of text units with 30 above are shown in Table 2.

FIGURE 3. BAR CHART SHOWING TOP 6 CATEGORIES OF VIEWS IN DESCENDING ORDER



SUMMARY OF VIEWS

This section presents the summary of views expressed based on the significant points identified in each theme and category of view.

SUMMARY OF THEME 1: ELDERS CHARACTERISTICS

1a This theme has the third highest frequency count among the 5 themes. Under the category of 'elders characteristics', students clearly identified the characteristics of the elders that they encountered. Under 'physical characteristics', most identified views were on 'negative physical characteristics' from elders such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and knee and back pain. Under 'Mental characteristics', students from group A, who served demented elders, identified symptoms of dementia such as memory loss and difficulty in analysis as 'Negative mental characteristics'.

1b Under 'personality', a lot of students identified positive personality of elders such as being friendly, kind and talkative. Most elders were happy to communicate with the students.

SUMMARY OF THEME 2: CHALLENGES

2a This theme has the second highest frequency count among the 5 themes. Under 'communication', which is the third highest frequency count in category of views, most students pointed out that they were a lack of experience communicating with elders, causing difficulty in starting a conversation. Some of them were nervous to talk with the elders while some felt hard to find a common topic to discuss due to generation gap. Two of them also mentioned having language barrier as the elders spoke other Chinese dialects.

2b Students pointed out that a few elders were not too willing to engage in conversations or activities under category 'Elderly willingness to participate'. A few of the elders preferred not to expose their personal information while a few did not want to do physical exercises. However, it was mentioned that situation had improved after encouraging the elders to participate and changing the way of communication with them such as showing appreciation, using eye contact and body touch (also refer to point 4a).

2c Under 'organising activities', students from group A had discovered that some activities made elders felt tired and hard to follow the instructions, while group C had once miscommunicated with the Centre and faced with technical problems, resulting in carrying out the activity without the PowerPoint presentation. Moreover, two students on home visits had to change their original plan to doing stress test with the elders.

SUMMARY OF THEME 3: KNOWLEDGE GAINED

3a Under 'Current policy', some students wrote about the current supports to elders given by the government, such as enhancing community care services, providing healthcare vouchers and giving grant to community centres to provide elderly services. Recommendations included to increase the numbers of healthcare workers, to provide more funding to organisations that support elders and to set up retirement protection.

3b Under 'centre operation', a few students from groups A and C pointed out they had learned about the daily operations and services such as physical and mental supports provided by the community centres.

SUMMARY OF THEME 4: SKILLS LEARNED

4a This is the theme with the highest frequency count among the 6 themes, and 'communication' has the highest frequency count among the 24 categories. Improved communication skills were frequently mentioned by students. They identified the problems they had encountered when first communicating with the elders and learned how to improve that communication. Most students mentioned they had learned to be good listeners, 'be patient and talk slowly with gentle tone'. Some of the students had learned to open and continue conversations by introducing more about themselves and showing appreciation. A few of them had shown attentiveness and made use of non-verbal communication skills such as suitable body touch, eye contact and facial expression. They also wrote about avoiding talking about politics, privacy and personal information, or speaking English in between sentences.

4b Under 'design and carry out activities', students mentioned the need to consider the elders' ability. Hence, they had to set the content of the activities to be meaningful and joyful. Some students reflected the need to guide and assist the elders carefully during the activities

by better preparation. Safety consideration was also pointed out by students mainly from groups A and C.

4c Under 'Teamwork', the importance of teamwork was mostly mentioned by students from group A and C. They identified how to cooperate and help with each other in conducting and solving problems during activities.

4d Under 'empathy', although the frequency count of this category was less than others, 11 students talked about demonstrating empathy towards the elderly when communicating with them. Three of them mentioned that they had learned to show empathy by understanding elders' health conditions and concerns.

SUMMARY OF THEME 5: FUTURE EXPECTATION

5a Under 'future expectation', some students expected they would do better in the coming services. Expectations included promoting more health information, organising more meaningful activities and improving problems encountered. One student recommended to conduct home visits in other low-income areas.

DISCUSSION

The intended learning objectives of the SL subject in this study include equipping students with the knowledge of health promotion methods and theories in different settings, developing students' ability to apply learned principles and concepts in elderly community, and building a sense of empathy, social responsibility and professionalism. The results have demonstrated that the main objectives have been met and students have positive learning outcomes.

From the above analysis, skills learned, challenges and the elders' personality and characteristic have been described the most by the students. Communication, teamwork and design of site activities are the most cited skills learned. Students have also faced the challenge of communicating with the recipients, who are essentially strangers, and due to their lack of experience in dealing with elderly people. Personality of the elders has dictated on how the students would encourage recipients' willingness to engage in conversations and activities during the site service participation. Despite the limited space in the recipients' home, which is unfavourable to carrying out activities, and

miscommunication with the centre on some occasions, students have reacted quickly by changing the contents of activities. Students have also learned to consider the elders' ability when planning service activities. They have overcome most of the challenges and have found better ways to communicate with elders such as showing appreciation, using proper tone and to be patient listeners.

There are two key limitations of this study, namely the lack of comparison between students who have participated in the SL subject and those who have not, and the students' attitude before and after the completion of the subject. Some studies have found no significant differences or added value in academic learning, performance in discipline rate, attendance or drop-out rate, and civic attitudes between these two groups. [7,8] Studies that favour SL as an effective learning module may have students who are already aware of the requirements and expected outcomes prior to the completion of the subject. An alternative explanation for the positive SL outcomes is because the students are service-oriented and have an interest in providing direct contact services to clients, and thus they are more likely to prefer SL courses. [9] To further examine the effectiveness of this new SL subject in Practices of Health Promotion, a pre-post design and longitudinal study approach could be adopted in the future to identify the changes of students' attitude, learning outcomes, and the long term impacts of SL on students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank the senior management and centre staff from Sik Sik Yuen for providing the opportunity for the students in service-learning to put into practice their learned theories in serving the elderly. The study is fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project Reference No.: UGC/IDS24/18).

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