

# *Path Study on Innovative Undergraduate Social Practice through Service-learning*

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**Abstract**—Service-learning is a concept originated from America, and it is a teaching method which combines community service and academic curriculum. This article, based on integrative analysis on problems arisen from undergraduate social practice, the necessity to perform social practice, basic mode and complementary characteristics of service-learning and the national conditions of China, proposed a path to innovate undergraduate social practice through service-learning. This study aimed to promote the pertinency and effectiveness of undergraduate social practice in China and to accelerate the reform on college personnel training mode.

**Keywords**—service-learning; undergraduate; social practice; innovation; path study

## I. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is a concept originated from America, which could be dated back to the mid-late 1980s, and it is widely applied to various education institutes in America. It is adapted from John Dewey's "hand-on learning" concept, and it emphasizes that curriculum study and extra-curricular service are of equal importance. Service-learning is a teaching method which combines community service and academic curriculum. Through experiential learning, it provides great opportunity to associate social practice with theory, which could facilitate students' understanding towards related academic contents. Besides, through service-learning, undergraduates could promote their moral cognition, critical thinking, effective communication, leadership, cultural sensitivity and personal development in the process.

Undergraduate social practice mainly refers to a series of activities of undergraduates to participate in social activities with aims and organized plans. In the process, we expect the undergraduates could gradually understand and finally contribute to economic construction and social development. It is an effective path to guide personal development of the youth.

It is emphasized in 《Several advices on further work to promote college social practice education》 by the Ministry of Education: "Insisting on the association of education with productive labor and social practice is the essential content of the Communist Party's education guideline. Insisting on the unity of theory study, innovative thinking and social practice; Insisting on learning from practice and learning from people is

the essential path for students' development." It is an inevitable requirement for universities to further strengthen social practice education and to continuously promote innovativeness of undergraduate social practice in order to comprehensively achieve the Communist Party's education guideline, insisting on moral education, strengthening education on socialism core value system, progressively implementing quality-oriented education and significantly improving the quality of higher education. Integration of service-learning with undergraduate social practice would further deepen the connotation of undergraduate social practice and compensate for the flaws in undergraduate personal values.

## II. THE NECESSITY OF IMPLEMENTATION AND PROBLEMS IN UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL PRACTICE

### A. Problems in undergraduate social practice

- *Deficiency in learning orientation.* Most undergraduate social practice activities include military training, which is included in education scheme, and professional practice. Besides, activities such as visit to companies, social surveys and science or cultural consultation organized by college Youth League Committee are also usually included. However, among all the social practice activities, only professional practice is organized activity with specific aims. Others mostly lack specific aims and are without introspection. For these activities, their effects are questionable.
- *Lack of systematic education management system.* Most undergraduates lack scientific cognition towards social practice and they regard related activities as extra burden, for they tend to overly concerned with their curriculum academic performance. As a result, they are usually not willing to participate social practice activities and are perfunctory about relevant assignments. Furthermore, universities are also partially responsible for this phenomenon. It is unfortunate to see that most social practice are not well organized activities without enough fund support from the universities and are usually without clear aims and scientific management system. Most relevant

activities seem to be merely poses and their actual effects are questionable.

- *Social practice design is monotonous.* In America, service-learning has clear aims and it is integrated with undergraduate curriculum design and long-term education scheme. However, current social practice performed in Chinese universities tends to be monotonous and is isolated from students' professional knowledge. Furthermore, most aimless social practice lacks proper instructions from mentors and thus turned into unnecessary burdens for the students. In another word, this kind of social practice is rewardless for the students.
- *Lack of social practice base.* In order to fulfill the training purpose of social practice, it is indispensable to establish stable practice bases. However, it is difficult to build effective connection between undergraduates and local communities. It may cost considerable human resources to hunt for suitable service program to perform undergraduate social practice.
- *Lack of introspection and summary.* Considering all the problems listed above, including unclear practice design and improper execution, it is not surprising to find that most social practice lack introspection and summary after the programs have been performed. And undergraduates can only gain limited progress through participation and the actual final outcomes of the programs are usually proved to be disappointing. The truth is that most undergraduates only regard the social practice as simple mission and there is little knowledge internalization in the process. They just want to walk through the process and hand in their final reports to earn their credits.

#### B. The necessity of undergraduates social practice

- *Associate theory with practice.* Undertaking social practice is beneficial for undergraduates to apply abstract knowledge they gained in courses to reality. It is beneficial for the students, for it provides excellent opportunity for them to introspect all the theories they gained in course and it can deepen their understanding towards their professional knowledge and learning objectives. On the one hand, it meets with students' needs for personal development and manifests their autonomy position during learning process; On the other hand, it also overcomes the deficiency and contrariety of teaching and learning during education process and turns the mandatory study experience into an independent process.
- *Establish correct world outlook, view of life and view of value.* With the development of society and progress in science, more and more students are facing challenges towards their world outlook, view of life as well as view of value. Undertaking social practice can contribute to the the cultivation of undergraduates' participation spirit and sense of social responsibility. Performing social practice in local communities can

teach undergraduates about the actual life status in communities and it would help them to introspect on their own lives. The students can receive acceptance and happiness from the society through their service, and it can stimulate further passion of dedication when the students feel that their personal values have been achieved.

- *Contribute to undergraduates' socialization, promote social skills.* Social practice can bring undergraduates from "the tower of ivory" into society. It is beneficial for them to broaden their eyesights, accumulate experience and enhance their skills. All these good aspects can help them build foundation for their future work, for they can promote interpersonal skills and contribute to maintaining effective social connections. Social practice can teach students how to keep the balance between "individual and overall" and promote team-work ability. During work and service, their hard-working and dedication spirits can be manifested. They can explore their interests and truly understand what they are good at and finally establish future objectives.

### III. THE FEATURES AND BASIC MODE OF SERVICE-LEARNING

#### A. The basic mode of service-learning

- *One-time and short time service-learning experiences.* This mode is usually used in orientation stage and freshman year, which can guide students to participate in service-learning programs. It allow students to participate some activities to make contact with communities and to provide services. And it could be classified into different groups according to different implementing methods, such as professional orientation activities, service-learning activities which are related to curriculum, activities organized by student groups or universities.
- *Concentrated service-learning.* This mode requires student to spent a continues period of time (more than 10 hours per week) on service-learning during a semester or a summer vacation. The time that student spent on service-learning is usually limited, as well as the extend of participation. These facts often result in weakened experience of students on the culture, living environment and problems of their service objects. In many America universities, concentrated service-learning is usually adopted to exert the effect of service-learning to the fullest. Specifically, this kind of service-learning has different forms, including summer internship, independent study, action research and international or global services.
- *Ongoing cocurricular service-learning.* This is a mode of service-learning that is widely used in America universities. Christian youth federation and undergraduate sodality are both organizers of community service activities, and these activities form

the organic components of undergraduat extracurricular activities. In specific implementation process, ongoing cocurricular service-learning is usually carried out as several activity programs, such as program focused on leadership cultivation, religious organization service-learning activity, service-oriented learning activity organized by student organization, dormitory organized service-learning activity, and campus-wide service-learning activity.

- *Service-learning in the curriculum.* This mode brings service-learning into curriculum, which can help students to associate theory with actual situations and to explore different definitions of kindness as well as origins of different social problems. It can help students to questionate aims and functions of learning knowledge and their meanings at different levels. In this curriculum, students can gain more compared to traditional curriculums. From 1993, more and more researches showed that not only can service-learning boost students' development on non-academic aims, but it can promote students' academic performance as well. Therefore, more and more universities bring service-learning into course design and give it explicit aims and requirements in curriculum design. It also has several forms during excution, such as establishing course cluster, establishing independent service-learning module, and providing peak experience curriculum.

#### B. Features of service-learning

- *Diversity.* Service-learning extends learning site from schools to communities, and thus making the community an open classroom. Students can get in touch with people from different backgrounds during service-learning. This is quite beneficial, for students could learn to get along with different kinds of people and deal with different problems. At the same time, students should make differential service plans according to various service objects to satiate different needs. In this process, some factors should be taken into consideration, such as age, gender and working environment. Avoid combining SI and CGS units, such as current in amperes and magnetic field in oersteds. This often leads to confusion because equations do not balance dimensionally. If you must use mixed units, clearly state the units for each quantity that you use in an equation.
- *Introspective.* Introspection is one of the important sections and basic features of service-learning, and is also a basic condition. Introspection is an important behaviour for students to assotiate theory they gained in course with practical service experience at different stages of service-learning. Service-learning emphasizes students' participation and introspection after service-learning programs were conducted, and it aims to cultivate students' independent elaborative faculty. It could help students to understand the aims, contents and process of service-learning, and finally help student to internalize experiences to own ability. Service-learning

has five indispensible features called "5c", namely "connection, continuity, context, challenge and coaching". It is required that introspection should assotiate school with community and experience with application. Introspection should have actual content and dare to challenge new experience, and it should provide necessary support and guidance for students.

- *Sociality.* Service-learning provides vast opportunities for students to understand social situations, for it incorporates social service into curriculum and applies theories in course to practical service process. It can improve students' ability to discover problems and deal with problems through their participation in the service ativities and communication with other people. Furthermore, the aims of service-learning include promoting community development and improving students' socialization level. It emphasizes the cultivation of students' interpersonal skills and sense of social responsibility. It contributes to students' ability to fit in the society.

#### IV. THE PATH FOR SERVICE-LEARNING TO INNOVATE UNDERGRADUATES SOCIAL PRACTICE

##### A. Strengthen the association between thoery and practice

Social practice in our country should be integrated with students' skills and knowledge, and it should guide students to understand society and to serve society, and finally let students to experience the fun of applying their knowledge to practical use. Service-learning emphasizes "hand-on learning" to help students understand the contents in study system comprehensively, and it aims to promote the association between theory study and extracurricular activities, and to connect social practice with curricular design. Service-learning aims to guide students to apply their knowledge into practical use independently and to acquire more skills to cultivate civic awareness, to achieve integration between knowledge and skills, between process and methods, and between attitude and personal value. Participating social practice activities which are related to curriculum could improve students' study outcome and promote obtaining knowledge and skills, and cultivate students' introspection and cooperation awareness. It could contribute to cultivating innovative talents and cultivating students civic awareness and sense of social responsibility, and to promote students self-esteem and value. Universities in our country should adopt service-learning education concept to conduct internationalized education reform to keep pace with foreign universities and become internationalized. On the one hand, it meet with international students' needs; on the other hand, it is benefical for cultivating domestic students.

##### B. Establish new concepts for social practice and study

All the universities, teachers and students should establish new concepts for practice and study, which should include: study while serve and serve while study. It is important to switch old concepts and strengthen the importance of students'

participation in social practice, and to utilize social practice to cultivate students' practical ability, and to promote students' personal development. Social practice activities should focus on students' needs, motivations and interests and emphasize on students' subjectivity and creativity. It should form the mode of social practice, where universities are taken seriously, society cooperates positively, teachers guide correctly and students participate positively. It should aim to promote students' sense of social responsibility, creative spirit, practice ability and finally contribute to theory study, formation of wholesome personality, and completing correct morality. The common problems in our universities include: students lack sense of subjectivity, students lack self understanding and some students with individuality and subjectivity are commonly elbowed out. Most university social practice activities are arranged by college Youth League Committee and guided by teachers, and most students can simply follow their instructions. This kind of mode of social practice can throttle students' autonomy and limit their personal choice. Service-learning is different from two points, for it emphasizes on the subjectivity of individuals and promotes progress and development of individuals through the process. On the one hand, service providers apply academic theories to practical service to strengthen service skills and finally improve theories and skills at the same time. Students stand at the core position in the service process, and their active participation could make them to understand their subjectivity and it also reflects the education notion, which is "Making students at core status and respect their individual differences". On the other hand, the aim of service-learning is to establish students' subjectivity awareness. During service-learning process, students establish subjectivity awareness and specify service targets.

*C. Enrich the content of social practice and promote the base construction for social practice*

The abundance of social practice contents could directly determine whether the activities are successful. Currently, the contents of social practice are usually monotonous and vapid and there is shortage for social practice base. All these factors contribute to students' passive attitudes towards social practice and some students just simply walk through the process. Service-learning obeys the experience concept, which could be summarized as "I listen, I forget; I see, I remember; I do, I understand." It truly guides students to participate in specific practice activities. For example, students could serve community by taking good care of the old and the young. Students could work as individuals or in teams to choose their service objectives, make their service plans and set their aims. Different service contents exert different experiences on students and service-learning could teach them to take social responsibility spontaneously, to focus on vulnerable groups and to promote sense of self moral duty. It is crucial to construct practice base for service-learning. Practice base with unique features and have multi-level constructions could enrich the contents of practice and improve the pertinency and effectiveness of social practice.

*D. Emphasize the process of social practice and introspection on its result, complete related system construction*

One of the important features of service-learning is introspection, and introspection should be run through all the stages during service-learning, namely the early-stage, the mid-stage and the late-stage. During the practice of service-learning, students are required to record, consider, discuss, introspect and summarize all the aspects in the process. As one of experience-learning methods, introspection could contribute to deepening the understanding of both service provider and receiver towards aims, contents, procedures, and results of service-learning, and it also reflects the changes of service-learning exerts on students. When students encounter barriers during service, introspection from a systematic perspective should help them to think initiatively and to reconstruct knowledge system and finally discover solutions to solve problems. In China, undergraduates' elaborative faculty, problem-solving ability, critical thinking ability are limited due to exam-oriented passive education manner. Students are used to receive instructions passively and tend to memorize knowledge mechanically. The introspection feature in service-learning could offset this flaw in education system, and it could cultivate students' ability to discover problems, to gather and analyze information, to generate solutions and to finally solve problems. After students complete their practice activities, universities should establish a set of complete and scientific evaluation system, which should include practical situations, evaluation principles, and specific aims as well as contents. A evaluation system with complete whole-course supervision, quantified grading, course process orientation, and sharing stimulation would contribute to the promotion of undergraduates' enthusiasm towards participating social practice activities. It also promotes the effects of social practice on talents cultivation and community service.

V. CONCLUSION

Service-learning is a kind of study concept as well as teaching method. With schemed service-learning activities, teachers could guide students to associate academic skills with social needs. Not only could this approach provide students with polybasic study channels but it could help students to understand different needs of society through service practice as well. When using this advanced concept for practice, we need to consider different practical situations among universities, majors and social environments to design related social practice activities. Only in this way can we actually help students to deepen their understanding towards their academic knowledge, to enhance their social service awareness, to improve their comprehensive quality, and to finally help them meet with the needs of society.

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