

Service learning in health professions education for the 21st century

Patricia Kim Chooi Lim¹, Muneer Gohar Babar²

Service learning has moved from a recommendation to an accreditation standard in the health professions. Service learning is an important educational tool to develop students' knowledge and skills to make them useful citizens. Community development was considered to be the main goal of service-learning in the seventies.¹ In the nineties the trend in service-learning moved from the academic and non-academic role of service-learning to volunteerism.² In the new millennium the trend in service-learning has shifted again from mere volunteerism to a more comprehensive approach, that is, learning and development of the learner in the community setting.^{3,4} So what does service learning add to the student's and faculty's experiences and why should we be concerned with an additional level of academic complexity?

Service learning is a research based pedagogical strategy that engages youth in service to meet learning objectives and to address real-world issues.⁵ This teaching-learning strategy integrates meaningful community service with clear instruction and reflection to allow students to have different ways of learning. These include inter-professional learning where students are able to re-evaluate their personal values and build their connection and commitment with community, translational learning where students can practise academic material outside the classroom, cognitive development particularly critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they deal with complex problems in a community-based environment, transformation within the students in the way they think and look at things in a new direction and also, service learning which focusses on effective citizenship and behavioural issues which will help students better understand relevant social issues in their own community.^{1,6}

Although much of service learning has been focussed on what students learn, participating organizations and community partners also stand to gain from this activity as has been reported in some studies.^{7,8} A positive impact of service learning on these participating organizations and partners will be an increase in their networking with

others, thus leading to them accomplishing more and reaching out to more communities.

The 21st century health professions learner will benefit from service learning. What is important is for academic institutions to promote service learning as an integral and enriching aspect of student learning and universities should engage with larger communities to develop competencies in order to promote the advancement of a socially responsible citizenry. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has identified a collective vision for the 21st century and the five key elements identified encompasses traditional core subjects of the course, 21st century content which includes global awareness including health and wellness awareness; financial, economic and civic literacy; learning and thinking skills; information and communications technology (ICT) skills and life skills which include leadership, ethics and accountability.⁹ Through service learning, attributes such as values, ethics, professionalism and teamwork may be reinforced in students to help them develop into well balanced and caring professionals.

Service-learning programs must have some academic context and be designed in such a way that ensures that both the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service.⁶ There are several ways to integrate community engagement into existing courses and the various options to be considered include a one-time service project, a community-based component within the course, community service as an integrated aspect of coursework, action research projects whereby students participate in research within the community (beyond the confines of the semester), disciplinary capstone projects or multiple course projects which will encourage inter-professional learning.¹⁰ An important aspect of service learning is to have a mechanism to capture and document these learning experiences for the student as well as faculty. Technology holds the potential to transform both service-learning by freeing service-learning from geographical constraints, and by equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement. Specific technologies used in service-learning include

¹School of Medicine, International Medical University, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

²School of Dentistry, International Medical University, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Address for Correspondence:

Prof Patricia Lim, Pathology Department, School of Medicine, International Medical University, 126, Jalan Jalil Perkasa 19, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Email: kimchooi_lim@imu.edu.my

synchronous tools e.g., videoconferencing, eLearning portal, virtual classrooms, mobile based texting tools. Asynchronous tools include e-mail, online discussion boards, drop boxes, online drive, video production and mobile apps.¹¹

Health professions education in the 21st century will need to embody this vision that service learning is an integral part of the education to develop students who are able to see issues through the eyes of others, be able to integrate and think critically to meet challenges of an interconnected world as well as grow as individuals and become useful citizens.

Keywords: Health professions education, service learning, 21st century learning

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