Original Paper

Incorporating a Practicum in TESOL Methodology Courses to Promote Service Learning

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Abstract

This study examined student attitudes toward teaching from their practicum experience and how their experiences met the requirements of service learning, which is defined as a curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities. Service learning also provides opportunities for students to interact directly with the local community. In this study, 27 students who enrolled in an English Teaching Methodology course participated in a 12-week project in which they taught beginning and intermediate English to elementary school students as part of an afterschool program. A survey was conducted at the end of the semester and student teaching reflections were collected for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results of the study indicated that the students had a favorable experience regarding the practicum requirement in the English Teaching Methodology course. Among the students, 85% (n=23) expressed that a practical teaching experience should be part of the curriculum and that a requirement of 3–4 hr of teaching is appropriate for a hands-on teaching experience. The paper ends with a discussion of methods for including a practicum requirement in the syllabus and what instructors should focus on when establishing service learning projects.

Keywords

curriculum, practicum, service learning

1. Introduction

In Taiwan, a teaching methodology course is a required or elective course in most Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs. The primary goals of the course are to provide students with basic concepts in language teaching, encourage them to reflect on their own beliefs on language teaching, and help them develop their own approach to language teaching. This can be achieved through various activities such as lectures, group discussions, personal reflections, watching movies, and tests. However, most teaching methodology courses involve teacher-centered instruction using textbook materials and discussions, and a practicum is typically not required as part of the

curriculum. Instead, many teachers have students perform an in-class teaching demonstration once or twice per semester. However, a practicum differs from a teaching demonstration, in which students from the class hold a lesson for other classmates. Consequently, some students go through a TESOL program without gaining any real teaching experience. A practicum requires student teachers to teach several lessons in an authentic setting, thereby providing students the necessary skills to teach in a real classroom. Service learning is the combination of course materials and experiential learning, involving both the curriculum and the community.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 What Is Service Learning?

Service learning is curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities (Spring, Grimm Jr., & Dietz, 2008). Service learning is organized around an academic course or curriculum that provides opportunities for students to interact directly with local agencies to effect change in the community (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010). Key elements to consider when implementing service learning projects are aligning the goals of the course with the goals of community partners and creating activities that foster student reflection and self-evaluation (Berman, 2006). Service learning can be mandatory or voluntary, and can involve service activities that occur outside of or within schools (Spring, Grimm Jr., & Dietz, 2008).

Previous studies have reported positive effects of service learning experiences. Astin et al. (2000) observed that students involved in voluntary community services exhibited enhanced overall academic performance, increased self-efficacy, the ability to assume leadership roles, and defined career choices toward service-oriented fields. In a more recent study, Colby et al. (2009) observed that students gained an in-depth understanding of themselves and their community through community service and service learning. Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher (2010) also indicated that service learning contributes to an enhanced learning climate, motivation, civic skills, problem solving, and an appreciation of diversity over the course of a semester. Other studies have concluded that service learning helps students develop valuable professional skills (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003; Lu & Lambright, 2010).

2.2 Factors Affecting Service Learning

A recent study by Lu and Lambright (2010) reported several factors that influence service learning effectiveness, including (a) the amount of in-class reflection time, (b) the level of student influence over a project, (c) the level of contact with service beneficiaries, (d) involvement in group activities, and (e) involvement with concurrent service learning projects. The reflection process is a vital part of the service learning process (Eyler, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Instructors in service learning play key roles in providing reflection opportunities to allow students to facilitate their values and goals and to reinforce their professional skills. The amount of time students spend outside the classroom working on service learning is another crucial factor because service learning can be time intensive for both faculty and students (Banerjee & Hausafus 2007; Kendrick 1996). Certain students might benefit less if they

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feel "burned out" because of the labor- and time-intensive characteristics of service learning; however, spending more time outside the classroom appears to provide students with greater opportunities to develop their professional skills (Lu & Lambright, 2010). Projects in which students exhibit leadership and influence are also effective because the experience is meaningful to them (Morgan & Streb, 2001). Lu and Lambright (2010) also posited that students who work on service learning projects with other students might benefit more than students who work alone. The groups that worked more like teams perceived that service learning was more helpful in improving their professional skills than it was for students in less cohesive groups. Finally, factors such as volunteer activities and work experience are crucial in determining service learning outcomes because previous experiences might make students comfortable with service learning.

2.3 Purpose of Study

We examined student attitudes toward teaching regarding their practicum experience and how their experiences met service learning requirements. The following research questions were posed:

(a) What are the attitudes of students toward the practicum requirement in teaching methodology courses?

(b) How can a teaching practicum in a teaching methodology course contribute to service learning?

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The study participants were students enrolled in the spring semester of an English-teaching methodology course. Among the 29 students in the class, 27 (6 male and 23 female) participated in the study (the other two were unable to participate because of a scheduling conflict with their other classes). Most of the participants were from the Department of English (n=16), whereas the others were from the Department of German (n=9), the Department of French (n=3), and the Department of Japanese (n=1). The study participants taught English to 51 elementary students as an afterschool program. The elementary students were divided into three sections and four groups. The first section was the storytelling group for advanced students exhibiting higher English proficiency (n=6). The second section was for intermediate students in Grades 4 to 6 (n=15). The third section was for beginning level students in Grades 1 to 4 (n=30), divided into two classes of 15 students each. The students in the first and second section met on Mondays, whereas the students in the third section met on Thursdays.

3.2 Instrument Identification

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester to determine student attitudes regarding their experiences in the teaching practicum. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding demographic information, such as age and the student's major. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding the student's practicum experience. This included questions on whether they thought the teaching experience was practical and rewarding, how many hours of teaching practicum should be required, whether they would consider teaching English in the

future, and whether the teaching practicum should be a requirement in the Teaching Methodology course. The final part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding the usefulness of the topics covered in class during the semester and how well the course prepared students for the teaching practicum. Each question used a 6-point Likert scale where by a rating of 1 indicated *least useful*, and a rating of 6 indicated *most useful*.

Participant reflection journals were also collected at the end of the semester. This assignment was to be conducted after the participants completed at least 3 hr of teaching, and the participants were instructed to answer the following questions:

(a)   What were the level students that you taught?

(b)   What were some of the things that you thought you did well?

(c)   What were some of the things that you thought were difficult?

(d)   What are some of the things you have learned as a teacher in the classroom from this experience?

3.3 Procedure

The teaching practicum was a requirement during the second semester of the English Teaching Methodology course. A 12-week arrangement was made with a local elementary school to provide English classes as part of an after-school program. During the semester, the participants attended regular classes with lectures, discussions, and activities that covered the course content during class time. For their practicum, the students worked in groups of two to three and signed up for teaching slots for the various sections in which they wanted to teach. The minimum requirement for the teaching practicum was 3hr of teaching, to allow sufficient time for the participants to finish a unit of study. Students who had more time or desired more experience could sign up for additional time slots after everyone had signed up for an initial 3 hr.

Throughout the semester, the participants traveled to the elementary school and taught the classes for which they had signed up. Participants in the storytelling group had to go to the school library and find books they wanted to present and read to the students. Participants in the intermediate and elementary level had to prepare teaching materials such as flash cards, worksheets, and PowerPoint presentations for one of the four units: All About Me (self-introduction), Numbers, Body Parts, and Colors and Shapes. During their lesson, the participants taught and conducted activities they had planned. The researcher acted as an observer in the classroom, only intervened when necessary, and presented general comments during regular class time.

3.4 Analysis

In this study, the 2 items identified in the instrument section were analyzed to determine student attitudes toward the practicum. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice and categorical questions, in which the percentage of each choice was calculated. For the reflective journals, a qualitative analysis was performed, with a particular focus on student attitudes toward the teaching experience.

4. Results

The result of this study was based on the information obtained on the questionnaire the participants completed at the end of the semester and from the reflective journals. The students taught a total of 124 hr, which included a story telling class, an intermediate class, and two beginner classes.

4.1 Student Attitudes toward Their Teaching Experience

Nearly all of the students indicated a positive or favorable attitude toward their experience of teaching elementary school students. Of the participants, 97% (n=26) felt their teaching experience was practical and rewarding. Only 3% (n=1) felt their teaching experience was not rewarding. Most of the students (54%, n=14) also felt that requiring 3–4 hr of practical teaching was sufficient for the course, whereas 19% (n=5) felt that 1–2 hr was sufficient. Several students (15%, n=4) had hoped to have 5–6 hr of teaching, and others (12%, n=3) had hoped for 7 hr or more. The results indicated that most students felt positive regarding spending extra time beyond their schoolwork teaching English to elementary students. As a result of their teaching experience, 30% (n=8) of the students indicated they would consider teaching English in the future. Only 4% (n=1) indicated they would not consider teaching English in the future. According to the questionnaire responses, most of the students (85%, n=23) felt the practical teaching experience should be part of the English Teaching Methodology course, whereas only 15% (n=4) indicated that practical teaching should not be part of the course.

4.2 Student Attitudes toward Their Training

Most students thought they had received adequate training before teaching their classes to the elementary school students. The questionnaire results revealed that 85% (n=23) agreed or somewhat agreed that they were provided sufficient knowledge and training before teaching, whereas 15% (n=4) either disagreed or somewhat disagreed. The type of training the students received primarily consisted of lecture and discussion on various teaching topics. Table 1 summarizes student views of the topics covered in class. The results revealed a favorable attitude toward the topics covered in the class lectures, and that those lecture topics and discussions facilitated students in preparing to become teachers.

Table 1. Student responses about the topics covered in class

Topics Presented in Class	N	Mean	SD
Differences between L1 and L2	27	4.59	0.75
Learner characteristics	27	5.11	0.80
What is motivation	27	4.96	0.94
Presentation techniques	27	4.93	0.87
Assessment types and tasks	27	4.93	0.78
Teacher Roles	27	5.19	0.88
Grouping Students	27	5.15	0.77
Selection and use of Coursebook	27	4.81	1.00
Designing lesson plans	27	5.00	0.92

4.3 Result of Student Reflections

Most of the student reflections indicated a favorable experience in teaching. Some of the comments

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included that the elementary students were "cute" and "naïve." However, the primary concern of most of the students was their ability to control and manage the classroom. Most indicated that certain elementary students were too loud and disruptive during the lessons and that some of them were unwilling to participate in the activities and games. Other challenges included motivating the elementary students to learn. However, most of the students indicated that their teaching experience enabled them to overcome their nervousness when standing in front of the students and organize and prepare for classes, and that managing a classroom might not be as easy as it seems.

5. Discussion

Students expressed a favorable experience regarding the practicum requirement in the English Teaching Methodology course. Among the study participants, 97% felt that the practicum experience was practical and rewarding, and that it successfully enabled them to apply the knowledge learned in classroom instruction to an authentic teaching situation, thereby meeting the definition and requirements for service learning. Students who identify the connection between classroom instruction and real world application value their learning and are therefore motivated to learn.

A requirement such as a teaching practicum can be used as a learning motivational tool when the participants observe how the things they learn in the classroom can be applied and used in the real world. Among the participants, 85% thought they received sufficient knowledge and training before their practicum teaching. This shows the importance of course organization and textbook selection for a course such as teaching methodology, because activities must help the students understand and prepare for teaching, not just fulfill academic requirements. Requiring a teaching practicum as an aspect of service learning allows participants to gain a sense of what it is like to be a teacher so that they can decide whether this is the field they wish to pursue. Regarding the teaching practicum experience, 30% of the participants indicated they would be interested in considering teaching English in the future. The teaching practicum experience also allowed the participants to become involved with people in their community, which is a crucial aspect of service learning.

The results of the study showed that 15% of the participants felt they did not have sufficient knowledge and training before the teaching practicum and that the practicum should not be part of the course. One explanation for this could be that these students had a negative experience in their practicum. Several participants indicated in their reflections that certain elementary students were difficult to control during the lessons and that some of the students refused to participate in the activities and games. Such situations can negatively affect the morale and confidence of the student teacher, resulting in a negative experience. This also explains why 19% of the participants thought that 1-2 hr of teaching was sufficient because a participant might be less willing to attempt to teach after negative teaching experiences. Therefore, course instructors must offer appropriate advice and guidance to these participants.

To ensure a positive service learning experience, the practicum must be carefully planned and

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organized. First, if the practicum is a course requirement, it must not be so demanding that it is viewed as a burden. Too much time required from the students can cause negative effects, such as a decrease in academic performance. Our study results revealed that 54% of the participants indicated that 3-4 hr of teaching practicum was appropriate, whereas another 27% indicated that a requirement of 5 hr or more of teaching was appropriate. Only 19% felt that 1-2 hr of teaching practicum was sufficient. The results strongly indicated that most students would accept a practicum requirement of approximately 4-5 hr. A teaching requirement of 4-5 hr is optimal because it is sufficient for a teacher to teach a unit in a course book, and allows the participants to have coherence and variety in teaching. Although Lu and Lambright (2010) observed that students who spend a greater amount of time in service learning gain greater benefits, instructors must be flexible in their planning to avoid student "burn-out" or resentment resulting from their compulsory experience.

5.1 How to Include Practicum Experiences in Service Learning

The practicum can be arranged such that students teach while they are enrolled in the teaching methodology course or as a separate course or requirement that students must fulfill after they have taken the teaching methodology course. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of arranging the practicum as part of the course requirement (as in this study) is that student experiences can be intriguing class discussions. When students share their experiences, the reflection process is a primary aspect of service learning. Both the students and the audience can learn from these reflections. In addition, if time allows, teachers can plan in-class teaching demonstrations to offer comments and advice to students before they go out and teach in the practicum. This allows the students to see where their teaching is effective and where they can improve. Problems that can be prevented beforehand are problems that consistently occur during actual teaching. The disadvantage of teaching a practicum while the students are still taking the methodology course is that certain students (particularly for those who teach early in the semester) might not have adequate background knowledge of how to teach. This can result in lower teaching quality provided by the student teachers, which might also affect the overall impression of the students. If the practicum is arranged after the students have finished taking the teaching methodology course, the advantage is that the students are able to develop background knowledge of teaching strategies and classroom management before they start teaching. This is particularly helpful for students who lack teaching experience. The disadvantage is that they lose the opportunity to share their experiences with their classmates and teachers. However, this can be compensated for by having students record their reflections and submit them as assignments.

Teachers arranging a practicum for their students should be cautious when negotiating the teaching terms with potential schools or agencies. First, we recommend that the student-teacher ratio not be too large. Students in a classroom differ from preservice teachers; they do not have the same amount of background knowledge and preparation. An appropriate student-teacher ratio is 5-to-1. Classes with a large number of students should include additional teachers to act as teaching assistants and help with classroom management or share the teaching load. This also benefits the students because they could

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also have more individual attention. When negotiating the teaching terms, the length of the teaching time should be based on the number of classes. Arranging teaching schedules lasting 12 weeks or more for a small number of classroom students might constitute a major time commitment for the students. Service learning differs from preservice teacher training because students in the class are often enrolled in other courses and must complete other assignments and sit exams. If fulfilling the practicum requirements becomes a burden, the responses and willingness to participate decreases. We observed that most students were satisfied with 3-4 hr of teaching, which is an optimal target number. Teachers can plan and provide options for those willing and eager to teach additional hours, but additional teaching hours should not be mandatory.

5.2 Other Forms of Practicum Experiences that Fulfill Service Learning

When arranging a teaching practicum with local schools or agencies is not possible, students can obtain practicum experiences through various other means. Students can be tutors, thereby providing them flexibility of time and subjects to teach. They can tutor elementary students, middle school, high school, or even adult students. Tutoring might be a great opportunity to gain teaching experience because tutors do not need to be concerned about classroom management. When they become confident teachers, teaching in a large classroom will not be a difficult challenge for them in the future.

5.3 Conclusion

In their reflections, many of the students thanked the instructor of the English Teaching Methodology course for arranging the practicum teaching. The students did not find service learning to be challenging because they were able to apply what they learned in class to actual practice, which was a great change from their everyday classroom study and a novel learning approach.

5.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this study were based on a small number of participants because of the limited number of students registered for the Teaching Methodology course at the time of the study. We recommend that future research include a larger number of students by surveying other institutions with a practicum requirement in their program, or by conducting a longitudinal study of a single course.

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