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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH – A CASE OF INTEGRATING CURRICULUM WITH COMMUNITY SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

Students' power and immense energy needs to be harnessed. At the same time faculty's potential and creativity need to be harnessed. There are gaps between students' expectations and what educational institutions are providing. Also there is a wide gap between what the business world demands and how students turn out during their studies in educational institutions. All over the world educational institutions are facing this challenge of bridging these gaps and also to enhance the quality of education. When a balance is striked between harnessing the potential of faculty and students, teaching- learning process will be effective. Experiential learning is one of the teaching methodologies where learning is imbibed through experiences. Experiences result in powerful learning which will last for a long time throughout the life. This paper is a case study of an initiative taken up by students and uncovers the learnings of students through experiences. The major finding of the study is that experiential learning and community service should be included in the teaching methodology and curriculum which positively transforms the personalities of the students and brings about attitudinal and behavioral change. Incorporating experiential learning methodology and community service in the existing subjects can bridge many gaps in the educational institutions.

KEYWORDS

engagement, experiential learning, community service.

INTRODUCTION

All the stake holders in the education industry are experiencing many gaps as there is mismatch between what is offered and what is expected. The requirements and expectations of the present generation and other stakeholders in the education industry have unrecognizably altered. There is significant change in the way the curriculums, courses and programs are getting redesigned to make them more socially relevant. There is a shift in the mechanism of course delivery. Teaching fraternity is now more open to experiment teaching methods that will work better with students and also leave behind long lasting learning experience for students. They are moving away from passive teaching methods to more learner centric methods like experiential learning. This paper focuses on how experiential learning can be an effective tool to create engagement and empowerment among students for holistic growth by incorporating community service in the existing subjects.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dahan and Senol (2012) observe CSR as a highly preferred strategy by higher educational institutions for gaining competitive advantage and for building reputation. The paper analyzes the various socially responsible acts of Instanbul Bilgi University and concludes that internalization of CSR acts is important in earning success in terms of good reputation and strong competitive advantage. This requires internalizing with the mission, core values and activities of the University. Motivation and willingness of staff and as well of management is important for supporting and implementing social responsibility actions.

Gupte and Jadhav (2014) Authors observe that higher educational universities have to cater to both traditional and entrepreneurial role without limiting the purpose. The paper observes that how lending hand by corporates through their CSR activities which are now mandated by The Companies Act, 2013, can also make education more relevant and qualitative.

Zivkovic (2013) talks about the characteristics of a developmental university in general. It illustrates the example of American University of Nigeria (AUN), which can be termed as a developmental university mainly because it positions itself to benefit its local community. Students undertake research and draft a strategic plan for the local community.

Uyarra (2010) recognizes five models for University taking into account their parts, determinants and method of engagement. They include Knowledge factory, Relational University, Entrepreneurial University, Systemic University and Engaged University.

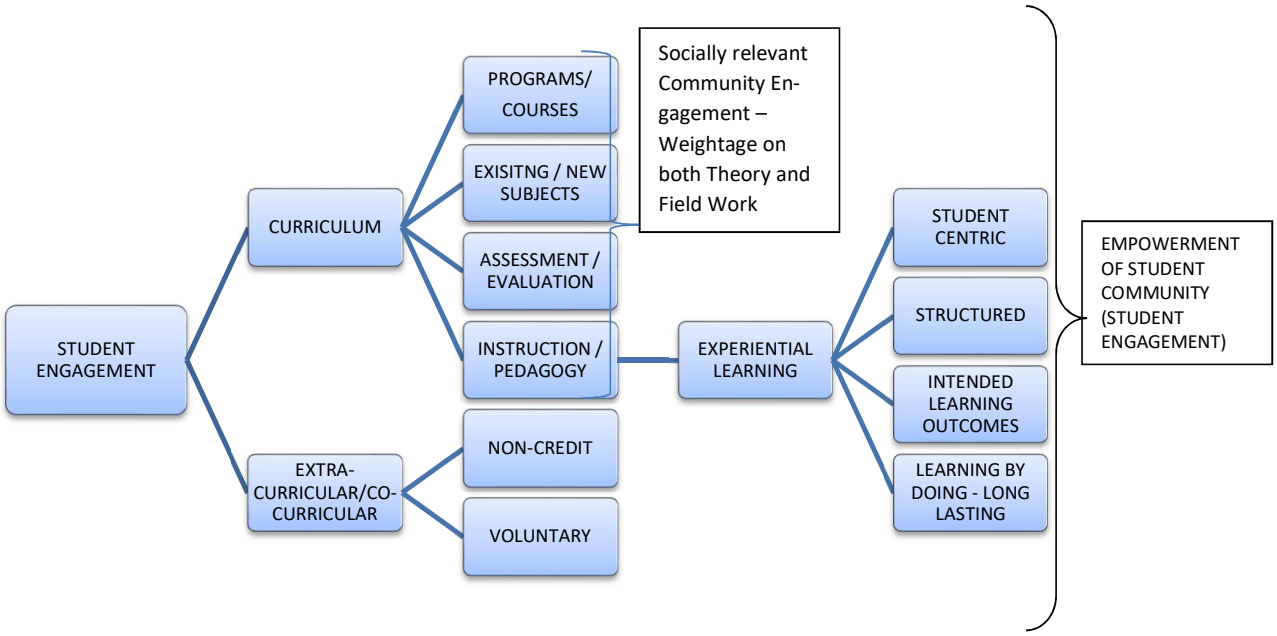
Gentry (1990) delineates several criteria which can be used to evaluate whether a particular teaching methodology can be classified as facilitating experiential learning. Internships, live cases are categorized as experiential learning as against computer assisted instruction.

The "Report to the Nation 2006" of the National Knowledge Commission which says that there is "a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep", and that it has to do with both the quantity and the quality of higher education in India. A recent government report finds two-thirds of India's colleges and universities below standard. India's highest-quality institutions have severely limited capacity. Besides its quantitative limitations and qualitative deficits, Indian higher education is also considered to be not properly organized and significantly overregulated.

The earlier studies have addressed the issue of experiential learning and Community engagement projects from the perspective of holistic development of students. They have also identified the importance of experiential learning in to add more value to education per se. However, the studies have not brought the importance of experiential learning through community engagement in the existing subject which is very essential in preparing students for the future world.

Educational institutions to be more socially relevant have to explore deeper dimensions of their prime functions of teaching and research. This exploration will throw open various opportunities to build competencies required for the future among the student community. Identifying social problems and finding solutions for the same will develop deeper understanding of the subjects that students are studying. Experiential learning is the key that can lead to greater and lasting impact on students. It bridges the gap between theory and practice. Based on the learnings the authors have designed a conceptual framework for the study (See Figure 1) which outlines key elements of student engagement.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT LEADING TO EMPOWERMENT OF STUDENT COMMUNITY



As shown in Figure 1, Student Engagement can happen both through Curriculum and as well through Extra-Curricular and Co-curricular activities. Programs/Courses, the subject students study, how it is taught and how the subject is evaluated are all important. In the subjects that students are studying if method of instruction/pedagogical approach is more active in nature, then the way concepts can be understood can realistic. Any subject can come to life when pedagogical approach like experiential learning is adopted. Experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice and results in achieving intended and structured outcomes which are long lasting. Being student centric approach it results in positive student engagement and empowerment.

THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT

In the beginning of the September 2014, Masters of Commerce (Financial Analysis) - Post-Graduate I semester students were asked come up with a community project which they will implement during the semester. In the process of taking up the community project they should apply the management concepts. They had Management Theory and Practice as a subject in their course. Inspired by the parameters of Enactus Projects (http://enactus.org) students were asked to initiate the project. This was a conscious attempt to integrate community service in the existing subject of Management Theory and Practice through experiential pedagogy.

FIGURE 2: COMPONENTS LEADING TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

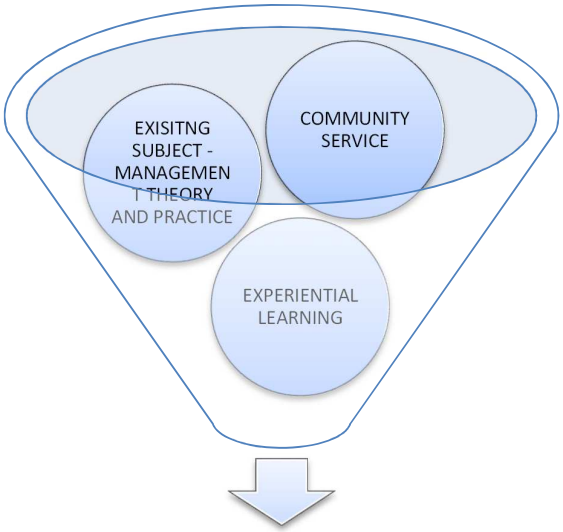


Figure 2 showcases the crux of the experiment of the present case.

The following parameters were given to them to come up with the project:

- The team had look at making economic, social and environmental impact through the project. (Inspired by Enactus)
- They had to apply the concepts the management in every step from project planning to implementation.
- They had to work on ideation to implementation during the concerned semester only.

Students were struggling to come up with the project idea. On the suggestions of the faculty they started hunting nearby NGOs, as they had to work with the communities and empower them and make difference to them and leave behind a social, economic and environmental impact. They started with the NGOs they knew and then listed out various NGOs with whom they could work with. Authors had suggested to look for NGOs in the neighborhood. They dabbled with working with various NGOs in Bangalore like NeleFoundation, Make A Difference (MAD), Parikrama, Karuna Trust and Akkamahadevi Trust. After contemplating various

possibilities, feasibility, they chose Karuna Trust mainly for the reason of it being proximate to the college. Karuna Trust works with Vivekananda Vidyalaya at Biligiri Rangana hills (popularly known as BR Hills) on various projects for the upliftment of the tribal community. BR Hills is around 176 kms distance from Bangalore, Karnataka.

Students were asked to identify the needs of the community and try and fulfill on that rather than going to the community with what they have. With this insight when students asked Karuna Trust as to what they could do w.r.t. their academic project, the Trust gave couple options of community need and also something which our students could do.

Our students had to give career counselling sessions for students studying in 10th standard. Students divided the work amongst themselves. They found out about various courses in science, arts, animation, commerce, diplomas and other vocational courses. They gave complete details about various options available to them with course structure, fees and educational institutes as well. They also spoke to few career counselors and also found out about career counselling institutes. They were hoping if they could get some professional counsellors to give sessions at BR hills it will be even better. However even after concessions it was difficult to work out the finance part as counsellors charged per student. Then the team with the faculty decided to give general career counselling session to the students. Students went to BR Hills on 16th and 17th February, 2015 and have successfully completed giving the career counselling session. They also generally spoke about life skills and conducted some fun events and games. Their sessions were very well received and appreciated by both teachers and students at BR Hills. The team was asked to come back again to give further sessions.

CHALLENGES

Though the team seemed to be enthusiastic in the beginning, it seemed to be too much of work for them. The team had a lot of challenges in terms completing assignments and other project by deadlines, writing their tests, preparatory exams and sometimes some concerns from home front seemed to be a priority. They had to identify community to make a difference which was again challenging for them.

Team dynamics kept on changing from time to time, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Negative factors kept disrupting the flow of the work. Reporting, documentation, follow up through weekly meetings sometimes seemed tiresome for the team. Language issues kept erupting in the team quite often and they also faced language barrier whenever they visited the NGOs or even at the time of final implementation with the community.

Also since they had to identify every phase of the project with the subject and concepts of Management Theory and Practice, it made them think, there were no readymade answers. Constant follow up experience for the concerned faculty was sometimes demotivating. Administrative support became a challenge in the last phase of project implementation. There were some lapses in the planning the implementation of the project.

Though students did not mind spending out of their pockets to travel to BR Hills, it was not enterprising enough for the faculty. Due some lapses in planning and implementation, the faculty could not accompany the students to BR Hills which was demoralizing for the students. Students also had to request their parents to accompany them as parents of girls were concerned that they were travelling a far off place.

Students also experienced shortage of time, pressure, conflicts, communication gap with Karuna Trust and within the team. They also experienced the gaps with community as community had no enough exposure to counselling.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

During the debrief/reflection sessions that was conducted by the faculty, students said that they learnt various concepts of management like, planning, decision making, organizing, team work, team dynamics, coordination, leadership, conflict resolution, implementation of a project in reality**.** Students themselves learnt about many new courses. They experienced a definite impact on themselves because of this project. As everyone contributed to the project, they experienced a sense of ownership. However out of the three parameters given to them (social, economic and environmental), they realized that they could only make a social impact by creating awareness among the students.

Another best part of the project is that they also saw the need to create succession planning, as they were asked to come back again on later. Faculty realized that though constant follow up, motivating talks and being resigned and cynical come in the way of the original objectives or possibilities, never say die attitude and persistence pays.

OUTCOMES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

For Experiential learning process to be effective it should result in the following outcomes:

Applied: This outreach project brought in the expected educational outcomes where students were able to apply the concepts of management into the entire process.

Participative*:* Students actively involved in identifying and analyzing the problem, make decisions. They also evaluated the outcomes of their decisions.

Interactive: Students had interactions among themselves, their faculty, the NGO and with the community.

Whole-person emphasis*:* In the process of project implementation students learnt people skills, technical skills, both cognitive and non-cognitive and interpersonal skills.

Contact with the Environment: Students experiences and learning resulted from through interaction with one's environment.

A Powerful Insight

"Everything has its own barriers, be it inside the group or with the community as different dynamics work at different points in time."

SUGGESTIONS

Community Projects have to be an integral part of learning of different subjects. Such projects should be planned in advance and should be powerfully incorporated in the academic schedule. Many times, students had this concern which kept cropping up from time to time, as to **'what is in it for them?'** This question was more to do with how so much of what they are doing will get reflected and translated into marks which is what is there for everyone to see at end of the day. Apart from Experiential Learning which the team knew was adding a lot of value, something more than that had to be created in terms of credits.

Faculty powerfully integrated application of knowledge from classroom on the project through internal assessment marks. However, it not being part of course matrix students sometimes wondered if they should really do it. Students deserve much more recognition and appreciation for their good work. It matters how the team is looked up to for further contribution. Funding for the project was another issue. The team spent on gathering information, visiting NGOs, travelling to BR Hills but the team did not create any enterprising activity to raise funds. Procedural delays in granting the permission, in granting the money will encourage teams working on the projects. To keep the team together it was important to create regular and structured meetings for the students. A dedicated faculty for outreach projects who creates objectives and targets and is accountable to fulfill on the same is necessary.

Connecting outreach projects with Research is another important thing that could be done to achieve greater results. Focus of educational institutes should be to engage the entire student community compulsorily in these outreach projects can actually help in avoiding youth in not getting into a lot of anti-social activities and they can actually utilize their time and immense energies more powerfully.

CONCLUSION – A REFLECTION

Sustainability and scalability of the projects became indispensable part of any project apart from the economic, social and environmental impact the projects can have. The team started inculcating the values of honesty, integrity and started learning the fundamentals of business ethics at an experiential level. They applied classroom learning of management theory and practice in reality

The students' experience will not only transform their perspective, it also helps students develop the kind of talent and build competencies that are essential to prepare them in an ever changing complex, volatile, uncertain and ambiguous world. Students will become more enterprising and confident. They will develop

communication skills and other life skills which are required for building a 'whole person'. Outreach projects based on community brings a satisfaction of having made a difference.

In this case, there was an attempt to integrate Community Service with Curriculum. This gives rise to the concept of Service Learning. Experiential learning pedagogy is an integral part of service learning.

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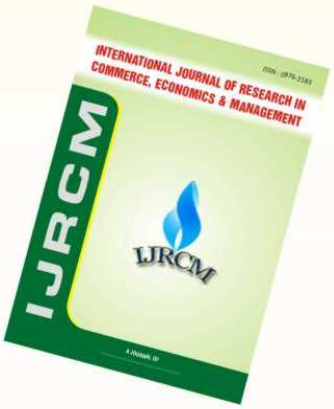
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