

Undergraduates' Development of Interpersonal and Cooperative Competence in Service-Learning

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Abstract : The present study was set out to investigate the extent to which and how service-learning fostered a sample of 138 Hong Kong undergraduates' interpersonal competence and cooperative orientation development. Interpersonal competence is presented when an individual shows empathy with others, provides intelligent advice to others and has practical judgment. Cooperative orientation reflects individuals' willingness to work with others to achieve common goals. A quality service-learning programme may exhibit the features of provision of meaningful service, close link to curriculum, continuous reflection, youth voice, and diversity. Mixed methods were employed in the present study. Pre-posttest survey was administered to capture individual undergraduates' development of interpersonal competence and cooperative orientation over a period of four months. The respondents' evaluation of service-learning elements was administered in the post-test survey. Focus groups were conducted after the end of the service-learning to further explore how the certain service-learning elements promoted individual undergraduates' development of interpersonal competence and cooperative orientation. Three main findings were reported from the study. (1) The scores of interpersonal competence increased significantly from the pretest to the posttest, while the change of cooperative orientation was not significant. (2) Cooperative orientation and interpersonal competence were correlated positively with the overall course quality respectively, which suggested that the more a service-learning course complied with quality practice, the students became more competent in interpersonal competence and cooperative orientation. (3) The following service-learning elements showed higher impacts: (a) direct contact with service recipients, which engaged students in practicing interpersonal skills; (b) individual participants' being exposed to a situation that required communication and dialogue with people from diverse backgrounds with different views; (c) experiencing interpersonal conflicts among team members and having the conflicts solved; (d) students' taking a leading role in a project-based service. The present study provides compelling evidence about what elements in a service-learning program may foster undergraduates' development of cooperative orientation and interpersonal competence. Implications for the design of service-learning programmes are provided.

Keywords : undergraduates, interpersonal competence, cooperation orientation, service-learning

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