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Effectiveness of a Service Learning Model with Allied Health Assistant Students in Aged Care

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Abstract

This mixed methods audit explores the impact of a student learning activity involving service learning. As part of a vocational course in the Academy of Health Sciences at the West Coast Institute, Allied Health Assistant (AHA) students participated in a service learning program focused on work-based learning in residential aged care. Students delivered a therapy program for residents at the facility. Students completed validated evaluation questionnaires on conclusion of study. Of 121 students completing the audit, 91% thought the experience challenged their way of thinking. Only 2% disagreed with this concept. A majority of students (93%) reported the experience interesting and engaging and a similar percentage (93%) reported that they felt better prepared to enter the workforce. The major themes in qualitative analysis related to the positive learning experience, increased confidence for future working career, improved knowledge and practice of aged care, and improved resident and student quality of life.

Keywords:

Service learning, training, students, aged care; dementia; partnerships

Introduction

The proportion of the Australian population aged over 65 years is increasing, creating increased demand for aged and community health services and a corresponding workforce of health care professionals to deliver care in these settings (Productivity Commission 2011a; 2011b). The community and residential aged care sector has experienced considerable reform, and training must respond to the shifting environment.

Over 65% of the residential aged care workforce are employed as personal care workers. A further 5% are employed in allied health professional/assistant roles. This means the vocational education training (VET) sector plays an important role in training staff for the aged care industry (King et al, 2013; Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2013).

Partnering by the vocational sector with aged care providers could create opportunities for training that is flexible, authentic, innovative and involves residents as co-partners in learning experiences. Universities have frequently taken advantage of training partnerships. One University and community partnership called 'Beyond the Teaching Nursing Home: Community Partnership of Learning and Care' (BTTNH: CPLC) (<http://www.uwa.edu.au/bttnh>) was established within a residential aged care complex made up of two aged care hostels and a group of independent living units accommodating over 100 residents aged from 63 to 91 years in the northern metropolitan region of Perth, Australia. Unused nursing home space within the residential aged care community was reconfigured to create a simulated learning environment (SLE) providing opportunities for health professional students from the university and VET sector to engage in learning activities with residents. A report on program outcomes documented that the integration of University based learning within a community aged care setting provided

learning opportunities for health professional students, including progression of communication and professional role skills, better understanding of the aged care environment and positive attitudes towards ageing and advocacy (Saunders et al, 2015). Other University student programs in the aged sector have reported similar benefits (Brand et al, 2015; Seaman et al, 2014).

However, there have been no evaluations of whether this model of care would provide benefit within the Australian VET sector. This paper audits a prospective three year evaluation of students studying the Certificate III in Allied Health Assistance course, who participated in learning activities as part of the Beyond the Teaching Nursing Home: Community Partnership of Learning and Care program. The VET program aimed to combine elements of both service and workplace-based learning into an aged care environment using a community partnership.

Methods

Type of study and ethics approval

This mixed methods study was a prospective audit of outcomes of a service and workplace-based learning project incorporated within the Certificate III in Allied Health Assistance course at the West Coast Institute. The project fulfilled the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia guidelines as a quality assurance and audit project.

Study population

The study population was students enrolled in the Certificate III in Allied Health Assistance course. The course is offered in a one semester program at the West Coast Institute. The initial 15 weeks comprise classroom learning and then all students participate in a three week clinical placement. The two units (CHCAC318B Work effectively with older people & CHCAC319A Provide support to people living with dementia) were traditionally delivered in the classroom through presentations, class discussions and simulation. The choice to include these two aged care electives in the program was made as there was an industry identified need for qualified allied health assistants in the aged care sector.

In 2013, students joined the 'Beyond the Teaching Nursing home: Community Partnership of Learning and Care' program for the aged care component of their course.

The program aim was to challenge some of the students' preconceived attitudes and beliefs of older people by working within the aged care sector. Students may have had limited prior contact and knowledge of this industry. The improved access to online learning being rolled out at WCI allowed a flipped classroom approach with students doing most of their learning at home

through online modules, then coming to the aged care campus for the workshops to put knowledge into practice.

Due to the high number of students completing the course, it was decided to divide them into two groups to allow more access to residents in the therapy groups. One group attended the aged care facility while the other group worked at home on online study modules. Hence each group attended the aged care facility a total of five occasions over a ten week timeframe. This allowed students to slowly build rapport and confidence with the older clients.

Program of learning

Prior to attending the onsite learning students completed the online theory component of the two units of competency and an online organisation specific orientation. <http://www.meddent.uwa.edu.au/community/bethanie/student>. Students then participated in learning activities at the aged care organisation, interacting with residents and staff, and delivering activities applying knowledge to practice.

Specific learning activities commenced with students practicing skills in the simulated learning environment with peers each morning. Students then delivered onsite therapy in the afternoon. The therapy program was developed by the students, in consultation with facility staff, residents and facilitators. Group activities included individual hand massages and social conversations, large group cognitive activities including quizzes and crosswords, and small group reminiscence and table games. Every session concluded with a shared afternoon tea. After the residents returned to their rooms, students debriefed with the facilitator to discuss individual and group learning outcomes.

Evaluation tools

As a part of an evaluation of the learning activity, all students were invited to complete unit evaluation questionnaires at the conclusion of the units. The evaluation questionnaire had both quantitative and qualitative components. The evaluation was conducted as part of routine educational evaluation and approved by the VET discipline committee.

Hypothesis

The primary hypothesis was that service learning activities would challenge student's way of thinking about older clients, some living with dementia. The secondary hypothesis was that service learning would improve student confidence in their ability to enter the future aged care workforce.

Variables to be measured and examined:

The evaluation questionnaire included qualitative and quantitative components.

Given the hypothesis was that service learning activities would challenge students' way of thinking about aged care clients, students were asked three specific questions and requested to rate their answers as strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree and strongly agree. The three key questions were that the experience:

- Challenged my way of thinking
- Was interesting and engaging
- Made me better prepared to work in the future

Statistical analysis

Data was entered onto a data sheet using Minitab® (version 16, University of Melbourne). A descriptive analysis was used for the quantitative data. For the qualitative data in the comments section of the questionnaire, an inductive content analysis was performed in accordance with methodology described by Elo and Kyngäs (Elo, Kyngas, 2008). The written comments were independently read by the principal researchers and an abstraction process used to summarize and conceptualize the overall meaning and implications of the comments. Open coding was performed to maximize the number of headings in order to describe all aspects of the content. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the data were integrated for data interpretation.

Results

Results were collected for all students enrolled in the units in 2013 to 2015. Of 144 students enrolled in the unit, 121 completed evaluation forms (84% response rate). The majority of participants were female (85%), and the mean age was 27 years (range 16 to 54 years). The majority of students were Australian residents; however 28% were overseas students.

Table 1 summarizes the responses to the three questions. Of 121 students completing the audit, 91% thought the experience challenged their way of thinking. Only 2% disagreed with this concept. A majority of students (93%) reported the experience interesting and engaging and a similar percentage (93%) reported that they felt better prepared to enter the workforce.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In qualitative analysis, 115 (95%) respondents wrote comments relating to their experience of service and workplace-based learning. Eleven themes emerged.

1. The experience was positive and enjoyable

Students reported that the experience of service learning was positive and enjoyable. Many expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed the activities. Students stated the experience was:

'Engaging and fun'

'Insightful and interesting'

'Having a cup of tea and a chat is always nice'

'It will always be a good memory of this course'

2. Provided confidence to take into a future working career

Students reported that the service learning had made them feel more confident about commencing their own careers in the wider workforce. It made them 'work ready' and reassured them they had the skills to be a useful clinician. Students stated:

'a positive experience particularly with clients which provided me with the confidence in myself and more enthusiasm'

'it has prepared me for the future'

'It is lovely that we are able to have real experience in handling real clients – this will definitely help me in the future'

'One of the best classes as it was hands on and got us ready for aged care and real life'

3. Provided insight into aged care and dementia

Many students commented that the service learning experiences gave them greater insight into an important area of future workforce need, and the focus on aged care was a positive step to encourage more students to consider a career in aged care. Students stated:

'very aged care focused'

'surprised how enjoyable aged care could be'

'I learnt strategies to use when I go into a career in nursing. I really loved this area and think it may be my future career'

4. Improved student knowledge

Student stated that the service learning activities both educated them and also reinforced didactic learning activities. They were able to translate words from textbooks and lectures into real life signs and symptoms. Students stated:

'I think it is imperative when learning to put theory into practice. Visiting (aged care site) we were able to incorporate what we had learned, exercise it with REAL CLIENTS and evaluate for further use'

'It supports people with dementia and I leaned about the symptoms and signs and how to support someone with dementia'

'It was vital to my understanding and learning'

'Nothing but practical experience! Hands on is how I learn best so really valued our sessions with the residents'

5. Provided an insight into a career in aged care

Some students were so enthusiastic about the experience they changed their thoughts about possible future career pathways and became more enthusiastic about a potential career in aged care. Students seemed surprised that aged care could be a fun, enjoyable and challenging career pathway. Students stated:

'this was a very positive way to experience aged care. The encouragement and positive behaviour has made me see this as a future career'

'learning about the different stages of dementia and how it affects people and others became real. I now feel better prepared to handle it. I was amazed how rewarding it felt when it came together'

6. Students with fears were pleasantly surprised

Some students who had negative attitudes reported the experience was transformational. Some reported the experience of service learning converted a dreaded activity into one of their most powerful learning events. Students stated:

'it was the unit I was most nervous about at the start of the course but I really ended up enjoying it and taking a lot out of it'

7. Students wanted to encourage more residents to participate

One criticism was that student felt more residents should be able to secure the benefits of the activities. Many students wrote comments encouraging an expansion of the activities of levels of participation so more people could benefit. Student stated:

'It would be great if more residents attend'

'Doing activities in the morning would be more helpful as many were tired in the afternoon and wanted rest'

8. Students observed improvements in resident's quality of life

Many students wrote comments about their observations of how the service learning projects appeared to improve the quality of life of residents. Students stated:

'It made the residents interact with each other more'

'The residents would be happy and laughing and enjoying themselves. I prefer that kind of atmosphere. It makes everyone feel younger'

9. Improved student quality of life

Students also observed that the service learning activities improved their own quality of life and made them feel happier about themselves

'loved working with older people and seeing how happy it made them really made me feel good'

'great to meet and engage with the residents'

'I enjoyed talking to older people and with other students and made friends in class'

10. Better than simulated learning

Students observed that real life practical exposure was more meaningful as a learning opportunity compared to simulated learning or learning using other students.

'I learned more in the actual environment rather than role playing in a classroom'

'better working with 'real' residents rather than 'students' acting'

11. Valued by international students as provided insight into Australian culture

A few international students made specific comments about how valuable they found the experience of working in the Australian community. It helped them learn the cultural context of care.

'I'm an international student so everything is new to me. I enjoyed talking with the elderly and hearing their reminiscing. It helped me understand the context of care'

'I learnt how to approach elders and how to create an activity that suited them'

Discussion:

Major findings/ support for hypotheses

This study evaluated the impact of an aged care facility based service learning program on VET student perceptions of aged care. Results from the survey supported both the primary and secondary hypothesis.

The first hypothesis was that this learning service learning activity offered onsite at an aged care facility would challenge students' way of thinking regarding the aged care sector and working with older clients. Nearly half of respondents (48%) identified that they strongly agreed with the program challenging their way of thinking; with a further 43% agreeing with this statement. Furthermore, themes identified from qualitative analysis suggested that the experience of the service learning program was positive and enjoyable; provided insight into the aged care sector and in particular clients with a presentation of dementia; and demonstrated that the therapy program helped improved people's quality of life. One student stated it was better to have the real life learning and experience in preference to a simulated environment; and another agreed they learned more this way. Several respondents were surprised at how much they enjoyed their time in an aged care facility, indicating a change of attitude towards this industry.

The secondary hypothesis was that that service learning program would improve student confidence in their ability to enter the future aged care workforce. The majority of respondents (93%) reported that they felt better prepared to enter the workforce. Multiple themes emerged that supported the secondary hypothesis. These were that the service learning program provided confidence for students to take into a future working career, improved student knowledge, and provided insight into a career in aged care.

Importance of the findings and implications

Previous research on community based service learning has shown multiple benefits for students as well as the community recipients. For the student this transformative learning experience can include both the academic or intellectual rewards of increased knowledge and industry ready skills, plus the personal goals of growth and social accountability (Cooper 2013). The positive results of this pilot study support many of these outcomes.

Around the area of academic development, an emerging theme from the current study was improved student knowledge and a greater insight into aged care. Students identified that the practical opportunities provided by service learning were preferred to classroom traditional delivery in improving skills and confidence around working with clients. Similar findings have been suggested in previous research (Cooper 2013; Scott, Harrison, Baker & Wills 2005; Simoni & McKinney 1998). As found in Saunders et al (2015) the results also indicate that overall students enjoyed the service learning program and developed a more positive understanding of ageing and the aged care sector.

In addition to these academic outcomes, social and emotional benefits can be gained from service learning. Indeed some research points to these as the primary goals of a service learning model (Beatty 2010). These may include having the opportunity to connect and develop relationships with clients outside of their usual networks, be involved in promoting client quality of life through active engagement, and challenging student attitudes. The regular supported and positive contact with older residents, some living with dementia, made possible from a service learning program has been found in research to foster a positive attitude and desire to support and work with these clients (Kaf, Barboa, Fisher & Snavelly 2011; Scott et al 2005). This current study also found a positive change in student attitude

towards working with the older client, with students sometimes surprised at how enjoyable and interesting the experience can be.

A final benefit was around increasing awareness of future employment opportunities within the community setting. Scott et al (2005) identified in their research that health professional students were more aware of non-traditional roles that existed following their service learning program. Students often enter training heading for a hospital role, however the reality is that more opportunities for employment exist in the community settings, and in the case with AHA within the aged care sector. Results from our current study showed a change in attitude to aged care, with many students feeling prepared to pursue a career within this industry. Due to the ageing population and increasing demands in aged care (Productivity Commission 2011a; 2011b), it is important to ensure students are appropriately supported to help with future demands in this expanding industry. Other research has shown a direct link between a positive service learning experience in aged care with an increased desire for future employment with older clients (Kaf et al 2011). The findings of our study supported this final outcome.

Limitations and further research

This pilot study provides positive support for service learning programs in VET settings. The innovative approach used by this program overcomes barriers in limitations of resources of the VET sector by partnering with an aged care provider.

However, due to the preliminary basis of the study, several limitations have been identified. Firstly, the data analysed in this study was wholly made up of student feedback. Transfer of skills and knowledge to alternative aged care settings may be evaluated by surveying the allied health professionals who supervised students in subsequent clinical placements.

Secondly, student survey comments were made at completion of the program and prior to the clinical placement. A more detailed longitudinal evaluation that would include the perspective of all stakeholders, students, staff facilitating the program and the residents would provide a more detailed evaluation. This could include a pre-post investigation of the students' attitudes towards older adults before and after the program, combined with additional questions related to the link of the program to future clinical practice, and a follow-up at 12 months to evaluate the more long term results from the service learning opportunity.

Conclusion

The positive results of the current study warrant further studies using larger populations of VET students, to ensure the present results are replicable and generalizable to wider populations. Additionally, the inclusion of data from supervisors, and a follow-up study, would more holistically highlight the impact of the service learning program on student learning and future careers.

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Table 1: Students' attitude towards the service learning component of their course

Question	N (%)
Challenged my way of thinking Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree	N=121 0 (0%) 2 (2%) 8 (7%) 53 (43%) 58 (48%)
Was interesting and engaging Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree	0 (0%) 1 (1%) 7 (6%) 52 (43%) 61 (50%)
Made me better prepared to work in the future Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree	0 (0%) 0 (0%) 0 (0%) 9 (7%) 52 (43%) 60 (50%)