

## **Title**

Empowering Students In Community Care Of The Elderly Through Action Learning

## ***Authors***

Claudia K. Y. Lai, Assistant Professor & Cynthia Wu, Assistant Professor  
Email: [hsclai@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:hsclai@polyu.edu.hk) & Email: [hscwu@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:hscwu@polyu.edu.hk)

## ***Institution***

Dept. of Nursing & Health Science, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

## **Introduction**

Higher education in tertiary institution has an important mandate of developing students' competence in knowledge and skills in order to prepare them for future leading roles in the society. Since nurses play a major role in taking care of human life and death, educating only their minds is inadequate in equipping them to be a proactive professional. Nursing students need to be facilitated in the mastery of critical thinking and problem solving skills in order to succeed in all aspects of life and work (Bandman & Bandman 1988).

Action learning, being a process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group with the intention of getting things done (McGill & Beaty 1992), provides excellent opportunities for cultivating this aspect of students' abilities. The use of an action learning approach in the project design will enable students to take a reflective role and actively participate in improving or solving the situation (Mumford 1984). The project aims at facilitating students' learning through active experience rather than simply providing theoretical input. It is believed that this innovative feature in project implementation will help to foster the development of students' abilities as a problem solver, a resource person and an advocate for older persons in the community.

## **Background to This Project**

Community health projects undertaken by nursing students for the subjects Community Health and Gerontological Nursing revealed two notable themes. First, students found that older persons were not aware of the variety of health services available to them (Li, Lor, Tsang, Tse, & Wong, 1997; Or, Yip, Wan, Tong, & Yeung, 1997). Only medical consultations and home help service were the better known service items. Though students were surprised at what they found about the awareness and use of community health and social services for the elderly, what they found was in fact not a new phenomenon.

Ho and associates already pointed out in 1978 that services were under-utilized by people whom they targeted to serve. It is true that there might be reasons other than the lack of awareness of available services in determining utilization. However, knowledge of existing services is an a priori for service use. Another study by Kam's (1991) echoed that elderly in Hong Kong could not

benefit from the existing community resources due to their ignorance of the resources. These findings highlighted that clients' lack of knowledge of service provisions is an area that health professionals need to address. To date, there is limited client-focused information resource. Directories of services are designed for the use of service providers. Rarely is health resource information available in a user-friendly format catered to the specific needs of the older persons.

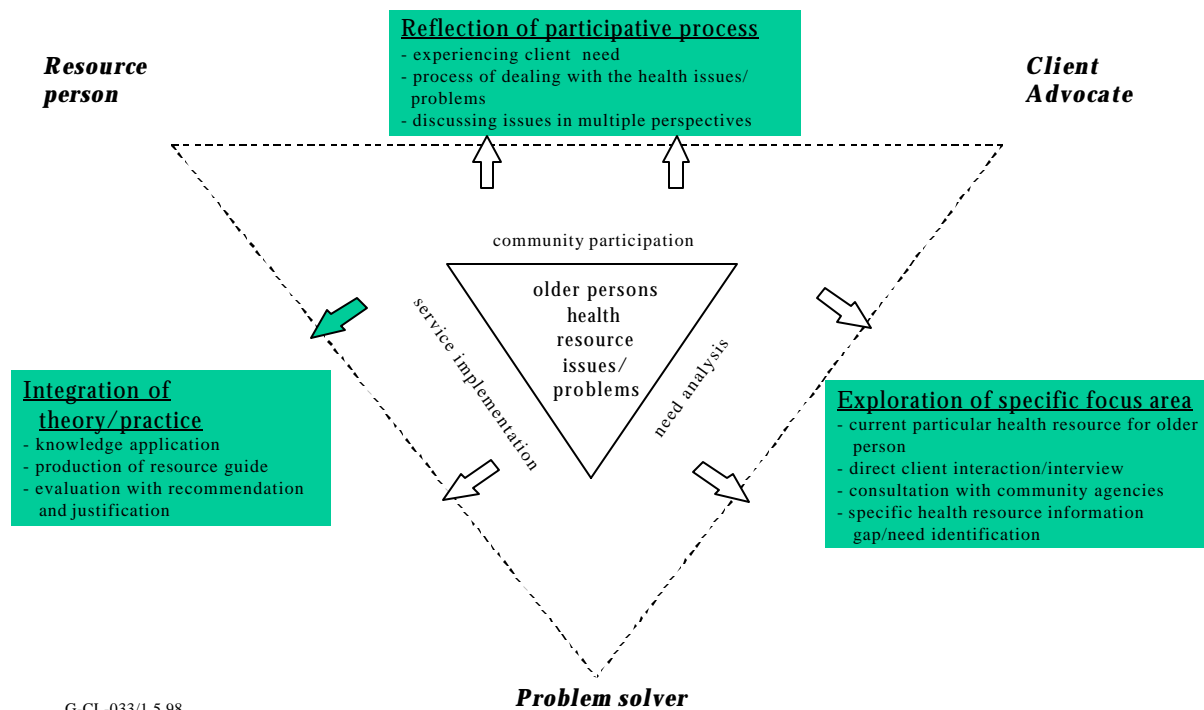
Second, students were frustrated in the inability to change the status quo of the problems they identified. In their projects, they uncovered several important health issues, but were unsure as to how to follow up with the information at hand. Since identified problems are complex health issues that can only be effectively addressed through policy changes, some students expressed that they are powerless in changing the system. The aim of the project was, therefore, to empower students to become resource persons and advocates for older persons in the community through addressing a practice gap.

### **Key Concepts Governing Design of Project**

The conceptualization of this project stemmed from a set of basic beliefs of the teachers and of the department. First, we believe the promotion of primary health care (PHC) is essential to all societies and all client groups. With regard to health service delivery a gap has been identified – our elderly lack knowledge of available community services which could meet their health and well being needs. Nurses have traditionally attempted to help people to attain and maintain health by providing disease prevention and risk avoidance information (White & Nezey, 1996). Having identified such a need in our elderly, attempts should be made to address this gap. To help people to master information and skills in order to stay well is one of the key responsibilities of nurses.

Second, for this particular project, the roles of the nurse as a problem solver, a resource person and an advocate were being highlighted. . It was because these roles are pivotal in delivering appropriate care and making changes in the health care system. PHC principles and philosophy must be integrated into nursing curriculum in order to prepare nursing students to meet the challenges of a changing health milieu. University education should make provisions for students to become active partners in community service.

Third, partnership between professionals and the community must begin with recognition that each party' s contribution is as important as the other. Under the PHC framework, health professionals are supposed to interact with clients in various settings and encourage them to take ownership of their health concerns. Regrettably, excessive powerlessness is felt by the general population, and in particular minority groups such as the older persons (Parsons, 1991). Our older clients must be empowered too as clients and nurses are partners in care. Knowledge about something, is an essential element in empowerment. To empower is to enable, to facilitate mastery, to build up confidence. Empowerment is an interactive process that develops, builds, and increases power through cooperation, sharing, and working together (Hawks & Hromek, 1992). Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) suggested that participation may be an important mechanism for the development of psychological empowerment because participants can gain experience organizing people, identifying resources, and developing strategies for achieving goals. Structured in this project are multiple opportunities for students as well as the older persons they served to interact and work together toward a common goal.



**Figure 1. The Empowerment Framework**

## Objectives

With this project, it was hoped that upon completion of the project, students would be able to:

- acquire an in-depth understanding of health needs and current service provisions for older people in the community;
- critically appraise the merits and drawbacks of health services for older people in the community;
- produce an initial draft of the proposed Health Resource Guide for the chosen community that is client-focused, accessible, appropriate for use for the older persons;
- actualize the roles of a problem solver, a resource person and an advocate in nursing for this particular group of clients.

## The Project

The project commenced in the fall semester of the 1997-1998 academic year. The entire class of thirty-nine students took part. Students went through the multiple reflective learning loops (Appendix I) in this project. They were facilitated in groups of six to eight students to identify own areas of interest on the health care concerns of older people in the community. Students identified two districts in Kowloon that are relatively heavily populated with older people, namely the Kwun Tong and the Wong Tai Sin District. Direct interactions with clients began with students interviewing older people residing in these two districts. Students developed a questionnaire to help them identify

areas of concerns of older people in terms of their perception of health informational needs.

Drawing from the interview data, the older people living in the two districts as the most important needs perceived the following areas:

- Financial assistance
- Health services
- Recreational facilities
- Housing
- Community support

Students then began to solicit and collect related data on health resource information accordingly. Students at this stage actively sought service information in the community. To give an example, students who are responsible for producing the guide on housing would contact service agencies and government departments for information in this area. Subsequently students organized, analyzed and compiled the data to prepare an initial draft of a health resource guide. Through a series of action and reflections and in relation to what they had been investigating, students engaged in critical appraisal of issues on health policies and service delivery. Issues that students had identified led them to question the existing policies and systems. A related example would be students who investigated issues and information on housing came to question the promotional efforts of the Housing Department in making their policies known to older people, and they began to formulate plans of appropriate advocacy action, which was an integral part of the requirement for this project.

Students met with their clients for a second time for collecting feedback on the initial draft of the resource guide. Feedback collected from clients was used to revise the guide. Clients commented on the layout, artwork, and the font size of the draft resource guide, and students made amendments accordingly. Moreover, information collected in the second cycle of client interviews also helped students to rethink and revise their advocacy actions. The advocacy actions were expressed in terms of a project paper that could be written in a variety of approaches, for example, a proposal to community centers, a newspaper report, a client or a service department interview, and so on. Related actions such as forwarding their project paper to agencies concerned were encouraged but not a must.

### **Project in Action**

The following were themes and quotes extracted from students' biweekly journals. Ideally students should have submitted five journals for this project. Eventually the teachers collected only four sets of journals. Submission of journals was voluntary and naturally there were more journals at the beginning of the project than later months.

#### Themes from First Set of Journals

Students voiced their confusion about the project in the initial stage. They had never taken part in an action learning projects before and they were unsure as to what was expected of them. Even with guidelines, instructions and discussions, they felt uncertain as to what should be the right way to go about this project. Other concerns of their journals included an appreciation of the cooperation and

negotiation needed in group work. Students started describing the processes they took in solving problems at hand. Many of them commented on the importance of mastering communication skills when work with older adults. Being the ones who asked permissions and favors from the clients they served, for example, to be granted the permission to interview, was a novel experience to them. Such a reversal of the power relationship was not what they used to experience in hospital settings. They were glad to gain some first hand experience regarding the way of life of older persons and also knowledge on community services.

#### Themes from Second Set of Journals

As students moved on with their projects, they talked about problems they encountered such as obtaining interviews. Sometimes people were suspicious and not as friendly as students had imagined. They also complained about the workload inherent in the project design. Yet, the tone in the journals changed. The tension noticed in the first set of journals disappeared and students obviously became more comfortable and confident. They began to think about the life situation of older people and wondered why that was so. On one hand they were better able to appreciate clients' perspective. On the other, they expressed surprise at the passivity of those older persons they met in tolerating adversity in life or unfair treatment from people or the system around them. There was also some evidence of critical appraisal of issues related to health services. They learnt about resources in the community and became more resourceful. More importantly, they wanted to be resourceful as a nurse.

A student's commented, *"This (referring to the project) enhances the knowledge and understanding on the resources available to the elderly and helps me to make suggestion to the needed client."*

Another remarked, *As a nurse, I think we should know well about the availability of community resources that are suitable for the client, so that the client's need can be well fitted and...promote optimal care even after discharge."*

#### Students' Third & Fourth Sets of Journals

Findings from students' third and fourth sets of journals showed many similarities and therefore they were discussed together. Drawing nearer to the end of the term and closer to project deadline, many students claimed that they were overwhelmed. The number of students who handed in their journals significantly dropped. Still, from what were being submitted, it was obvious that through working on the logistics of the project, students actively thought about what services were needed for the elderly and whether the existing approach or their proposed ways of addressing needs had been effective. Students illustrated creative thinking as well as deep thinking. A number of students proposed that the next project could be producing resource guides in the form of audiotapes as many elderly could not read.

An outstanding theme from journals of these sets is the frustration experienced by students as they attempted to collect information from service agencies, and in particular, government services in order to complete the resource guides. One student's comment said it all.

“...We had tried filling up any missing data by further making many phone contacts with the service-providers and reference to their publications. However, making phone enquiries to government departments was especially a frustrating experience. It was extremely rare that I could obtain the information I wanted by making just one or two calls. The officials just kept on making referrals to me by giving me another and another phone numbers. I was like a ball which they kicked around on the phone line. I wondered how there could be so many phone numbers within a single department and how they could be so useless to the public.”

### Reflections Upon Project Completion

To reduce the workload of the students on this project, they had a choice to decide whether they would like to write a project report or an advocacy paper. Just less than half (19/39) chose to write a project report. Information presented in the following was collected from students' comments in their project reports. Generally speaking, many students wrote that they now know the elderly better and become more aware of their needs. Many students were pleased that they now have increased knowledge in community affairs and gained deeper knowledge of community services. They are more cognizant of potential barriers when providing services to older people. The following quotes from students serve to illustrate and summarize their experience and gains in the project.

*“...It also gave me confidence to interact with the elderly. I found myself has paid more concern and awareness on elderly issue. When I met the problem or bad news from the newspaper for them, I would not just left it alone but thought why such problem happened and what can I do for them.”*

Some also mentioned that they now have a different perception of the roles and practices of a nurse. The project team regards this element as significant learning for graduating students.

*“In this action learning project, valuable experiences and reflection were gained. As a nurse in the future, I learnt to take an active role in introducing community services to our clients, our neighbours, relatives or elderly persons in need. Besides, it is also my responsibilities to empower them in order to facilitate them to live a dignified, respected and secured old age.”*

*“Actually the elderly could live in the community happier and nurses had an ability to improve this poor situation. For the elderly, nurse can assist them to build up a positive self-image, try to strength their weakness...Nurses encourage and explain to elderly about the significance of participating the welfare and activity...Also nurses explain the aging process, teach them how to adapt their new stage of life...”*

### **The Resource Guides**

Through working on the project, students produced the basic framework and collected core data for the Resource Guides. The material was later compiled and edited with the help of a project assistant. Seventy-five sets of the Resource Guides were printed and they were distributed to libraries, elderly centers, community nursing services units, patient resource centers of hospitals within the two districts where students did their project in 1999. Many colleagues provided immediate positive feedback and asked for personal copies. They like the idea and were indeed

impressed about the outcomes of the project was something that actually could benefit the public. A nursing colleague from another university sought approval from us to adopt this model for her teaching. However, the most encouraging responses came from the community. There were phone calls and walk-in requests asking for more copies. Unfortunately due to budget limitation, there was not sufficient money for updating information and a reprint.

### **Alternatives to Written Resource Guides**

The team is aware that Resource Guides in a written format can only serve a particular group among our elderly – those who are literate. Studies told us that most of our older population has been deprived of the opportunity to be educated while they were growing up due to numerous wars, amongst various reasons. The experience of this project taught our students to question the wisdom of producing a written resource guide, which is of course correct, at least to a certain extent. Comments and questions from students in this regard made the team happy rather than perplexed. We would like to call this project a success, because we have not discussed the value of a written resource guide as opposed to other format prior to commencement of the project. Yet students were able to learn - experientially - that in order to serve our older clients well, we need information and resources in a variety of format, and various dialects. Students' interactions with older clients while conducting the project opened their eyes to the heterogeneity of older adults, and enabled them to develop profound insights to the needs of the elderly. Such in-depth learning, no theoretical discussion can attain.

The team is pleased to report in later projects, students produced a great variety of resources for older clients in the community, all aiming at health promotion and healthy living. Some examples on the format of the resource include audio-tapes, video-tapes, websites, posters, calendars, pamphlets, shopping bags, and an umbrella with slogans. These resources were about various topics - ranging from relaxation exercise and healthy diets (physiological healthy in focus) to beauty classes and support groups (psychosocial health in focus). Many of the productions were in Cantonese but some were in Hakka or Hokkinese (Chinese dialects).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it could be said that a large part of the aims and objectives of this project had been achieved. It was gratifying to learn that the majority of the students had reaped multiple benefits from this format of learning. They had been able to actualize their roles, at least to a certain extent, as a resource person, an advocate and a problem solver. Though not all students mentioned that they liked the project and would choose this project again if possible, from the reflective journals, the resource guides, and the questionnaire, most students evaluated the project positively in many respects. Some students expressed the needs of active teacher facilitation at the beginning of the project since this was a new learning approach to them. More guidance and support were needed by the students in order to lessen their anxiety of having to cope with a fairly unstructured project.

The teachers also learnt that project design, in particular, the structure of the project, is a crucial element in determining how students experience the project. The needs of students, as they navigate through the cycles of action learning, vary in the different stages of a project. Support for the students, therefore, needs to be adjusted accordingly.

Concrete outcomes of this action learning project for all students comprised of the production of two sets of informational health resource guides for older adults for the Wong Tai Sin and Kwun Tong district. For slightly more than half of the students, the second outcome consisted of the actualization of a nurse's advocacy role as evidenced by the production of an advocacy paper and/or implementation of related actions. In summary, probably a student's comment best reflected the positive side the teachers hope to see in a student through this project,

*“Even though there are so much unhappiness and bad things happened on the process, I am still very appreciative that I had took part in the action learning project. It was because it let me know that I can overcome all the barriers encountered in the process. The birth of the resource guide gave me a great sense of satisfaction that I ever experienced before. I recognize that I can mobilize the community resources to the elderly. I am very proud of myself. The project let me know that everything is possible and building up my confidence. Our potential are unlimited.”*

These words were like heavenly music to our ears. We believe at least slightly more than half of the students would have been benefited along similar reins. As teachers, there is nothing more rewarding to see students' metamorphosis.

In this action learning project, the teachers were pleased indeed to have a project that could serve both learning needs of students as well as service needs of older people in the community. The experience made us aware that there are numerous opportunities in the community for nurses to serve their clients in promoting health. The team believes that with an expansion of our focus on not just acute care but also community services, nursing as well as other health professionals can make a lot of differences in the health of the society.



## References

- Bandman, .E L., & Bandman, B. (1988). Critical thinking in nursing. California: Appleton & Lange.
- Hawks, J. H., Hromek, C. (1992). Nursing Practicum: Empowering strategies. Nursing Outlook, 40 (5), 231-234.
- Ho, A. Lee, M. K., Ngo, D., Lau, P. K., & Lau, T. (1978). Opinion survey on community facilities and social services in Lam Tin and Sau Mau Ping Estates.

- Kam, Y. L. (1991). Project for outreaching service for elderly at risk in Kwai Tsing District. Hong Kong Journal of Gerontology, 5 (1), 230-239.
- Li, L. L. F., Tsang, C. Y. S., Tse, Y. K. V., Lor, K. C. A., Wong, P. K. T. (1997) The study of health services awareness of elderly in Kwun Tong. Unpublished report.
- McGill, I. & Beaty, L. (1992). Action learning: A practitioners' guide. London: Kogan Page.
- Mumford, A. (Ed.). (1984). Insights in action learning. West Yorkshire: MCB University Press Ltd.
- Or, P. L. P., Yip, S. Y. B., Wan, Y. W. E., Tong, P. S. M., Yeung, Y. M. I. (1997). A preliminary study on the psychosocial well-being of the retired elderly and their awareness of the elderly centers in Kwai Tsing District. Unpublished report.
- Parsons, R. J. (1991). Empowerment: Purpose and practice principle in social work. Social Work With Groups, 14 (2), 7-21.
- White, J., & Nezey, I. O. (1996). Project wellness: A collaborative health promotion program for older adults. Nursing Connections, 9 (1), 21-27.
- Zimmerman, M. A., & Rappaport, J. (1988). Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment. American Journal of Community

#### Appendix I. Outline of Project

