Learning to Serve Together: Creating an Inter-Continental Classroom for Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Within an increasing interconnected global society, it is important for undergraduate university students to be educated as competent/fluent global citizens. International service-learning is an effective tool for developing cross-cultural competencies and relationships, and many universities have programs that bring their students to serve in communities abroad. At the same time, technological advances have made telecommunication tools available and affordable. The confluence of these three factors raises an intriguing thought: what if two service-learning courses in two countries were linked, such that students learn together digitally , from their own campuses, and then serve together, in a third country?

This paper describes a pilot global classroom service-learning course designed and co-taught by instructors at the University of Maryland at College Park (UMD) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). The expertise of the PolyU team is in computer science and engineering, while the UMD team has much experience with education, leadership and social development. The service project, which took place in Rwanda in May 2016, was designed to take advantage of the expertise from both sides.

Key Words: global classroom, cross cultural competencies, inter-institutional collaboration

BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES

Within an increasing interconnected global society, it is important for undergraduate university students to be educated as competent/fluent global citizens. International service-learning is an effective tool for developing cross-cultural competencies and relationships, and many universities have programs that bring their students to serve in communities abroad. At the same time, technological advances have made telecommunication tools available and affordable. The confluence of these three factors raises an intriguing thought: what if two service-learning courses in two countries were linked, such that students learn together digitally , from their own campuses, and then serve together, in a third country?

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This paper describes a pilot global classroom service-learning course designed and co-taught by instructors at the University of Maryland at College Park (UMD) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). The expertise of the PolyU team is in computer science and engineering, while the UMD team has much experience with education, leadership and social development. The service project, which took place in Rwanda in May 2016, was designed to take advantage of the expertise from both sides.

The course was designed with the following objectives:

- To allow students to experience and practice principles of global citizenship and cultural sensitivity in an equal partnership in a third country within the framework of international service-learning

- To make possible a multidisciplinary project that leverages expertise from two very different disciplines to bring broader and deeper impact to the community

- To facilitate faculty exchange and sharing of expertise through the planning and implementation of the course and project

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been much work on global citizenship and leadership, and the importance of this field has increased with recent events. For example, Project GLOBE (House 2004) is a large-scale research effort on cross-cultural issues concerning leadership and organizational management, covering over 50 cultures. Especially at the tertiary education level, classrooms are becoming more internationalized as universities seek to increase the national and cultural diversity of students, and there is much work on how students learn and interact in global classrooms (e.g. Dalglish, Evans & Lawson 2011; Besharov & Oser 2013), though most of these studies focus on situations in which students from multiple cultures are located in a single physical location.

In contrast, the use of technology allows the linking together of students from *multiple* cultures, from *multiple* institutions in *multiple* countries. For example, McLauchlan & Suveica (2012) describe a class that linked together students from the USA and Moldova in a civic engagement course studying the issue of human trafficking. Students met to discuss common readings, to hear from guest speakers and collaborated to conduct in-depth research on a selected subtopic. Lock (2014) describes a similar course connecting Canadian and Australian students to investigate topics on water supply, and also identifies some best practices which help to maximize student learning in these contexts.

Our joint subject follows the latter pattern, with an added challenge: students (and teachers) are expected to collaborate on a *real-life* project that will be implemented on-site in a third country. This makes the collaborative project more than an intellectual exercise; complexities of real-life projects are often several orders of magnitude greater than classroom exercises; and quality has to be assured to protect the receiving party.

Of interest to us are the following questions:

- How well does the expertise of the lecturers complement each other, in the teaching of the subject as well as the carrying out of the project?

- How do the two subjects adapt to work with each other, in terms of teaching methodology and style?

- What do the students learn about the other culture through the interaction, and how do we best prepare our students to learn from this experience?

PLANNING AND LOGISTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

The planning for the course started in August 2015, and it was offered in the Spring semester (Jan-May) 2016. Due to the fact that this is a pilot run and also some students had family constraints and needed to withdraw from the course, the class size was small: 6 PolyU students (3 male) and 3 UMD students (1 male). The PolyU students were mostly in their first and second years, who were taking this course to fulfill their service-learning requirements, while the UMD students were mostly third and fourth year students, taking an elective leadership studies course.

The following table shows the course schedule during the semester. Since the semester weeks between PolyU and UMD do not align perfectly, it was not possible completely align both classes. For maximum impact and to make the best use of resources, we linked the topics which were most closely tied to the expertise of the members of the teaching team, and scheduled the rest of the topics around them. The four classes that were finally chosen to be linked are shown in blue italics.

Week	Lecture (PolyU)	Lecture (UMD)
1	Introduction	
2	Digital Divide	
3	Assessment & Reflection	
4		Class Introduction and Rwandan Context
5		What is Service-Learning; Critical Service-Learning
6	Solar Energy & Circuitry	
7	*Low-resource computing*	
8	*Offline Educational Content*	
9	Basic Networking	Developing Community Assessment
10	Prototyping	

11		*Global Leadership and Cross Cultural Communication*
12		Development and the Digital Divide
13		*Community Assessment*
14		Project Planning: Inspiration Phase
15		Project Planning: Inspiration
16		Project Planning: Ideation

The linked classes were held using a Skype videoconferencing link. To facilitate learning, the teaching team attended all shared lectures, and stepped into the discussion sessions when needed. Since this mode of small-class, interactive-heavy learning was not the norm for students from Hong Kong, a reflection and debriefing session was held for the PolyU students after each shared lecture, when students were asked to make observations on the proceedings and to notice differences between themselves and their UMD peers in verbal and non-verbal communication, learning styles and group dynamics.

The service-learning project spanned 17 days in Rwanda. To take advantage of the expertise of the participating faculty, the project integrated computer science, engineering, community development and education. Students installed a zero-carbon community learning center, which involved the installation of computers, servers, Internet access and renewable (solar) energy. In the development of the center, a community assessment piece was incorporated. Community members were interviewed to ascertain their expectations and desires for the center. Students also organized and facilitated a workshop for a selection of community members. This workshop served as a train-the-trainer experience, in which the community members learned about the learning center and its technology, and later facilitated their own workshop for the larger community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the pilot course are extracted through instructor and student reflections, and analysis of the course and project execution.

The contribution of the differing expertise of the lecturers resulted in a broader project and richer teaching topics. Incorporating the community assessment piece enabled an insight into the impact of the service project that was not anticipated, and the engineering/computing aspect enabled a tangible contribution to the community. Analysis of instructors' written reflection of their individual experience with this pilot class relieves several themes based on cultural and scholarly interpretations such as approaches to service-learning experiences, communication styles, and priorities of learning objective and processes.

"Talking in concrete terms is also more difficult for our students. The terms they use tend to be very vague and wide open. Maybe it's a sign of protecting themselves or "sitting on the fence". Either way, they do not seem to be very willing to say thing that make them appear to take a stance. We need to learn how to teach them to overcome this or it's going to lead to problems later with communication". – PolyU Instructor

"While reflection this morning seemed to be necessary, some students were distracted due to time concerns and instructors would also pull individual students away. Finding a balance between the priorities of both teams has been a challenge, and I find myself being especially careful about communicating frustration as we continue to develop our relationship".– UMD Instructor

Analysis of the reflection essays from the students suggest that they have achieved a deeper insight into the lives of the recipient community, compared with their counterparts from the previous year. Students also mentioned the cross-cultural aspect extensively, both in their oral reflections as well as in their written essays. The PolyU students expressed surprise at the outspokenness of the UMD students, and to a body, they felt that they had learned to express themselves, and more importantly, to understand that disagreement in opinion did not necessarily mean belittling or disrespect:

"We need to tell them that they are being too controlling sometimes and should be more respectful to our ideas. But I was so anxious before   the discussion and I worried that the conversation would make   our cooperation more difficult. The outcome was surprisingly smooth and they said they understood and   would totally support us."

They also made more references to the local (Rwandan) people than students in previous years; perhaps the intentional training that they underwent in preparation for them to work together with their UMD/PolyU peers also primed them to be more sensitive towards their local beneficiaries.

UMD students also wrote about navigating cross-cultural differences and the constant role negotiation throughout their experience.

"I am trying to be very aware of not only of my privilege, but also of my cultural baggage. I am struggling to suppress asking or doing things that might come very naturally to me. I think some of the PolyU students have noticed how freely we interact with [our instructors] – and to some extent [theirs]. I don't want to not act like myself or be normal, but I also don't want to come across the wrong way to the students. "

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

Coordinating and delivering the course and project was not without its challenges. There was tension between the amount of time and effort allocated to the community assessment piece and the engineering piece; some of the students expressed that they wished for more time to interact with the community, others wished for more time in the engineering installation. In some sense, this is something that is encountered in any service project: from our experience, the local partners often wish us to do more, to benefit more people, while we prefer to slow down and let students make mistakes, to

learn, to interact, and reflection as part of the learning aspect to the project. By bringing together two very different aspects in the same project, it is not surprising that this course and the project encountered the same issue toa greater extent. However, given the learning gains of the students, and the greater depth and diversity of the project, we feel that this is a good beginning and paves the way for higher-level interactions and tighter collaborations in the coming academic year.

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