

An Experiential Approach to Developing Teachers' Understanding of Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential approach to developing teachers' understanding of service-learning in a summer 2014 staff development course. Successful applicants spent up to eleven days in Cambodia with a group of almost one hundred people involved in service-learning projects for three different subjects in three discipline areas. These teacher-participants observed and reflected upon the activities of almost 90 students and six teachers. The staff development course topics and structure are described, followed by participating teachers' reflections including a) what they learned, b) benefits to students and c) advice as well as d) cautions to other teachers of service-learning subjects.

Key Words: Service-Learning, staff development, teacher development, courses for teachers, teacher reflections

1. INTRODUCTION

As of the 2012-2013 academic year all universities in Hong Kong changed over from three-year to four-year university degree programs, with a corresponding reduction of secondary schooling from seven to six years. A main aim of the Hong Kong government's decision to move to the new "3+3+4" curriculum structure was to enable "higher education institutions [to] be in a better position to provide a balanced education to their students, through an integrated 4-year undergraduate programme, that allows for a broader knowledge base to support specialised learning" (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005, p.12). There is also a growing international trend of universities accepting a role in educating students to become socially responsible global citizens (Andrzejewski & Alesso, 1999; Campus Compact, 1999; and UNESCO, 2009).

In response to these local and international aims for higher education, at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) a new policy was instituted requiring all students to complete one three-credit subject that has been accredited as a service-learning subject as part of the new four-year undergraduate curriculum.¹ The University adopted a definition of service-learning as described by Furco (1996) which stresses a balance between service and learning in which both the service recipients and the students benefit. As described in Chan, Ngai, Yuen and Kwan (2013) these subjects must be academic in nature and to qualify for accreditation must: a) present clear academic objectives and student learning outcomes, b) incorporate a significant amount of service activity (typically 40-45 hours), and c) contain a rigorous process for student reflection and assessment.

¹ See Hong Kong Polytechnic University (2011) Distinctive Features of Four-year Curriculum. <http://4yc.polyu.edu.hk/featureII.html> (Accessed 28 July, 2014).

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is one of the largest universities in Hong Kong admitting approximately 2800 undergraduate first-year students each year. In order to fulfill the new service-learning subject requirement, 60-70 subjects have to be created. This represents a substantial change from the previous situation in which service-learning was conducted only as an extra-curricular activity by interested teachers for a small percentage of students who participated on a voluntary basis. The service-learning requirement is being phased in with subjects first piloted in 2011-2012 and the number of accredited subjects has grown to over 50 as of June 2014.²

Preparing for such a large change to the University curriculum has required effort in a range of areas including developing and approving new policies, establishing relevant working groups and committees, disseminating information on the change and providing central support in both service-learning expertise and funding. Staff development is also critical to supporting this change as few teachers are familiar with developing, implementing and assessing service-learning subjects.

A major challenge is to help teachers to not only understand the University's service-learning policies, but to also effectively implement accredited service-learning subjects. This challenge is all the greater as service-learning is a form of experiential learning, which is an approach to learning that relatively few Asian university teachers have experienced themselves as students or commonly use in their own teaching. It stands to reason then, that in addition to "talking about" service-learning teachers would benefit from a "hands-on" approach that would allow them to observe and participate in a service-learning subject. The focus of this paper is on an experiential approach to developing teachers' understanding of service-learning that was carried out in the summer of 2014. The remainder of this paper will present the staff development course aims and description, share participating teachers' reflections and conclude with lessons learned.

2. STAFF DEVELOPMENT COURSE TOPICS AND STRUCTURE

The staff development experience was advertised as "a unique summer course" inviting teachers to "learn while involved in projects being carried out by University students under supervision of teachers experienced in service-learning." Successful applicants would spend up to eleven days in Phnom Penh, Cambodia with a group of almost one hundred people involved in service-learning projects for three different accredited subjects in the discipline areas of computing, hotel management and optometry. There were almost 90 students, six teachers across the three subjects and five additional support staff. Two of the subject teacher-leaders each had more than ten years of experience in service-learning as well as being heavily involved in the establishment of the service-learning requirement at the University. One support staff member had expertise in curriculum development and would serve as the course coordinator. This context was selected for the course in the belief that it offered a varied and rich immersion experience in which the participants would be able to observe service-learning projects being conducted across a range of discipline areas and supervised by a number of teachers, each with his or her own "style". Teachers from any institution

² A listing of approved subjects is available at http://sl.polyu.edu.hk/04_approved_subjects.html

worldwide were welcome to apply and there were numerous enquiries. However, the final enrollment in this pilot course involved three teachers from the University.³

Each of the three teacher-participants was selected on the basis of an application in which they indicated their current level of involvement in service-learning, their reason for attending and what they wished to achieve during the course. All of the accepted teacher-participants held advanced degrees in their area of expertise, had more than ten years experience in their field as well as more than ten years teaching experience and had worked at the University for at least five years. One teacher had just finished offering an accredited service-learning subject for the first time, another teacher had submitted a service-learning subject proposal and was hoping to be approved, and the third was expecting to become involved in service-learning in the department.

The course format included two pre-trip group meetings, involvement during the service-learning project period in Cambodia, and a follow-up meeting and reflection. The two pre-trip group meetings were for the purposes of allowing group members to get to know one another, answer questions, and clarify every participant's purposes in joining the course. In these two meetings the participants identified and agreed to focus on six main topics during the experience. These six areas were: 1) site entry (purposes and logistics); 2) working with NGOs (especially how to establish a good partnership); 3) how to conduct student reflection and assessment; 4) identifying and limiting risks (especially for international projects); 5) effective site exit (including reflection and wrapping up) and finally, 6) administration and logistics of service-learning projects (including those involving larger groups and travel).

In order to accommodate the participant's other work commitments, two teachers joined on the third day and participated for the remaining eight days of the project and a third teacher (who had previously joined a service-learning project in the same location) joined the group for six days.

For the majority of the course the teacher-participants stayed together to visit the different student projects in each of the discipline areas, meet with non-governmental organization (NGO) partners etc. Teacher-participants typically met in the morning for breakfast with the course coordinator to discuss the day's activities and the areas of focus, then joined student groups to observe their work. The teacher-participants shared meals with the students and would be with students until late in the evening when they could observe the student group reflections. They could converse with the six teachers leading the various student projects. A package of resource materials was created for the course. The resource pack included a small number of relevant conceptual articles on service-learning, templates and proposals for service-learning subjects, and the University's recently published guidelines on assessing service-learning subjects as well as a risk assessment handbook.

The impetus of this paper grew out of the teacher-participant discussions with the course coordinator. The group decided that by participating in a shared reflection exercise, the group could come up with suggestions that would be useful for other teachers who are becoming involved in service-learning. This reflection process could

³ It is likely that limited enrollment was due to a number of factors including the relatively long duration of the commitment, a short time for applications to be accepted, and finally the \$850 US dollar course fee (including Hong Kong to Cambodia round trip air ticket) which was covered for participants internal to the institution by a scholarship fund in support of staff development for service-learning.

also do “double-duty” and provide suggestions to further improve the experiential course for future teacher-participants.

3. TEACHERS’ REFLECTIONS

Reflections were generated to the following questions, and each will be presented in turn:

- Purposes in joining the service-learning staff development experience
- Main gains from participating in the experience
- Main benefits to students
- Advice to teachers starting out in service-learning
- Cautions or warnings for teachers who are setting up service-learning subjects

3.1 Purposes

“During my visit to Cambodia, I have observed different teams serving different communities, participated in reflection sessions, discussed with colleagues, and met with NGOs. Through these activities, I have exchanged thoughts, gained a better idea about overseas service-learning projects, with an eye towards developing my own subject in the future.”

- Teacher Participant A

Every teacher-participant expressed the general purpose of learning more about how to run a service-learning subject and project. However, the particular areas of interest varied with each teacher, and often based on the amount of previous experience. The teacher with the least service-learning experience expressed interest in more of the basic conceptual as well as “how-to” information such as knowing more about the international trends and recent advances in service-learning, and how to facilitate and assess student reflections. The teacher who had just completed his own service-learning subject for the first time confessed to “encounter[ing] some issues in teaching which I [had] never thought of; although I had been teaching [in] universities for over a decade”. He recognized that this subject was substantially different from other subjects he had taught and wanted to learn how to handle service-learning subjects from his peers. The third teacher had previously accompanied the teacher-leaders to Cambodia. She was hoping to soon offer a subject and was very interested in developing a better understanding of the location and culture as she intended her project to also be run in Cambodia. She also wanted to liaise with potential NGO partners for her future subject. In addition, as her own subject would soon become a reality, she was interested in acquiring more detailed practical experience in managing students on service-learning trips.

In summary, although all the teacher-participants shared some common purposes for participating in the experience as advertised, each also brought his or her own individual purposes. The course was better able to meet each teacher’s needs by openly asking them to articulate their purposes at the start in the pre-trip meetings and then using the morning planning sessions and end of day reflection periods to review progress on these individual goals.

3.2 Main Gains

“The nature of service-learning subject is a mixture of learning and serving integrated together. It should achieve the objectives of 1) an awareness of community service with good attitude at learning to serve, and 2) experiencing a more integrated learning outcome while providing services to those needs (Laing, 2013). On one hand, students should be given the professional knowledge as well as some general guidelines for delivering services in a classroom setting. On the other hand, students are provided an environment to practice what they learn and to deliver their professional service.”

- Teacher Participant B

All of the teacher-participants described gains in two key areas – **acquiring a deeper understanding of the critical concepts** or “ethos” of service-learning, and **gaining understanding of many practical issues** related to conducting service-learning projects. The quote above is taken from the reflection of one of the teacher-participants. It incorporates both a recognition of the principle of “balance” between the service and learning components, and elicits the relationship between acquiring professional knowledge and applying it in practice within a service project that echoes the earlier quoted aim of the Hong Kong government’s shift to a four year tertiary curriculum.

Regarding the practical issues, all the teacher-participants described the usefulness of observing *logistics* and the need for *risk management*. This multi-discipline, multi-project internationally-based experience was intentionally chosen for its complexity. The context offered many opportunities to observe logistics such as how to handle travel, meals, accommodation and project supervision and assessment for up to 100 people. In fact, the logistics were so complex that the teacher-participants joked that their own contexts would now seem “very simple” to manage in comparison. Observing the logistics also raised awareness of the range of risks that students could be exposed to and the derivation of a number of practices that would be very useful to limit some of these risks. The importance of requiring students to not only work in groups during the service-projects, but expecting them to travel together and learn to look after each other within their specified groups is an example on one such useful practice for limiting risk.

3.3 Main Benefits to Students

“On the first day of activities, I joined one group of students in the classroom as an observer. It was chaos initially as unforeseeable things happened. Later that evening, I participated in the debriefing process of the groups and heard all kinds of frustration and negative thoughts being raised by students. After the debriefing by two facilitators with the students, the mindset of students was stimulated with respect to their set objectives of learning & attitude. On the last day, the same group of students shared their learning and gains in insight in terms of becoming more flexible, supportive, communicative team members during the service. It is a wonderful experience to see these positive changes in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude gained when dealing with unexpected events, difficulties, language barriers, cultural differences, team dynamics, etc. This is a marvellous experience for students to have

transformed to be more flexible, capable, willing to open up, and giving instead of taking. This kind of experiential learning cannot be easily simulated in classroom or laboratory settings.”

- Teacher Participant A

The intent of this paper is to share the reflections of the teacher-participants. Other research, though now becoming dated, has attempted to compile the benefits to students from participating in service-learning as identified in research studies (Astin *et al*, 2000; and Eyler *et al*, 2001). All three teacher-participants remarked on being able to observe improvements in skills and attitudes of students over the project period. Teacher-participants of more “scientific” disciplines acknowledged that their own students would benefit in their future careers if they also have *more highly developed people related soft skills*, and they could see, as described in the quote above, how the service-learning projects would facilitate development of these skills for all students regardless of discipline.

The teacher-participants also believed that the students will derive *long term benefits from the experience of being taken out of their customary environment*. This was the first international travel experience for many of the students. In addition, the experience involved close contact with people (most often children) from a substantially different living standard practicing customs significantly different from their own. They described students becoming “enlightened” and more open-minded in a way that will require them to rethink what it means to be “rich” or to be “poor”, “lucky” or “unlucky”. The teacher-participants expressed the belief that the students could be learning things from the experience that would influence them in their later life. At a minimum this experience would be an unforgettable part of their University years. One teacher-participant described being “quite sure, that less than two weeks of stay in Cambodia will ever be in their memory; no matter whether they liked or did not like the visit.”

It should be noted that all of the teacher-participant reflections on what students gained were dependent upon being able to observe students across an extended project period. In fact, all of the teacher-participants expressed concerns regarding student ability or what they were learning in the earliest observations when things were more obviously “going wrong”. The student gains described by the teacher-participants, all of which they considered difficult to develop in typical classroom situations, arose over time as part of trying to deal with the challenges the project context presented.

3.4 Advice to Teachers

The advice to other teachers who would teach service-learning is probably most easily shared as a list for consideration as follows:

- **Be clear on the difference between service-learning and volunteer service or work experience.** The model of service-learning used by our University assumes service that draws on skills in a discipline and requires significant student effort not only during the project, but also in preparation and reflection. Other forms of service may not offer the same benefits. Furco (1996) explains the differences.
- **Finding the right match with a community partner is important.** Identify a particular skill or range of skills in your discipline that you can

teach to your students. Your job is also to find a client who values these skills so that they can benefit from the services your students provide. Service-learning projects are found through word-of mouth. If your students do well with one NGO, that NGO will want to work with you again as well as be willing to refer you to other NGOs. If you (and your students) do a good job, over time you will find you have more potential partners than you can serve.

- **You must show care to both your students and the community you are serving.** Teachers are commonly expected to look after their students. However, it is not only possible but even likely that conflicts may arise during the service-project in which student and service recipient needs or wants do not match. Such conflicts must be resolved in a way that demonstrates respect to both parties, and are a source for more learning.
- **Be prepared to draw on a wide range of skills in addition to teaching skills.** In addition to teaching students the discipline specific skills they need to use in the service project, you need to be ready to draw on administrative, logistic and interpersonal skills that are not usually in such high demand in classroom settings. You very probably will have to handle money and have a clear policy and process for handing project-related expenses. You will find that you have to make many decisions “on the spot”, a sense of humor helps, and you should be prepared to be asked all sorts of non-academic questions by both students and clients during the service visits.
- **Be vigilant in identifying and managing risks.** Whether international trips or local projects, service-learning takes students out of the classroom and into the community and interacting with people they do not know. Have policies that minimize the identified risks, such as students always working and travelling in groups. Also have emergency backup and plans ready to put into operation. For example, international service-projects should have a lower teacher to student ratio and always involve more than one staff member so that there is a backup person in cases of emergency. Information on the range of risks and possible ways to address them are available in resources such as the “Risk Management Handbook for Service-Learning at PolyU” at http://sl.polyu.edu.hk/03_3_risk_management.html.
- **Be prepared to learn from negative examples.** Service-learning, because it happens outside of the classroom, involves real people in communities and requires that students actually be doing something – inevitably reveals problems, challenges and mistakes which must be addressed. Adopt the attitude that “mistakes” are opportunities to learn, practice reflection openly with students to come up with solutions to the present challenge and identify what could be done differently next time to prevent it from happening again.

The above list is not intended to be exhaustive. But it does suggest the kinds of understandings teachers can acquire in an immersive experience of a service-learning project.

3.5 Cautions or Warnings to Teachers

And now a list of cautions for consideration:

- **Be prepared for the worst-case scenarios.** At the risk of being repetitive, placing students in real world settings with other people dramatically increases the possibility of unexpected things happening, some of which may be quite serious. It is not possible to predict and prevent everything that may happen. But diligent risk analysis and use of measures to control risk are required. Carry an emergency medical pack and know how to contact a nearby medical facility. Nurturing a positive attitude and calm response to emergent situations is useful. And teaching in teams in which there is more than one recognized leader is crucial to allowing one person to look after an issue while the other continues to supervise the project in context.
- **Assessing students is challenging.** It requires students to demonstrate their professional knowledge as well as how well they provide their service, work as a team, demonstrate the expected attitudes, and so forth. There need to be multiple measures of student performance that assess preparation, the service-project and final reflections and reports. As students usually work in a group, there also need to be adequate measures of individual performance. One teacher is unlikely to be able to observe the services and participate in all student reflection sessions, so it is common to work in teams and/or employ teaching assistants.
- **Service-learning courses require more time and different kinds of effort than “usual” subjects.** The previous comments about all of the logistical and interpersonal skills required also suggest that more hours are likely to be spent by the teacher on a service-learning subject. Subjects may have to run for more than a semester to allow the service projects to be offered evenings, weekends or during term breaks. However, some teachers report that spending time with students on projects allows them to relate to students in a more personal way and that they find they do not mind spending the additional hours.
- **Service-learning requires support from others.** Service-learning is still considered a non-traditional approach to education, and as such has numerous sceptics. As service-learning requires more resources and a lower teacher to student ratio there should be a team with a mixture of academic staff and teaching assistants in monitoring the students' services and handling the assessment. Demb and Wade (2012) describe the importance of many contextual factors, such as departmental and professional community support, as well as institutional policies to motivate teachers to become involved in outreach and engagement in service-learning. In this regard, it is important to have a learning community within a university campus to build up the faculty support for development of service-learning subjects (Furco and Moely, 2012). Hence, special allocation of resources for teaching service-learning subjects should be taken care of at the departmental, faculty, and even at the University level. For example, in recognition of the additional resources required, our University provides additional funding to each accredited

service-learning subject on a per student enrolled basis. Last but not the least, the teachers should be recognized by their department/school for their extra effort in launching and managing the service learning subjects..

4. A FINAL REFLECTION

In closing, what did this experiential course for teachers achieve and was it worth the time and associated costs to run? From a statistical perspective, this short course for three teachers is simply too small a sample to arrive at “significant” outcomes. This running was, at best, a pilot. However, from the perspective of the participants and the course coordinator, the course was definitely worthwhile. Each teacher-participant, though self-selected as being interested in service-learning, has identified a number of outcomes that are personally applicable to their own teaching in service-learning as well as other subjects. And from the perspective of the course coordinator, giving interested teachers the opportunity to observe and experience service-learning was both a very effective way to help teachers learn how to do it themselves, as well as efficient as a course of this nature can be conducted while simultaneously involved in other job responsibilities associated with the service-learning subject. The model of this course suggests teachers who are quite experienced in service-learning should be open to having less experienced teachers come along. When combined with identifying learning targets, observing and reflecting regularly, a lot of valuable insights can be gained from the experience.

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