Using Standardised SPOCs to Prepare Hong Kong Students for Service-Learning Programmes

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1. ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

Service-learning and blended learning have both been touted in recent decades as pedagogical tools which may be used to enhance students' learning over more traditional instruction methods. This paper will present the initial findings from the pilot run of a small, private online course (SPOC) which was used in conjunction to face-to-face methods to prepare students in Hong Kong for their upcoming service-learning programme. The SPOC was utilised in one class each from three University Grants Committee-funded institutions, as well as opened up for self-enrolment at a fourth, for a total enrolment of 122 students. Following the completion of the course, students were asked to complete an online survey to gauge their reactions to the course, and face-to-face interviews were conducted to provide further insights through qualitative analysis.

Keywords: *Service-learning, elearning, SPOC, Online learning, Hong Kong*

2. INTRODUCTION

As a pedagogical tool for enhancing students' learning, Service-Learning has provided a number of advantages over more conventional teaching styles, although many drawbacks have also been noted. The attitude towards, level of preparation prior to, as well as their level of motivation during, their service experience have been cited as key issues which need to be addressed within the field of Service-Learning. In an effort to find remedies for these issues, more of the more universal elements of Service-Learning could be standardised, and teaching tools made

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available, through which students could engage with the material and their peers to come to a clearer understanding of the purpose, advantages, and methods of Service-Learning as it pertains to them. One method to achieve this could be through the incorporation of online-learning materials, integrated into a blended learning environment.

This paper aims to share the findings from a pilot iteration of a Small Private Online Course (SPOC) as a possible tool for addressing this issue by examining the self-reported outcomes from students from a number of prestigious higher education institutions (HEIs) in Hong Kong. As noted by some scholars, there is a shortage of literature relating Service- Learning to an online context (Helms, Rutti, Hervani, LaBonte, & Sarkarat, 2015). As such, it is hoped that this paper may provide some insight into the effectiveness of such a programme, and contribute to the understanding of the effectiveness of eLearning initiatives, particularly as they pertain to an East Asian context.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK / LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has demonstrated that students are often unclear, or unmotivated, when it comes to engaging in Service-Learning programmes; they are often perceived as irrelevant, or as a hurdle to be overcome (Jones, Segar, & Gasiorski, 2008). It has been theorised that this may be a result of unclear messages from institutions and staff as to the benefits of Service-Learning for the learners themselves, and the intended outcomes of such a programme (Averett & Arnd-Caddigan, 2014).

Research has also indicated that educators themselves are occasionally wary of Service- Learning as it is perceived to require a significant investment of time, to be difficult to coordinate logistically, and problematic to design effectively (Maddrell, 2014). One of the oft-cited issues in Service-Learning programmes is the level of preparedness of students in terms of their knowledge, skills, and competencies (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000). It has been suggested that technology may provide some methods for enhancing Service- Learning by providing students with a wider community and more avenues for communication (Sun & Yang, 2015).

Several scholars have noted that there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the use of technology in delivering Service-Learning within a modern context (Bossaller, 2016; Mcwhorter, Delello, & Roberts, 2016). Bourelle (2014, p. 249) notes that Service-Learning, if it is to be adapted for an online environment,

must be "student-centred", "promote active participation", whilst online learners must be "self-regulated learners who explore, reflect, and interact with others". Learning is most effective when there is an active process of engagement between the learners and the material being presented (Maddrell, 2014), and some research has shown a positive impact on students' learning from engaging in blended learning courses where there are opportunities for active engagement (Bell & Federman, 2013).

4. METHODS/ANALYSIS

Phase I - Development of the eLearning materials
As part of a University Grants Committee (UGC) funded project on Service-Learning, a course was created which contained instructional information, practice materials, further resources, discussion fora, and peer-assessment tasks aimed to develop students' understanding of Service-Learning. This course was intended to be used as supplementary material as part of students' preparation for a Service-Learning programme, and was designed in such a way that it could be used by various HEIs involved in the project. The course covered the following 4 areas:

- What Service-Learning is
- The benefits of Service-Learning
- Responsibilities, Attitudes, and Ethics in Service-Learning
- Reflecting on Service-Learning

The course was developed using the KEEP platform, which is based upon the Open edX architecture and hosted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Phase II - Piloting of the course
Students from Service-Learning programmes at 4 UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong were invited to participate in the pilot run of the course as a supplement to their preparatory studies. The pilot run expects to attract between 50 and 120 students in total.

Phase III - Gathering of students' feedback
Analysis will be done through the 'end of course survey', which is presented to all students upon completion of the SPOC. This is to be supplemented with focus groups to gain more in-depth insights into the attitudes, reactions, and insights of the students regarding the success of the SPOC.

5. RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

Results and discussion section pending the results of the pilot run of the SPOC course.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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