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Service-Learning as an Independent Course: Merits, Challenges, and Ways Forward

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In Hong Kong, service-learning is commonly regarded as a pedagogy for facilitating students' learning of specific subject knowledge; rarely does it serve as an independent course focusing on developing students' knowledge and skills of service-learning itself. At Lingnan University, however, the Office of Service-Learning offers an independent, credit-bearing service-learning course outside of other academic departments. The course aims to equip students with knowledge, skills, and attitudes about service-learning and to prepare them for future engagement in service activities within communities. This article reports on a case study of this independent service-learning course, with particular emphasis on the course development process. Assessment and evaluation data from students are also reported, followed by a discussion of the merits and challenges of implementing such a course, and a consideration of ways forward. The authors argue that the lessons learned from this study can help to inform the design of independent service-learning courses specifically and improve the quality of service-learning courses and programs in higher education in general.

Keywords: course development, credit-bearing service-learning course, student learning outcomes

Service-Learning in Western and Asian Contexts

Service-learning has spread across the entire landscape of higher education in the United States. Campus Compact, a national coalition of higher education institutions and a leading proponent of service-learning, has grown from three member institutions in 1985 to over 1,100 in 2015, representing over a quarter of all higher education institutions in the U.S. (Campus Compact, 2015). Harkavy and Hartley (2010) attributed the growth of service-learning to its effectiveness as a powerful pedagogy and its ability to link core academic work with higher education's mission of "transformative learning, education for democracy, and research to better understand and improve the world" (p. 419). In addition to a high number of service-learning courses available to students, colleges and universities also house independent programs focusing on community engagement, community development, or social justice. Such offerings echo the results of an investigative study of five universities in U.S. suggesting the likely future elevation of service-learning into an academic discipline (Klentzin & Wierzbowski-Kwiatkowiak, 2013).

The development of service-learning in Asia is not as mature as that in the U.S., and service-learning practice varies widely within the Asian context. In the Philippines, for instance, service-learning is often practiced at higher education institutions espousing a traditional Christian orientation; in India service-learning has grown in tandem with a vision of national self-reliance; and in Hong Kong, its development is tied to the government's emphasis on whole-person education (Xing, 2010; Xing & Ma, 2010). Furthermore, in Taiwan, the National Taiwan University treats service-learning as part of the general education curriculum, which requires students to enroll in different service-learning courses during their respective study programs. Academic departments and general education units offer courses with service elements; most of these courses adopt discipline-based service-learning to facilitate students' learning in general education or established disciplines, like arts, education, engineering, and science. Yet, only a very small number of courses deliberately focus on service-learning theories. National Sun Yat-sen University offers one-credit general education courses in "Service-Learning, Leadership and Communication" and "Service-Learning: International Volunteer," while the National Taiwan Normal University offers a two-credit course entitled "Design and Practice of Service-Learning." In Japan, the Service-Learning Center at the International

Christian University offers courses every term with local and international service experiences. It appears, however, that in Asian contexts service-learning remains largely a pedagogy to be implemented rather than examined.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, the term *service-learning* is still relatively new and is just beginning to become embedded within higher education curricula. Though service-learning has grown in popularity in Hong Kong higher education, it is commonly used as an instructional strategy to facilitate students' learning of other subject knowledge—that is, discipline-based service-learning. It rarely manifests as an independent course that focuses on developing students' knowledge and skills of service-learning itself—or “pure” service-learning—not to mention as a major or minor program in the undergraduate curriculum. If Asian universities offered more courses centering on service-learning knowledge and skills, the shift would signify a significant educational evolution.

Pure Service-Learning

Service-learning is a powerful instructional strategy that provides contextual learning and real-world application of theory; thus, it is commonly regarded as a pedagogy for facilitating knowledge acquisition in other subject areas. This has been evidenced by the rapid increase of academic courses with service elements in higher education institutions around the world. Service, whether on campus or in the community, is oftentimes added to academic courses and viewed as an activity (or set of activities) that students complete in order to achieve learning and social goals (e.g., students teach children from low-income families, enhancing their understanding of poverty and providing assistance to the needy). Service-learning has been defined in multiple ways; however, for the purposes of this research study, it was defined as

a course-based credit bearing experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs; (b) reflect on the service in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

Previous research has made clear the positive impacts of service-learning on students' personal growth and academic learning, the image and reputation of universities, and the solidarity of communities (Lillo, 2016; Olberding & Hacker, 2015; Rutti, LaBonte, Helms, Hervani, & Sarkaratet, 2016), providing solid justification for universities to implement service-learning pedagogy. Moreover, researchers have also demonstrated the positive effects of service-learning on students' moral, intellectual, and civic development; in fact, some scholars have argued that students would demonstrate even stronger outcomes in these areas if they enrolled in service-learning programs throughout their college experience (Myers-Lipton, 2003). In one research study on the effects of participation in a comprehensive service-learning program (which attempted to develop a service-learning minor) at a large Western metropolitan university, results showed that students in the program developed leadership roles and skills, and increased their understanding of diversity (Myers-Lipton, 2003). In another research conducted by Kropp, Arrington & Shankar (2015), student participants in the service-learning student facilitator program became effective leaders of service-learning projects, increased their understanding of elements and methods of service-learning, and expressed motivation to develop a deeper understanding of its theoretical basic. In light of the possibility of enhancing students' leadership skills and their valuation of diversity and sense of community, the study suggested that a comprehensive service-learning program offered as a minor has the ability to engage students in addressing complex urban, social, and economic issues (Myers-Lipton, 2003).

Service-learning comprises an intellectual movement that has evolved beyond the course level into academic programs, leading to major and minor degrees, and certificates. As such, it is open to systematic inquiry and constructive critique as a standalone discipline.

Exploration of an Independent Service-Learning Course at Lingnan University

Lingnan University, the only liberal arts institution in Hong Kong, has a longstanding motto of “education for service,” which emphasizes the service-learning elements of academic study and community service. The university promotes a plethora of service activities to encourage students to participate in service-learning. Nearly a decade ago, it was one of the first among the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong to integrate service-learning into its academic curriculum—which has since served as a powerful means for conveying the university’s motto and actualizing its mission of offering liberal arts education toward the development of students’ adaptability, brainpower, and creativity (Chan, Ma, & Fong, 2006). This institutional model has been best achieved when service-learning has acted as the vehicle for “fulfilling the primary mission of the institution” (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010, p. 419).

Lingnan University offers two types of credit-bearing service-learning courses:

- credit-bearing courses offered by academic departments (also known as departmental courses). Participating students normally use their tutorial hours for services, while other course requirements, such as lecture attendance and assessment, remain the same. Students are generally placed with an agency where they carry out their services. The service element of these departmental courses is decided by the course instructors and is closely related to the learning objectives and content of the course. In this case, service-learning is used as a pedagogy that facilitates students’ learning of the subject knowledge and related skills taught in the course.
- credit-bearing service-learning courses offered by Lingnan’s Office of Service-Learning (OSL). Students enrolled in these independent service-learning courses devote all of their contact hours to service-learning. In addition to attending lectures and service-learning seminars offered by OSL, students are required to plan and implement their own service-learning project. In this case, service-learning comprises not only a pedagogy, but also the subject knowledge of the course.

Currently, among the local universities in Hong Kong, there is no independent service-learning course offered by an office solely in charge of service-learning other than the course at Lingnan University. The research detailed in this article sought to explore the potential of independent service-learning courses to enhance the seven domains of student learning at Lingnan (Ma & Chan, 2013): subject-related knowledge, communication skills, organizational skills, social competence, problem-solving skills, research skills, and civic orientation. This research also aimed to assess the particular challenges associated with designing and implementing such a course. Three primary research questions guided this study:

- What elements comprise the process of developing an independent service-learning course (e.g., deciding the learning objectives, selecting the course materials, organizing the teaching and learning materials)?
- What are the merits and challenges of developing an independent service-learning course?
- What are some specific ways forward in the development of future independent service-learning courses?

This article explores the design of independent service-learning courses and is meant to serve as a reference for educators, faculty members, and staff who are involved in service-learning and who wish to further improve the quality of service-learning courses and programs in Hong Kong.

Lingnan’s Model of Service-Learning

Lingnan University’s model of service-learning mirrors Kolb’s (1984) in that it represents a form of experiential education in which students engage in a cycle of academic study, meaningful community

service, and reflection. According to this model, service-learning enables students to experience a four-stage cyclical process of experiential learning (see Figure 1). Students may undergo additional active experimentation through continuous engagement in the service.

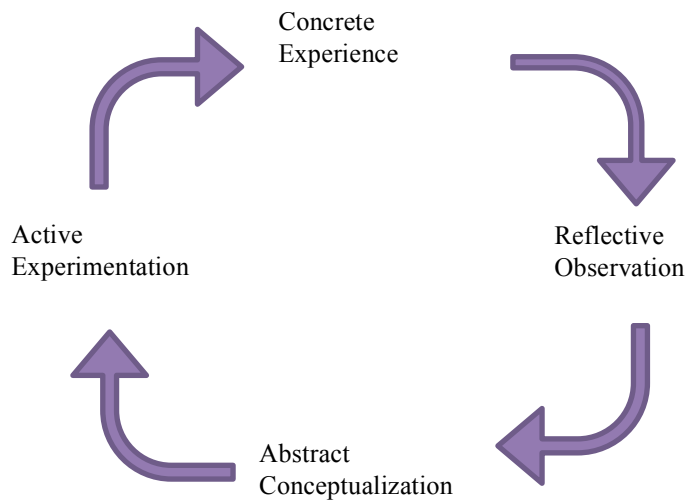


Figure 1. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning.

Borrowing from Kolb, the OSL at Lingnan developed its own model of service-learning as shown in Figure 2 (Ma & Chan, 2013). Students not only integrate academic knowledge into their service experience, but also investigate social issues through different research methods. While processing knowledge about community issues investigated through continuous guided reflection and observation, civic engagement increases. At the same time, through the collective process of knowledge building, application, and transfer, students have the opportunity to co-create knowledge (Chan, Lee, & Ma, 2009; Chan, Ma, & Fong, 2006).



Figure 2. Ma and Chan's (2013) OSL model of service-learning.

The Need for an Independent Service-Learning Course

When service-learning was first introduced into Lingnan's curriculum, it was still a new concept and pedagogy to both faculty members and students; it offered a different experience from lectures and tutorials, requiring students to assume a more active role in their learning and to reflect more on the learning process. Indeed, as the literature has suggested, not every experience generates knowledge (Hansen, 2012; Kendall, 1991). A student must:

- be actively involved in the experience;
- reflect on the experience;
- use analytical skills to conceptualize and better understand the experience; and,
- possess the skills necessary to use the experience as a springboard for testing new ideas.

In response to the need to help students better understand service-learning, the OSL developed the independent service-learning course with the goal of equipping students with the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes for learning effectively from their service experiences.

Course Development

The independent service-learning course, entitled "Community Engagement through Service-Learning," was first offered at Lingnan University in the summer of 2008. Its design was guided by the university's model of service-learning (Ma & Chan, 2013; Chan, Ma, & Fong, 2006) and key principles of effective service-learning programs (Howard, 2001; Kendall, 1991). For example, Kendall (1991) suggested that an effective service-learning program should:

- engage people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good;
- provide students structured opportunities to reflect critically on the service experience;
- articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved;
- clarify the responsibilities of each person and organization involved; and
- include training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals. (pp. 95-96)

Above all, the program must be evaluated to ensure that service-learning benefits reciprocally the students and the community. That is, students engage in meaningful learning experiences by serving within the community, while the community receives meaningful services from the students.

The development of the independent service-learning course comprises a rigorous, intensive, and ongoing process. To help guide and clarify our discussion of this process, we present Graves' (1996) course development framework in Table 1, which lists the primary components of course design as well as the questions that teachers must consider in relation to each component.

Table 1. Graves' (1996) Course Development Framework

Component	Corresponding Questions
Needs assessment	<p>"What are my students' needs?"</p> <p>"How can I assess those needs so that I can address them?"</p>
Determining goals and objectives	<p>"What are the purposes and intended outcomes of the course?"</p> <p>"What will my students need to do or learn to achieve these goals?"</p>
Conceptualizing content	"What will be the backbone of what I teach?"

	“What will I include in my syllabus?”
Selecting and developing materials and activities	“How and with what will I teach the course?” “What is my role? What are my students’ roles?”
Organization of content and activities	“How will I organize the content and activities?” “What systems will I develop?”
Evaluation	“How will I assess what students have learned?” “How will I assess the effectiveness of the course?”
Consideration of resources and constraints	“What are the givens of my situation?”

Needs Assessment

Drawing from findings in the literature centering on departmental service-learning courses, students might not possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to make the best of service-learning experiences, such as knowledge of service-learning theory, research skills for identifying social needs and issues, ability to reflect on service experiences, and attitudes related to caring about and serving the community (Howard, 2001; Howe, Coleman, Hamshaw, & Westdijk, 2014). Also, students’ needs may vary from year to year. At the beginning of the course, a needs assessment is conducted with the students who enrolled in the course via the Goal Setting Exercise, which addresses students’ expectations for the course and helps them to set their learning goals for the course. This helps the instructors to understand more clearly the needs of the students and to address them early in the course.

Determining Goals and Objectives

The OSL’s independent service-learning course introduces students to the concept and practice of service-learning. Its major goals are to equip students with knowledge of service-learning theory and skills for conducting their own service-learning projects, and to develop a sense of social commitment and sensitivity to the needs of the community (i.e., a service-learning “attitude”). Upon completion of the course, it is expected that students should be able to:

- articulate their knowledge of service-learning theories and the social, cultural and economic realities of the communities in Hong Kong;
- identify various community needs and specify possible solutions for addressing those needs;
- think critically about phenomena and issues in the social, welfare, and business sectors, both locally and globally; and
- after careful research, develop and evaluate possible solutions in response to specific community needs.

Indeed, these learning goals and objectives align with the mission of Lingnan University which emphasizes whole-person development and community engagement.

Conceptualizing Content

Since the course allows students to proceed through a full service-learning experience, the service-learning cycle model serves as the backbone of the course. The course content is conceptualized into (a) theory and skills of service-learning and (b) theory and skills for service-learning. The former conceptualization includes the history of service-learning development and its philosophical roots, theory of experiential learning, models of service-learning, and reflection. The latter refers to the

knowledge and skills required for students to design, implement, and evaluate their service-learning projects. For instance, knowledge and theory about social needs and issues related to student service-learning projects, social inequality, and social welfare policy are essential for students to understand the causes and consequences of those social needs and issues, as well as to identify possible ways to address them—the most challenging aspect of the service-learning experience. In addition to knowledge and theory, students also need skills to write project proposals, organize activities, communicate with the service target, coordinate with the service agency (as a few of many examples) in order to conduct their service-learning projects effectively. The conceptualization of course content into theory of service-learning and theory and skills for service-learning helps the course instructors to determine the core content to be covered in every semester as well as specialized focuses due to the varied nature of student service-learning projects. Ultimately, the hope is that through acquisition of course content and its application the service-learning projects, students will develop positive attitudes, commit to serving the community, and become more civic-minded (Bringle, Studer, Wilsom, Clayton & Steinberg, 2011).

Selecting and Developing Materials and Activities

A number of in-class and out-of-class activities are developed by the instructors to prepare students for their service experiences and for sharing those experience with the instructors and agency supervisors, and their fellow students. Table 2 summarizes the teaching and learning activities for the course.

Table 2. Teaching and Learning Activities

Activity	Frequency	Description
Lectures	Weekly	Knowledge and theory of service-learning, reflection, social needs and issues, evaluation, etc., are introduced and discussed.
Agency visit	Once per agency	The visit familiarizes students with the service agency and the service target, and clarifies their role and responsibilities.
In-Class presentation	Twice per course (beginning and end of term)	Beginning of term: Students present the project ideas and proposal to the instructors and agency supervisors in order to receive feedback on how to run/revise the project. End of term: Students share their service experiences and learning outcomes with fellow students, instructors, and agency supervisors.
Service practicum	A minimum of 25 hours total	Students plan and arrange the service with the service targets/agency. Students provide direct or indirect service to the service targets/agency.
Reflective/consultation meetings	At least twice per course	Students report the progress of the service and share their learning and difficulties. Students are asked to reflect on their service experience and to connect the experience with classroom knowledge.

As the teaching and learning activities listed in the table reveal, the roles of instructors and students differ from those of the lecture model. The instructors, the agency supervisors, the students themselves, and even the service targets may help students to enrich their understanding of social needs and concerns in order to cultivate their social commitment and sensitivity. Students play a significantly more active role in their own learning and that of their peers. Moreover, learning takes place not only in the classroom, but also outside the class at the agency site and in the community.

Organization of Content and Activities

The course is organized cyclically. On the macro level, the entire course follows the experiential learning cycle; on the micro level (of a unit or a part of the content), students learn and revisit certain content in various ways: in lectures, the service practicum, and reflection activities. Course materials and activities are arranged in a way that the related knowledge and skills are covered in lectures before they are applied to the service-learning projects. Table 3 provides a chronological overview of the content covered in lectures and service-learning-related activities.

Table 3. Organization of Content and Activities

Week	Content of Lectures	Service-Learning Activity
1-2	Fundamentals and theories of service-learning; reflection	Agency visit; reflective meetings; presentation of project idea; proposal writing
3-4	Skills for assessing community needs and proposal writing	
5-8	Theories about social issues and community needs	Service practicum; consultation meetings
9-11	Event-organization skills, communication skills	
12-13	Theories about project evaluation	Presentation of project outcomes and results

Evaluation

Both formative and summative assessments are used to assess students' learning in the independent service-learning course. Formative assessments include weekly reflection journals, project proposals, reflective meetings, and consultation meetings with course instructors. These enable the instructors to better understand the learning progress of the students and to maintain awareness of the difficulties students are encountering—thereby allowing instructors to make adjustments to the teaching pace and content. Students are also required to evaluate each other's performance via peer evaluation, give a final presentation, and submit a reflective essay about their service-learning projects and their learning at the end of the course. Specifically, students are asked to identify the ways in which they applied theories taught in course lectures to their service-learning projects and to indicate how the service-learning projects impacted their learning.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the course, focus group interviews were conducted. The focus group interviews offered the researchers a more in-depth understanding of the service experience, the learning process involved, and the difficulties encountered. Also, to ascertain the effects of the independent service-learning course on students' learning outcomes, seven domains (i.e., subject-related knowledge, communication skills, organizational skills, social competence, problem-solving skills, research skills, and civic orientation) were measured before and after the course through pretest and posttest questionnaires. Each of the seven domains included three sub-domains, determined through a literature review and findings of previous qualitative research. The domains were operationalized using the cognitive behavior model, validated extensively by Breckler (1984). The questionnaire was also reviewed by students to ensure clarity and comprehension and by a group of service-learning faculty to ensure academic validity.

Besides the instructors and students, agency supervisors are also involved in the assessment process; they assess the students' performance of the service with respect to the seven domains. Table 4 describes the seven domains.

Table 4. Description of the Seven Domains of Learning

Domains	Description
Subject-related knowledge	An understanding of the concepts and knowledge taught in the course
Communication skills	The ability to express ideas clearly and to listen to the ideas of others
Organizational skills	The ability to put tasks into working order and to arrange parts and people into an efficient system
Social competence	The skills necessary to be accepted and fulfilled socially, including interpersonal relations, self-confidence, and social skills
Problem-solving skills	The ability to recognize the core of problems and to solve problems effectively
Research skills	The ability to search relevant literature, to understand types of research methods, and to collect and analyze data
Civic orientation	An understanding of social responsibility

The pre- and posttests provide an overall picture of the changes in students' learning relative to the seven domains.

Consideration of Resources and Constraints

The OSL has collected and produced various useful materials and information about service-learning pedagogy (e.g., a student handbook, a faculty handbook, and an agency handbook) and established an extensive network within the community. These are also useful resources for the course. The handbooks, for instance, help to clarify the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, and the established community network enables instructors to easily find community partners for different service-learning projects.

A major consideration for both instructors and students around service-learning is time. Learning the content and engaging in the service requires a significant amount of time. Moreover, a gap often develops between the coverage and the mastery of content (Gallman, 2000). Given the limited time in a semester, it may be impossible to cover the content in depth while allowing sufficient time for students to conduct meaningful and substantial service.

Implementation of the Course: Student Service-Learning Projects

The original proposal for the independent service-learning course was submitted and approved by the Service-Learning Program Committee and Academic Quality Assurance Committee of Lingnan University as a free, elective course for undergraduate students. During the first few years after its creation (2008-2012), the course was offered in the summer semester only. Yet, due to increasing student demand, the course has been offered three semesters (fall, spring, and summer) per year since the 2012-2013 academic year. In total, about 100 local and international students from different departments have completed the course. Students have conducted diverse service-learning projects addressing issues and needs on the Lingnan campus and in the community. Regarding the campus-based service-learning projects, students have investigated issues such as classroom energy saving, food waste in canteen, and hostel cleaners, and have shared their findings to raise staff and students awareness around these issues. Students leading community-based service-learning projects have worked with agency partners to design activities and programs in response to particular needs of the agency and/or community. For example, course participants, working with a community center near the university, organized programs for South Asian children to foster integration with local children and the community. At the same center, students interviewed elderly individuals and wrote life stories

about them, which helped to promote a more positive image of the elderly. The vast majority of students have commanded their service-learning projects with motivation and passion, from generating project ideas to implementing the services. Importantly, they have connected and applied their classroom learning to their service-learning projects through, for instance, project evaluation, social and intercultural competence, reflection, and learning processes of experiential and service-learning. In all cases, the instructors and the agency supervisors have facilitated feedback and monitored the progress of the projects and students' learning. In brief, all students who have participated in the course went through different stages of the experiential learning cycle and experienced vigorous study in service-learning through active engagement in community.

Merits and Challenges

In theory, the course has been effective in bringing about students' learning as described in the course goals and objectives. Yet, to what extent is this assumption correct? What challenges have arisen during the implementation of the course? To help answer this question, the researchers conducted a case study to determine how effectively the course enhanced students' learning. Data were collected from the assessment and evaluation of students who had enrolled in the course during one of the three semesters of the 2013-2014 academic year. Both qualitative and quantitative data were used in the analysis, enabling triangulation of findings.

Merits: Students' Course Learning

Data from the pre- and posttests

In the pre- and posttests, students were asked to rate their level of competence on a 10-point Likert scale (with 1 = "Not competent" and 10 = "Very competent") for items related to the seven domains. In the 2013-2014 academic year, 40 students enrolled in the independent service-learning course during one of the three semesters (fall, spring and summer) it was offered, and 37 students completed the pre- and posttests, the results of which were included in the study's data analysis. Table 5 displays descriptive statistics related to the independent service-learning course offered during academic year 2013-2014.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Paired t-test Results of 37 Students' Pre- and Posttests

Domains	Pretest		Posttest		Paired Differences		95% CI of the Difference			<i>t</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	SE	Lower	Upper		
Subject-related knowledge	6.71	1.59	7.76	1.01	1.05	1.67	0.27	0.49	1.61	3.83***	0.63
Communication skills	6.40	1.45	7.16	1.37	0.76	1.48	0.24	0.27	1.26	3.14**	0.52
Organizational skills	7.23	1.41	7.76	1.06	0.53	1.28	0.21	0.10	0.96	2.52*	0.41
Social competence	7.48	1.01	8.22	0.95	0.74	1.18	0.19	0.35	1.14	3.81***	0.63
Problem-solving skills	7.44	1.11	8.01	0.90	0.56	1.26	0.21	0.14	0.98	2.71**	0.44
Research skills	6.37	2.08	7.50	1.34	1.14	1.89	0.31	0.51	1.76	3.66***	0.60
Civic orientation	7.92	0.95	8.37	0.83	0.45	0.96	0.16	0.13	0.77	2.84**	0.47

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As Table 5 reveals, the mean ratings within all seven domains of learning outcomes in the posttests were higher than those in the pretests, with statistical significance at the 0.05 level. This suggests that students showed improved competence within the seven categories of knowledge and skills after the service-learning experience. Among the seven domains, subject-related knowledge, communication skills, social competence, and research skills showed greater improvement, with moderate effect size ranging from 0.52 to 0.63. Surprisingly, students showed smaller increases (0.45) in civic orientation, suggesting that the course is less effective in increasing students' social and community engagement. Arguably, students enrolled in the course had a higher level of civic orientation, as supported by the results in Table 5 that civic orientation had the highest mean rating in both the pre- and posttests. One possible explanation for this finding is that the independent service-learning course was closely related to community service. This might have encouraged students who already possessed a strong civic commitment and a heightened interest in social issues to take this course; thus, the increase in the civic orientation domain among these students was not as great as that in other domains of learning. To further probe students' learning from the course, reflective essays submitted by students at the end of the course were studied, supplementing the findings from the pre- and posttests.

Data from the reflective essays

At the end of the semester, each student submitted a reflective essay providing a detailed portrait of his or her service-learning experience and learning. Findings from the students' reflective essays suggest that their civic orientation, as expressed through community engagement, was enhanced by their participation in the course. One student group conducted a program with South Asian children and local children at a youth center near the university. Students intended to increase tolerance among the children and to promote better integration between the two groups. After the program, one student participant wrote:

The university [is located in] a diversified community.... People with different gender, race, age, religion, and cultural background live here. However, as a university student [studying here], I feel separated from the local community. Before the course, I was not aware of the situation.... [After completing the course] I found that I can get more involved into the community after the service. Sometimes I feel I have enough knowledge about the place I live, but it is never enough. Not only do I need to change my mindset, being more tolerant and open-minded about others with different backgrounds, but also do I pass the message to the people around me.... the service is just the beginning.... I need to start practice what I learn in the course, so as to build a continuity of the change.

Apparently, the service experience increased this student's understanding of the community near the university. It also cultivated in her a greater sense of commitment to continuously engaging with the community; she would pass the message of tolerance and open-mindedness to people of different backgrounds and cultures.

Another student created a service-learning project that involved running an educational program to raise local children's awareness of environmental protection. She was introverted and felt anxious about speaking in front of groups of people; yet, each group member was required to look after five to seven local children who were energetic, talkative, and outgoing. Because of this responsibility, the student challenged herself and took the initiative to talk with the children. In her reflective essay, she shared that:

This [the service-learning project] is a wonderful experience. I hope I can join other service-learning courses and better use what I had learned from this course. These kinds of service courses are much interesting and teach us many things that we cannot learn from books. Being a university student, it is not enough to gain knowledge in the lesson. We need to serve the community back and service-learning is definitely a good way for us to have the personal growth.

For this student, enhancing her communication skills and stepping out of her comfort zone were opportunities that could not be offered through academics alone. More importantly, she was motivated to apply this learning from the independent service-learning course to other service-learning programs in the future. Thus, it appears that the course succeeded in helping this student (if not all students) to acquire or enhance the knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes needed for future service-learning programs and civic engagement.

In summary, data related to student learning indicated that the independent service-learning course enhanced students' understanding of service-learning (i.e., subject-related knowledge), competence in generic skills like communication and research skills, and commitment to serving the community.

Merits: Course Features that Facilitate Students' Learning

The assessment data from the study suggested that the independent service-learning course helped to bring about the intended learning outcomes in students. Yet, what are the specific features of the course that help to facilitate students' learning? First, as suggested by one student, the new mode of learning afforded by service-learning pedagogy was a significant facilitator: "I could learn better from this service-learning course than traditional learning modes as I was involved in the project. I could apply the theories to the service in order to make those theories more memorable."

Another unique feature of the independent service-learning course is the autonomy given to students to generate their own service-learning project, as one student summarized:

I liked this course since I could take part in organizing our project—not only the activities but also our service targets. Though there were some challenges, we were able to focus on the social issues that we thought ... should be prioritized in our society.... On the other hand, I could find the linkage between solitary elders and successful aging.

In the course, students enjoyed greater autonomy in selecting the type of service and the service targets rather than choosing from a prescribed list in the departmental service-learning courses. This enabled students to produce meaningful projects and enhance their sense of project ownership. Students were able to explore their learning in a more diverse way. As one student said, "There are no [fixed] formulas to know what you will learn."

Challenges

The independent service-learning course poses great challenges to the instructors. It is very different from departmental service-learning courses because the pedagogy used for subject knowledge learning becomes the subject knowledge itself. In other words, the means becomes an end. Not surprisingly, the instructors have struggled to identify the intended learning outcomes of the course. A large proportion of the course content, especially regarding theories and skills for service-learning, is not fixed since the service projects vary from student to student and year to year. In other words, the learning content and objectives are jointly constructed by the instructors and the students. The instructors must remain flexible enough to select materials relevant to students' projects; thus, the course materials used during one semester may not be appropriate for the next. This implies that more time and effort are needed to prepare the course materials and teach the content than are required for courses with fixed content.

The Way Forward

Despite various challenges, the enhanced learning and social commitments of students motivate the course instructors and the OSL to continue creating more service-learning opportunities for students at Lingnan University. The independent service-learning course represents a timely response to calls for university social responsibility (Tandon, 2014). The flexible course content enables students and instructors to respond promptly to the immediate needs of the community—a responsive not easily

afforded by courses with fixed content and curriculum. Credit-bearing service-learning courses are commonly found in universities in countries like the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan, where the development of service-learning is more mature than that in Hong Kong, where service-learning started as non-credit-bearing, extracurricular activities. Recently, however, more local universities have begun to offer credit-bearing service-learning courses through academic departments or jointly through academic departments and student affairs offices and/or service-learning offices to enhance the learning of other subject knowledge.

The independent service-learning course at Lingnan illustrates that service-learning is not simply a pedagogy (a means); it can become the subject knowledge—that is, an end in itself—that deserves students' time and effort as they pursue knowledge and skills related to service-learning. The course is paving the way for a more sustained and structured study program in service-learning that includes intermediate and advanced service-learning courses, such as a service-learning capstone, which engage students in continued and active inquiry in service-learning theories and experience. According to Butin (2010), an introductory service-learning course is important in any service-learning program since it provides students with common texts, perspectives, and analytical tools for future coursework and service experiences.

This article highlights the potential for service-learning to evolve into an academic subject independent from other academic departments in Hong Kong. This evolution requires a new perspective—that is, service-learning as an academic subject as well as service-learning as a pedagogy. However, the latter view is pervasive in Hong Kong as evidenced by the scarcity of independent service-learning courses and by the fact that most service-learning courses are housed in general education units or attached to other academic departments. The formation of an “academic home” for service-learning (Butin, 2011, p. 33) that sustains and nurtures academic inquiry and critique is necessary for conceptualizing service-learning as a distinct discipline that creates, legitimatizes, and transmits knowledge like other academic disciplines do.

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