Frameworks for A Critical Service Learning Approach

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SERVICE LEARNING

- Academic,
- Community,
- Experiential,
- Critical reflection
- Progressive
- Strength: Academic know-how, Student capability, Technology and Infrastructure
INTRODUCTION

• ‘At one level, the scholarship of engagement means connecting to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems. Campuses should be viewed by both students and professors not as isolated islands but as staging grounds for action’

(Boyer as cited by D.M. Smith)
Unceasingly redefining how we ‘do’ Service Learning

A CRITICAL look at how Service Learning contributes to influential changes must be explored.

Significant role that educational institutions play is clear
‘A critical service-learning pedagogy names the differential access to power experienced by students, faculty, and community members, and encourages analysis, dialogue, and discussion of those power dynamics.’

Tania D. Mitchell, 2008
Paulo Freire (1997)

‘..To critique oppressive structures and ...to ground all knowledge to social life in human history, culture and relations to power’
This study gives an in-depth contextual look on the background ...reflects the behaviours and perceptions of Malaysian students towards the notion of Service Learning and is instrumental in future research.
Service Learning in MCKL (since Jan 2014)
Institution Background

- Pre-University programmes: A-Levels, Matriculation, Diploma, Professional Accountancy courses
- Location: City, Developing country
- Urban issues
- Private institution
- Middle class income
- Post high school: 17-19 yrs
- Student population: 1200 (as of 2015)
COURSE OVERVIEW
Enable students to have increased awareness of the needs of the community in various areas.

To have an insight into and learn the meaning of community service.

To gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their community, and society.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

How to apply academic, social, and personal skills to improve the community.

Make decisions that have real results.

Gain respect for peers, and increase civic participation.
• 20 hours of service
• 8 hours of classroom lecture
• Written assignments and presentations
• Completed within One semester
Lecture Overview

- Lectures, readings and discussions
- Supplemented by Videos, newspaper cuttings and selected readings
- Interaction between peers and the teacher
AREAS of SERVICE

10 STREAMS (Core Value)

- RELIGIOUS (Honor God)
- YOUNG NATION BUILDERS (Cherish Our Nation)
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- YOUNG NATION BUILDERS (Cherish Our Nation)
- VOLUNTEERISM (Celebrate Volunteerism)
- CHILDREN (Respect Yourself)
- SOCIAL ACTIVISM & POLITICS (Respect Others)
- SOCIAL WELFARE (Respect Others)
- TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY (Respect Property)
- ENVIRONMENT (Cherish Nature)
- EDUCATION (Celebrate Excellence)
- ARTS & CULTURE (Celebrate Diversity)
COMMON CHALLENGES

• ‘A Burden’
• Parents solely prioritize their children’s academic scores and are not fully supportive
• Student’s don’t fully participate.
• LARGE Classes consisting of 40 up to 200 students at one time

= Results in a watered down lecture and assignment to suit all parties.
COMMON CHALLENGES

Partner organizations:
- Schedule setbacks due to Service Learning being held within semesters.
- Timing conflicts as students are only available on weekends.
- More administrative, supporting work given i.e. tidying the office, data entry that is dull, repetitive and doesn’t require much intellectual knowledge.
FINDINGS FROM STUDENT’S REFLECTIONS

Reflections are done via two main methods:
- Written
- Powerpoint or Video Presentations

It must be communicated however, that the excerpts taken here are:
- A sample of the student’s written assignments
- Reflect the most common findings; close to 75% of the overall work read and marked
- Therefore they prove to be worthy of discussion and for further investigation although not an exhaustive list.
A. Students do not acknowledge government & private sector’s role and responsibility in tackling the wider systemic problem

i. Instead, responsibility is placed on the community organizations/self to solve problems

(2) ‘Solutions to avoid the haze effect are to avoid exposure or exercising outside...use air ionizers...switch on air conditioners...watch your diet and ensure you maintain high levels of vitamin A,C and E.’ (Group G, Environment)
B. Students posit that a Positivist Outlook is all that is needed to overcome pervasive structures

(4) ‘I learned a lot from this Service Learning and know that as long as we have goals in life, keep trying and one fine day we are able to get through all the difficulties and hardships we faced.’ (Student B, Social Welfare)
C. Student’s tendency to oversimplify a deeply rooted and interconnected problem without any critical inquiry into the external factors of the situation.

(5) ‘I realize that refugee kids have dreams...they know that education can make their dream come true...they know that education can change their future.’ (Student P, Education)
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

- Lack of perspective taking
- Not being able to engage in higher critical thinking
- Seems to portray an absence to reframe and restructure oppressive social systems.
- Rather, they simply show a change of sentiments and feelings
Robert A Rhoads (1998)

“Such a vision is compatible with liberatory forms of pedagogy in which a **goal of education** is to challenge students **to become knowledgeable** of the **social, political, and economic forces** that have shaped their lives and the lives of others.”

Rahima Wade (2001) cautions

‘Rarely do students in service-learning programs consider whether some injustice has created the need for service in the first place.’
WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE?

- Reinforce the status quo or should it look at creating avenues to address and fix the system that produces the inequality? (Marullo, 2000)

- Failure to do so would only be a misdirection of precious resources and an exercise in futility.
WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE?

• ‘Noblesse Oblige’
The ‘responsibility’ of someone with higher social or financial power to be kind, helpful.

• Kelly & Wolf-Wendel, (2000)

‘Charity-based programs view communities as having ‘needs’ whereas transformative Service Learning based programs view communities as equal partners involved in addressing social problems and identifying solutions.
The Way Forward

Recommendations from past experiences
1. To develop and train up more academic staff to overcome the imbalanced teacher-student ratio. As it stands, there is only one person handling up to 400 students at one time.

2. To introduce more hours into certain programmes such as the Early Childhood Education and Certified Accounting Technician professional course could then enable additional time for students to be engaged with critical readings and discussions.

3. Thirdly, an introductory sessions to explain to the students the background and goals of the organization.
Examples

Facilitating the class through critical readings, discussions and directed writing assignments comes at recognition that inquiry into sociopolitical economic structures are not instinctive and needs to be stimulated into thinking.

(Thomas Deans, 1999)
‘Readings can often invoke voices or experiences not heard or realized in service, and raise questions and inspire dialogue that can lead to deeper understanding. The readings and concepts covered in a critical service-learning course should bring attention to issues of social justice and concepts of privilege and oppression.’

(Mitchell, 2008)
Prioritizing the laying of the right foundations through a Critical Paradigm, we are essentially foresighting an outcome of students capable of making real change for years to come.