The 7th Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Service-Learning

Proposal for a Poster Presentation

Does Service-Learning project enhance civic learning in media students?: Comparing results from two runs of *News Reporting & Feature Writing*

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Abstract:

1.   **Introduction**

Playwright and screenwriter Sir Tom Stoppard once said, "I still believe that if your aim is to change the world, journalism is a more immediate short-term weapon." Similarly, Richard Branson believed that effective storytelling can change the world because words have an incredible power to move us. In this age of fake news, accountability of the journalists to the public is ever more paramount. However, to train media students in ethical knowledge, moral and/or societal responsibility to achieve public goods and make positive impact in society can be daunting. One pedagogy that holds promise to achieve that end is Service-Learning (S-L).

In 2016, Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP) adopted S-L as its signature pedagogy. At the School of Humanities & Social Sciences (HMS), students taking the S-L module *News Reporting & Feature Writing* in the Chinese Media Communications course in October 2016 and October 2017 semesters participated in a study that examined civic outcomes.

2.   **Theoretical framework/literature review**

The theoretical foundation of service-learning has been linked to Dewey's works on the civic purposes of education, learning through project work and emphasis on reflection (Carver, 1997).

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The definition of S-L – a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, pp. 114-115) - that this study adopts aptly capture those points.

Many studies had provided evidence that S-L leads to positive student outcomes across academic and civic domains, including cognitive development, improvements in civic engagement (Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki, 2011) and increased ability to address social issues related to equality, race, and empathy (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Similarly, studies in Singapore had found improved civic attitudes after student-teachers participated in group endeavours in service learning (GESL) projects at the National Institute of Education (Shumer, Goh, & D'Rozario, 2010).

While service-learning in journalism courses is not new (see Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication, 2017), systematic investigation of the impact of S-L on media students' civic learning is not yet well established in Singapore. This study examines whether the group of students in the 2017 cohort who carried out a S-L project and had more interaction with the community members would report greater civic outcomes scores than the 2016 cohort who did not do a S-L project. Another research objective was to gain students' perspectives on their civic learning through qualitative interviews.

3.   **Methods/analysis**

Participants: Participants were two groups of students taking the module *News Reporting & Feature Writing* in the Diploma in Chinese Media & Communications in October 2016 and October 2017 semesters at HMS, NP. The response rate in October 2016 was 90% (43/48), with 76.7% female and 23.3% male, Mean age = 18, SD = 1.25. The response rate in October 2017 was 93%, with 85% female and 15% male, Mean age = 17.95, SD = 1.20. Students' responses were tagged to their student identification number to enable comparison of pre- and post-test responses.

Procedure: To both cohorts of students, the lecturer gave a presentation on the research study to the students in the first two weeks of the semester and set aside time for them to complete a pre-survey via Google form. Reflection activities through in-class discussion, social media or online form were carried out during the semester. At the end of the semester, the students completed the post-survey. For the October 2017 cohort, students were informed about the S-L nature of their module and carried out a S-L project for the community members. In both instances, students had

to arrange an interview with members of the partner-organisation on a separate occasion and complete a feature article of a community member.

Community partners: The two cohorts of students worked with different communities due to difficulties in accessing the same partner-organisation. The 2016 cohort carried out one visit to a halfway house and interacted with ex-offenders through work skills training activities such as Food & Beverages, gardening and car wash as scheduled by the partner-organisation. For the 2017 cohort, groups of students planned and organised two outings for older persons from a non-profit self-help organisation as their S-L project.

Research Design: This study adopts a mixed methods approach, with quasi-experimental, pre-post test design to examine the change in civic outcomes for the group that did not carry out a S-L project (2016 cohort) and for the group that completed a S-L project (2017 cohort), and qualitative interviews of selected students to understand, from their perspectives, the meanings they gave to their S-L experience.

Instrument: The pre-post survey consisted of nine items measuring civic outcomes with five-point responses ranging from (1) *Strongly Disagree* to (5) *Strongly Agree*. The measure was adapted from relevant scale items in the literature (Denby, 2008; Furco, Muller & Ammon, 1998; Moley, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron & McFarland, 2002) and has high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha = .89. Examples of the survey items are: I often try to act on solutions that address social, local or international problems in the community; I am aware of what can be done to meet the important needs in the community.

Qualitative interviews: Eight students from the 2016 cohort and four students from the 2017 cohort participated in focus group discussion or individual interviews. Semi-structured questions intended to elicit civic outcomes included: Were there any social issues or concerns that you became more aware of through this service-learning project? Tell us about a point during your S-L experience that you began to feel a sense of civic responsibility towards this community. Students were probed further whenever they mentioned experiences related to civic learning.

Data Analysis: The Civic Outcomes scores from the pre-post tests were analysed using paired samples t-test for each cohort of participants. The qualitative data was analysed thematically to identify patterns or themes in students' civic learning.

4. **Results and Discussion**

Paired sample *t*-tests revealed that the student-participants in October 2017 cohort (that completed a S-L project) showed significant increase in their Civic Outcomes mean scores in the post-S-L survey (Mean$_{post(SL)}$ = 3.73, SD = 0.62) than in the pre-S-L condition (Mean$_{pre(SL)}$ = 3.55, SD = 0.50), $t(39)$ = -2.21, p = .03) whereas there was no significant change in civic outcomes mean score at the start (Mean$_{pre}$ = 3.66, SD = 0.49) and end of semester (Mean$_{post}$ = 3.59, SD = 0.58, $t(42)$ = 0.68 ; p = .50) for the October 2016 cohort in which students only interacted with community members and did not carry out any S-L project).

Thematic analysis revealed that students described civic learning as a 'natural' outcome from their interaction and bond with the community members. They reported having a sense of responsibility to influence readers to be open-minded, and that they applied objectivity in the feature writing task. For example, a 2017 participant who featured an elderly as straight-talking that might hurt others with her words also stated that she presented the cultural context and underlying meaning of what the older person said in her feature article.

5. Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

The promising results from this study that revealed S-L to be effective in enhancing civic learning of media students adds credence to the S-L pedagogy and its application to the polytechnic education scene in Singapore. Carrying out a S-L project increased students' interaction with the community members and enhanced civic learning. Qualitative findings provides evidence of students applying skills and ethical knowledge in their feature writing task.

Keywords: civic learning, service-learning project, journalism, media (up to 5)

References: no more than 10 references.

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