Reflective Teaching in Service-Learning to improve academic connection in a Chinese Literary module

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Background

Ngee Ann Polytechnic adopted Service-Learning (S-L) as a signature pedagogy in 2016. All students will do at least one S-L module during their course.

♦ Course-based  ♦ Credit-bearing educational experience

Students
★ participate in **mutually identified service activities** that **benefit the community** and

★ **reflect** on the service activity in such a way as to gain
  ○ further **understanding of course content**
  ○ a **broader appreciation of the discipline**
  ○ an enhanced sense of **personal values and civic responsibility**.

Bringle & Clayton, 2012: 114-115
Research Focus


This study focuses on the **academic connection** aspect of S-L and aims to examine:

a) How well do students perceive academic connection in a S-L Chinese literary module in two consecutive runs of the module?

b) How might academic connection be strengthened?
Significance of Study

- Research on S-L has typically been studied in colleges and universities as a separate course with a focus on S-L (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001) or as strategy for teaching academic concepts in disciplines such as education (Chen, 2004), and nursing (Romack, 2004).

- The study of academic S-L within a Chinese literary module in a polytechnic setting in Singapore is less investigated.

- The effort to integrate S-L with literature can be problematic and challenging (Grobman, 2005) ⇒ useful for other courses that face similar challenges.
Connection between Academic Content & S-L Project

• Fiction, poetry, essay and drama of modern Chinese literature from 1917 to present in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia
• Analyse works by famous writers such as Lu Xun, Jin Yong
• Functions, trends & development of Chinese literary associations in China during the May Fourth Movement
• Case study of local literary association

Conduct four or five children’s storybook reading sessions at public libraries (with one session at the site of the local Chinese literary association)

Interview participants; write feature reports for potential publication in newspapers or the association’s magazine.
Challenges in achieving academic connection

Quotes from students in 2017 cohort

We didn’t teach the children literature. We actually just read the books to them… we’ve other modules, Children Literature and Project Development, which are more related to the S-L project.

I feel that our service learning wasn’t really related to our final exam for this module. It’s more of an exposure for us to interact with the children and to pick up some skills along the way.
Reflective Teaching

Evaluate delivery of S-L and students’ responses

• Obtain feedback from students in Oct 2017 semester
• Note parts that succeeded and possible reasons
• Analyse elements that were ineffective
• Make changes to improve the next run
Changes made for Apr 2018 cohort

- **Perceived Preparedness for S-L**: Explicit description of the purpose and objective of the S-L project to show how academic contents of *Modern Chinese Literature* are related to the role and function of the community partners and the storybook reading sessions.

- **Perceived impact of S-L**: Field visit to the Chinese literary association in which students learnt of the challenges faced by the association; how by promoting the language might revive interest in Chinese literature.

- **Perceived quality of reflection prompts**: Explicit explanation of the reflection prompts during class, and providing additional reference materials.
Methods
Participants

Year 2 students taking *Modern Chinese Literature* in October 2017 and April 2018 semesters were invited to complete a post S-L survey at the end of their semester.

**2017 cohort**
- 100% response rate (29)
- Mean age: 19
- 83% female
- Interviewed 4 students

**2018 cohort**
- 82% response rate (32/39)
- Mean age: 18.5
- 75% female
- Interviewed 2 students
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>No. of items</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Connection</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>This S-L experience helped me to learn the academic content of the module.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-L Features: Perceived preparedness for S-L</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Before the S-L project/activities, I understood the purpose and objective of S-L in this module.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived quality of reflection questions</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>The reflection questions were structured with clear directions and guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Impact of S-L</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>In this S-L experience, I had opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results
Results

How well do students perceive academic connection in a S-L Chinese literary module in the two consecutive runs of the module?

The 2018 cohort perceived a **stronger link between the S-L project and academic contents** than the 2017 cohort.

![Academic Connection Mean Score](chart)

- **AC (2017)**: 3.59
- **AC (2018)**: 3.99

Significant increase

p<.05
Results

How might academic connection be strengthened?

The mean scores for the variables in the 2018 cohort are higher than those for the 2017 cohort which may reflect improvement in the implementation of the S-L module.
Improved perception of academic connection

Quotes from students in the 2018 cohort

I understand how it’s taught. In Chinese literature, we learnt about the different literary associations in China in the 1917, then there is the Chinese literary association in Singapore [our community partner].

We will ask the children questions regarding the story, which made them think more… It’s just like when we do literature; it’s analysing and it’s all open-ended. So we really need to think: What is the purpose of the author writing this? What is the purpose of him doing this action?... to make our audience understand the story better.
Discussion

• Bringle and Hatcher (1995): a S-L course takes several offerings to stabilise (e.g., instructor confidence, community partner’s familiarity, improvement of reflection activities)

• Faculty development does not end after a S-L module has been designed and implemented; there is always room for improvement in the next run of the module.

• Need to carefully and critically examine own practices and improve them to achieve the promise of the S-L pedagogy, especially when the academic contents and the S-L project might not seem a perfect fit.
Conclusion

Reflective ways lecturers might strengthen students’ perception of academic connection:

• Feedback from students (Survey, interview, guided reflection & mutual interaction)
• Feedback from community partners
• Community of Practice – discussion with S-L lecturers
References


