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

Angel Chan1, Juliet Choo1, Tan Yew Kong2, Sangeeta Nair1, Jean Ong1, Tiong Shuan Shiuan1, Faith Ong3

1School of Humanities & Social Sciences, 2Centre for Learning & Teaching Excellence, 3Office of Service-Learning, Ngee Ann Polytechnic

Introduction
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). This study examined the civic outcomes in two cohorts of students (2016 and 2017) taking the module News Reporting & Feature Writing in the Chinese Media Communications course at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. Another research objective was to gain insights into students’ perspectives on their civic learning through qualitative interviews.

Methods

Procedure
Explained research study to students in the first two weeks of the semester; students completed a pre-S-L online survey
Conducted reflection through in-class discussion, social media or online form
Students arranged for an interview with members of the partner-organisation and completed a feature article

Research Design: Mixed methods
Pre, Post-Test Online Survey
Measure change in civic outcomes score for 2016 cohort that did not carry out a S-L project and 2017 cohort that completed a S-L project.

 Instrument
Nine items measuring civic outcomes; Cronbach’s alpha = .89
Example of item: I plan to find time or a way to make a positive difference in the community.

Qualitative Interview
Eight students from 2016 cohort and four students from 2017 cohort participated in focus group discussions or individual interviews.

Example of semi-structured interview questions
- Were there any social issues or concerns that you became more aware of through the activities/S-L project?
- Tell us about a point during your S-L experience that you began to feel a sense of civic responsibility towards this community.

Results

Oct 2016 cohort
Response rate: 90% (43/48)
77% female; 23% male
Mean age = 18, SD = 1.25
S-L Project: one visit to a halfway house; interacted with ex-offenders through work skills training activities (e.g., F&B, gardening, car wash) as scheduled by partner organisation; wrote feature article

Oct 2017 cohort
Response rate: 93% (40/43)
85% female; 15% male
Mean age = 17.95, SD = 1.20
S-L Project: planned and organised two outings (e.g., picnic at Botanical garden) for older persons; interacted during outings; wrote feature article

Figure 1: Comparison of difference in pre, post-S-L mean civic outcomes scores for 2016 and 2017 cohorts

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 (nagging was how older persons expressed concern) in her feature article.

Conclusion
S-L is effective in enhancing civic learning of media students. It adds credence to the S-L pedagogy and its application to the polytechnic education scene in Singapore. Students’ greater participation in the S-L project and increased interaction with the community members and enhanced civic learning. Qualitative findings provided evidence of students applying skills and ethical knowledge in their feature writing task.

References


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