

EDITORIAL

From classroom to “real-life”: Experiential and service learning in tertiary education

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Recommended citation:

Chng, H. H., & Sow, C. H. (2013). From classroom to “real-life”: Experiential and service learning in tertiary education. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 3(2), 49-53.

<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.33280>

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Experiential learning, through face-to-face interactions and teamwork, is a crucial part of the training of the mind and the development of the whole person, and is part of the unique value of the university experience.

NUS President Prof Tan Chorh Chuan
The Alumnus, 2013

For this volume we invited several colleagues from 3 institutions –University of Hong Kong (HKU), National Institute of Education (NIE) (Singapore), and National University of Singapore (NUS) – to reflect on the issue of experiential/ service learning as they understand and practise it in their respective disciplinary domains. This volume is divided into four sections; in the opening section we start with two different perspectives offered by **Amy Tsui**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President of Teaching and Learning at the HKU and **Alex Ip**, Professor in Biological Sciences, NUS. We begin with Amy Tsui, who was one of the four invited speakers at the [Universitas 21 Educational Innovation Conference](#) held at the NUS in November 2012. At the conference, she spoke about experiential learning in the context of nurturing global citizens, and for this volume we invited her to share her views on the matter with JNUSTA readers.

Tsui starts by offering the following definition of experiential learning with reference to a Senate Paper from HKU; namely, “*Experiential learning refers to the kind of learning that requires students to tackle real-life issues and problems by drawing on theoretical knowledge that they have learnt in the formal curriculum. ... It is in these situations that students put theoretical knowledge to the test, gain a deeper understanding of theories and, most importantly, construct knowledge. It is also in these situations that students develop their core values and generic skills. As such, experiential learning is relevant to all programmes.*” Three key challenges are identified; the first being that of integrating this form of learning into a course in the formal curriculum. Tsui underscores the challenges and importance for organisers of experiential learning to clearly identify the objectives of the course and the issues that the students are expected to address during the learning process. In addition, one should carefully consider the appropriate sites of learning that will lend themselves to the engagement with these issues. The second challenge that Tsui emphasises is the importance of providing quality supervision and the responsibilities of

supervisors. The third challenge is the least explored in institutions of higher learning and most challenging: assessment of experiential learning. These three challenges are addressed in different degrees of detail in the contributions from colleagues across different disciplinary domains – see Sections 2 through 4 in this volume.

Alex Ip, who teaches Biological Sciences at the NUS, understands experiential learning quite differently from Amy Tsui. In his contribution, Ip argues that experiential learning is fundamentally “*a theory about how people learn, and NOT a teaching method*”, the latter being more appropriately captured by labels such as “service learning” and “project learning”. Ip elaborates on his view on experiential learning by referring to David Kolb’s four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle. These stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Ip explains that these four stages emphasise the learning “process” of the individual, which is different from “experience-based learning”, which is a teaching strategy. With reference to “experience-based learning”, Ip cites the list of six different criteria proposed by Andresen et al. for the learning to be experiential. In addition, Ip argues that the outcome of experiential learning must lead to active experimentation which should be the focus of assessment, and the aim is that it would lead to another cycle of experiential learning. Ip further discusses different modes of assessment for the learning outcomes of experiential learning.

Section 2 focuses on the practicum as an experiential learning platform. The two contributions come from colleagues working out of the Business School and teacher training contexts. In each of these, the authors **Audrey Chia** and **Benny Lee** describe the implementation and the challenges of a critical component that is termed “the practicum”, a hands-on direct experience that students undergo in their respective programmes. According to Chia, the challenges faced by the students from the Business School in a practicum include task learning and skill enhancement. She notes that perspective-taking is the most important aspect of the practicum. When students enter into a process of trying to understand why and how others think and feel, they become better able to manage relationships with the client organisation and, more generally, with others. The other key challenge refers to keeping the students’ enthusiasm from flagging during the course of the practicum. Chia also shares her experience on how the challenges described may be addressed by implementing a mechanism for feedback and assessment.

In his contribution, Benny Lee details the Practicum carried out by student teachers at the NIE, Singapore. The practicum component is highly structured with explicit goals and learning outcomes, minimum hours of teaching in specified subject areas, and a minimum number of structured class observations

of the student teachers by the Cooperating Teacher (CT) and the NIE supervisor. These activities are followed by immediate structured feedback. Here Lee points out the similarities and differences in the role of the CT and the NIE supervisor. In addition, the student teachers are required to produce reflections to relate the links between their teaching experience and larger institutional goals. Such reflections are discussed formally between the student teachers and the supervisors. Having several people involved in the supervision process of each student teacher minimises occasional lapses in the proper supervision of practicums.

In Section 3, one further NIE programme, namely the Group Endeavours in Service Learning (GESL) as well as the perspective from the Office of Student Affairs (OSA), NUS provide additional thoughts for how experiential/service learning may be conducted for holistic character development. The first contribution by **Low Ee Ling** describes a rigorous programme instituted on a teacher training platform that aims to equip teacher trainees before they present themselves in the schoolroom. GESL aims to cultivate team work, management and leadership skills. In addition, it serves as a platform for inter-ethnic and inter-religious understanding. Low provides a concise description of the structure of GESL and the pedagogical considerations behind its development, including assessment and review. Since GESL is a group project, Low presents a clear discussion on how the student teachers are also evaluated individually despite the fact that they are required to work as a team during the course of the project.

The second contribution in Section 3, by **KC Lee**, considers how experiential learning may be hosted from outside the mainstream curriculum, through the platform of student halls of residence. According to Lee, the approach adopted by the OSA to experiential learning is three-pronged, each requiring a synergy among different stakeholders within and beyond the university. The first approach is through a range of community involvement programmes (CIPs) and co-curricular activities. These initiatives centre on developing teamwork, effective habits and leadership qualities. The second approach is through the offering of hall modules. These modules have the advantage of capturing learning for a shared community in a systematic, coherent and concrete way. Another key element of hall modules is the incorporation of team work that fosters interpersonal and organisational relationships, as well as a deep appreciation for inter-cultural understanding, thus making the most of the fact that the halls host a diverse student population and represent a microcosm of the “real world”. The third approach is the collaboration with faculty members to embed experiential learning into their respective academic modules, to develop students’ confidence and competence in exploring, critically examining and questioning what they have learned. Such a process is believed to bring about

various positive attributes such as transfer of theory to practice, intense level of engagement through conversations with peers, experts, academics, industry players and others in shared learning communities. Lee also considers some of the challenges encountered in facilitating the experiential learning for the students.

In the final section, we turn to a difficult but important issue – assessment. The assessment of experiential/service learning is, as Amy Tsui notes in her opening remarks, “*the least explored area in higher education and the most challenging*”. In the final contribution to this volume, **Laksh Samavedham** reflects on this challenging issue from the domain of engineering education. Laksh identifies the possible factors that have contributed to the challenge in assessing experiential learning. These factors include the complex nature of the project, the technical and people-related challenges, varied amounts of personalised learning, and the mismatch in expectations from the different parties involved. As a consequence, the learning outcomes for the experiential learning modules may end up being broad and fuzzy. Laksh makes five constructive suggestions to improve the assessment of experiential learning for students in engineering.

This volume aims to trigger an exchange of ideas on the subject of experiential/service learning by presenting different perspectives from across disciplinary domains. We hope that these differing perspectives will provide valuable food for thought.

ONLINE FORUM: We wish to invite all readers to the JNUSTA online forum to share their perspectives, opinions, thoughts and experiences about experiential/service learning in their own institutions. Post your comments at [JNUSTA Online Forum](#)

COMING IN AUGUST: Another volume featuring a discussion on the teaching of ethics is currently being prepared. Look out for the August issue of JNUSTA. If you wish to share your own thoughts and experiences about ethics and the teaching of ethics in your own domain, please contact the Editorial Office at jnusta@nus.edu.sg