Developing authentic professional knowledge through transformative community engagement in an interdisciplinary service learning project

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This showcase presents a preliminary analysis of a community service learning project designed to align more authentically with contemporary society and emerging constructs of professional knowledge. As described in the paper, the project involves a multidisciplinary group of students working collaboratively with a community organisation to find creative responses to challenging issues concerning the organisation’s identity, how it interfaces with stakeholders, and how it evidences its inclusive practice. Of particular interest is how the interdisciplinary practice of the students within a service learning context encouraged reconsideration of their world-view and their role as future professionals. Also highlighted is the need for greater congruence between the goals of the project and the structural elements of the curriculum.

**Keywords:** Community service learning, interdisciplinary community engagement, authentic knowledge

**Context**

One of the major roles for educators in higher education settings is the facilitation of professional knowledge which, when linked with employability, demands not only closer attention to those sectors in society where graduates will find employment, but also a focus on the nature of society and how it is changing. In terms of knowledge, this is reflected in a growing emphasis on a more ‘socially robust’ form of knowledge “…created within an expanded context of being useful. No longer confined to the university, it is interdisciplinary and conducted in active engagement and collaboration with society – the wider community, civil society, industry, and the region” (Gibbons et al, 1994 in Hazelkorn 2009, p. 5). Further, there is the need for graduates to be more socially aware and prepared for transformative engagement that transcends traditional professional and disciplinary boundaries.

The initiative showcased in this paper starts to explore the potential of service learning to facilitate community engagement, and to facilitate more contemporary and pedagogically authentic learning opportunities for students. In this context, service learning is understood as: “A pedagogy of engagement in which students address a genuine community need through volunteer service that is connected explicitly to the academic curriculum of their academic course through ongoing structured reflections designed for: maximizing a deep understanding of course content; addressing genuine community needs with impact; and developing learners’ sense of civic responsibility” (Stewart 2012). Given presentation constraints, this paper attempts to capture some of the experiences of undergraduate students in a multidisciplinary team in a service learning pilot project. The paper does not provide a comprehensive description and evaluation of the pilot project, but seeks to provide one basis for reflection and review of the project for subsequent offerings.

**Overview of the pilot service learning project**
The project described in this paper is located within a larger university-wide Community Service Learning Lab (CSLL) environment, piloting several projects in units across a range of discipline. The specific project discussed in the paper involved a not-for-profit community organisation and a multidisciplinary group of third and fourth year undergraduate students. The community organisation is committed to strengthening individual, family and community life through a range of community programs, and disability, foster care and family support services. The organisation services the outer southern region of Brisbane and Logan City, in Queensland. To provide a focus for service learning each community organisation partnering on projects in the CSLL was asked to identify a problem or issue to be addressed. At the end of 2011 and beginning of 2012, the projects were promoted through online teaching and learning sites, by email, and university student intranet and offered to students through units that allowed for independent or community-oriented projects, with assessment aligned across all units. In this way, students selected to participate in the service learning projects and enrol in associated elective units in their specific discipline areas. Each unit was a 12 credit point unit, the standard unit in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The organisation proposed challenges around the organisation’s identity as the problem or issue to focus on in the CSLL project discussed in this paper. The organisation sought to more effectively develop, document and, communicate its identity linked to its mission around strengthening individual, family and community life. Given this focus, the project known as the 'Identity, Interface, Inclusion’ (3I’s) project was promoted to business, psychology, law, legal studies, and creative industries students. The outcome was the formation of a group comprising seven students from multidisciplinary backgrounds and at various stages of undergraduate studies, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Students listed by course, primary major, and completed credit points on enrolment in unit for CSLL project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Primary Major</th>
<th>Completed credit points when commencing project</th>
<th>Total credit points of course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Bachelor of Creative Industries/Bachelor of Human Services</td>
<td>Interactive and Visual Design</td>
<td>288 credit points</td>
<td>384 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Bachelor of Business</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>180 credit points</td>
<td>288 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Bachelor of Creative Industries</td>
<td>Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>168 credit points</td>
<td>288 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Bachelor of Creative Industries</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>204 credit points</td>
<td>288 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Bachelor of Design</td>
<td>Interior Design</td>
<td>384 credit points</td>
<td>324 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor of Design</td>
<td>Interior Design</td>
<td>384 credit points</td>
<td>312 credit points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Bachelor of Behavioural Science</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>216 credit points</td>
<td>288 credit points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A student completing a Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology)/Bachelor of Social Work from the same institution, completed a Social Work Field Education unit at the community partner, and acted as a key liaison point and conduit between the community partner and the team on the CSLL project.

The students worked collaboratively to produce a proposal for the community partner. The proposal identified, discussed, and provided recommendations to address challenges around identity. In line with the requirements for the units in which students were enrolled, there were three items formally assessed: a project proposal comprising individual and group components; four individual reflective blog entries across the semester; and an end of semester presentation to community partners, other project teams, and academics. The proposal for the community partner, the presentation, and individual blogs included students’ reflections on experiences, drawing explicit connections to the influence on their professional learning including disposition and capacity to work in the community on complex social issues. With the permission of the students, these outcomes formed the data set analysed thematically to inform ongoing research, development and implementation. Some preliminary findings inform the following discussion.
Discussion

This section highlights some of the students’ experiences as they relate to working in a multidisciplinary team and with a community partner as a client and collaborator.

Multidisciplinary becomes interdisciplinary

Analysis of the data reveals a strong desire by the students to participate as part of an interdisciplinary team working on a real project. Responses by several students suggest frustration to being ‘locked’ to a discipline, identifying the desire to transcend discipline boundaries and constraints. As conveyed by one student:

We’ve all made a choice to do this subject and that says something in itself. I think that perhaps we all wanted to explore, and expand our knowledge, and do something a little bit more than just our discipline perhaps let’s us do.

In terms of the students’ experience of interdisciplinarity in the project several point to positive outcomes such as developing a better understanding of and skills linked to collaboration and teamwork. One student noted that this was the first opportunity for a group project for the whole semester. In addition, students described how the project opened new possibilities of doing things differently:

…the interdisciplinary side of things, has just totally shifted the way I would approach a project like this.

The project informed new insights and ways of learning; facilitated the drawing together of prior experience and knowledge in such a way that the synthesis was more than aggregation; challenged professional stereotypes; and helped students make connections to other forms of knowledge, and to other learning experiences:

And I’m doing a subject at the moment, it’s called Ragtrade, and we’ve got to help like a fashion label, like to help their business and their marketing, which sort of relates to how we’re trying to help [community partner], so I’ve definitely drawn some connections there on that.

While the integrated nature of the group provided individual members with a sense of security enabling them to approach the academic team and challenge the weighting of the assessment items, it also highlighted insecurities, and conflicting emotions and assumptions that needed to be confronted and addressed in order to reduce the angst and continue as a productive team member. Also evident was the interplay between individual identity and collective identity and the extent to which individuals could make a valued and equal contribution to the project. This was particularly evident in the early stages of the project when members were still developing understanding of their own and others’ discipline knowledge, strengths and weaknesses. The issue of the individual was also raised in relation to personality and how much personalities of individual members were understood to be significant in affecting group dynamics and project outcomes.

Several students commented on the diverse nature of the disciplines represented in the project and how this provided a greater opportunity to learn differently and employ a more holistic approach to understanding and beginning to address the identity needs of the community partner. In addition, one student noted how having another team member with a similar discipline was also helpful because they could speak the same language and bounce around ideas.

Community partner as collaborator client

Working with a community-based client was a different experience for several of the team, whose previous practical experience was restricted to discipline specific settings. Students noted how the social agenda of the community partner triggered introspection and made them critically aware of their own behaviour and how inadvertently one’s practice can be discriminatory and oppressive. The focus of the project underpinned by the need to be inclusive and develop an inclusive interface for the community organisation also reinforced and helped consolidate a more inclusive and collaborative approach by the team. Several comments also suggested an increasing awareness of professional practice as a change agent and an opportunity to empower others as agents for change for the social good.
The complexity of community issues also became increasingly apparent to the team. For many members dealing with an open-ended issue that had no known or knowable outcome at the outset and required framing before a proposal could be formulated was particularly challenging and frustrating. As one student stated:

The unknown is scary. It’s intangible. Unable to be grasped.

It was anticipated that introducing students to an inquiry led approach would provide sufficient support. The reflections of the students and experience of the teaching team revealed other aspects of the learning environment and the curriculum were not considered thoroughly enough, and in some instances, conspired to produce conflicting experiences for the students.

This is succinctly and powerfully articulated in the following student response:

This kind of experience we’re having now is so authentic and to try and replicate that [in a presentation] makes it unauthentic, like it’s not real then.

These and other findings will now inform the development of the unit for next semester with the outcome produced by the students further developed by the next cohort of students. Some of the existing students have indicated an interest in continuing with the project and supporting the new students as they move towards a more finalised outcome for the community partner.

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**References**


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