

Experiential Learning and Innovations in Professional Education – Interdisciplinary Roundtable (Faculty of Education)

Dr Gary Harfitt & Ms Jessie Chow

The University of Hong Kong

Ms Jessie Chow

We aim to nurture students to be educators, who will be responsive to the reality. It means that we have to unlearn the ways that we were taught, and then we learn new ways that work in this 21st century. When it comes to EL (Experiential Learning), I think we share a very similar timeline with the Faculty of Medicine. We started our work in 2016, this academic year is the fourth year since the EL projects were launched. This year we make EL compulsory at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. We are the first Faculty of Education in Hong Kong and Asia to make EL compulsory in teacher training. Over the three cohorts, we have around 1,200 students from undergraduate and postgraduate for training. At postgraduate level, we have teachers who completed a one-year teacher training with us, we focus more on the application of EL in this community-based placement where students can bridge EL with their practice. For the undergraduate students, we believe we have enough amount of time for them to achieve more, so we organize credit-bearing courses. Each course has its separate intended learning outcome and separate input training sessions. That means we do not send the students to the community without any training. We train them. We equip them up with the necessary skills, and they serve the community.

Another question that pops up in our mind is that, who are the knowledge holders for teacher training in the 21st century? As we believe knowledge does not reside within the four walls of the university, we actually engage our community partners as co-educators in our teacher training. We believe the community is a very salient knowledge base with many passionate mentors across different sectors of the community. They can help our teachers mature. We have a wide

range of topics focusing on different social issues, like poverty, child right, resilience, conservation and social innovation, STEM education and design thinking. Approaching the fourth year, we aspire to engage students as our partners. We have been trying to do so by supporting the students' initiatives through the University's Gallant Ho Experiential Learning Fund. We want to do more on this and Gary will now share about our experiences.

Dr Gary Harfitt

I think Rick had mentioned the labor intensiveness that goes into experiential learning. Jessie and I are the team in the Faculty of Education and I'm very proud to work with Jessie and teachers as well who have come on board and run this experiential learning. There is no doubt, it's much easier to run a twenty four-hour course that is fixed in a classroom, where we going every Tuesday night teach it, finish it and give assignment at the end. But I have to say the transformative nature of this work on students and on us and on teachers has been extraordinary. And certainly the highlight of my teaching career both in the secondary schools and in the university. So I wanted to focus on that transformative side because I think that the benefits are just so, so strong. The term 'interdisciplinarity' came up a lot today. One of the things we learned very quickly was to open our EL courses to all faculties, and that has been extraordinary. Because it has opened up our students in our faculty to other students from other disciplines and areas. And I know that they've benefited from working with education majors, too. That was a surprise for us, how many other students would be willing to come on board and take courses that were offered by Education, it's something which we haven't done in our faculty very well. That's something we're very proud of.

We've also had several colleagues who would offer their EL projects in areas that they wanted to develop and reflecting their own interests and their students' interest. That has been one way of sustaining the work that we have and that's always an issue there. We made a big decision right at the beginning and that was to make it a pass/fail course, so we have no grades to these credit-bearing courses but they are all credit-bearing. Many people warned me, if it's not carrying a grade, the students won't sign up. And I held my breath a little bit when we did the add/drop period but actually I thought there was an increase and no one has ever come to me to say how come I don't get an A for this or a B. The simple fact is we wanted our students to take these

programmes and courses from their heart, not because they knew it's a quick way to get an A grade. And it took away a lot of nonsense about how to measure and monitor when actually, you can't be with the students all the time and you can't see all the work that goes on, so actually, taking that away just allows us to focus on the core of their work. As I said, it's been a joy to see them engage, so it's just simply a part of the learning process we teach, we input, we never send students away on their own, or without preparation. We learn with them and we learn from them, and that's been a very powerful tool for us.

We work with more than 30 community parties in Hong Kong, and we set up 14 credit-bearing undergraduate courses in the last three years, all of which have been over-subscribed. One of the things that we try to do is as Jessie said, is to have our students as partners, that's a theme now in our university. But we've actually seen some of our students who have participated in our EL projects, from other faculties as well as our own setting up their own NGOs on the back of a trip to Cambodia, Vietnam, or a project in Hong Kong. That's something we didn't push, but it's something we've encouraged them to work with. We've also seen our NGOs connecting with other NGOs in Hong Kong, so the boundary crossing is not just with us it's actually with other partners too. And we've been very focused in a way, what Francine says about disseminating and researching, so crucial. And we've been lucky enough to have talks in Dubai and Mongolia and here in Hong Kong on what our students and our partners have been doing. So there is a clear attraction from different people around the world to what's going on in EL. And I guess that's a way of looking at Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). That's a means of how we frame that. We publish, we write and we do research in this area.

But there are tensions, there's no doubt, just including the dark side and Jessie used that phrase in an article about EL. But it's something that we learned to embrace. And I have to say the first 18 months when people really criticized us for doing this, it was easy just to run away and hide, and pretend those criticisms were in fact a little unfair. But actually that's something which everybody has. If you think about it, we've had students, when you make something compulsory, you automatically alienate a larger proportion of people because they don't want to do it. It's much easier just to offer it to people who want to do it. But we've known this is important for our teachers of the future. We also felt that it was worthwhile engaged with. But we actually

have many students who said “The only way to teach is to teach them, teach them, and teach.” “Why should I go to a community partner and spend five weeks working with an NGO, what's that got to do with my classroom teaching?” But that's embodied knowledge, that's knowledge that the person has brought to the course. We can't change that, but we can try and work with it, we have to accept it. We also had colleagues who argued that EL was a waste of classroom, “why are you taking away our lesson time, sending students out to do practice in an NGO or a community-based organization when they could be in a school teaching?” And so we still have that issue. Only two weeks ago, a colleague of mine in a meeting said that the EL projects that we offer are wildly diverse. I took that as praise but it wasn't meant that way. But that's the way you have to see it. You realize that people have opinions and views and that's why scholarship is important. You break those views down by showing them the benefits that are coming into our students.

And I just like to finish by mentioning the future of teachers. Teaching is not just about technical skills, it's a moral undertaking. And for us, EL has always been about boundary crossing. The elephant in the room in Hong Kong at the moment is what's going on outside. And I have to say that this week we've been visiting community partners and our students are working there. The only way Hong Kong is going to pull itself out the ditch that it's in is by building bridges. I think the EL is one of the ways to do that, and not just withdrawing to the classrooms and pretending everything is okay. So bridging community, bridging universities, bridging schools, is something we very much want to try.