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Re-designing a first year teacher education community service-learning subject using constructive alignment

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Abstract

Community service-learning is a recognised pedagogical approach in higher education especially in a North American context (Eyler & Giles, 1999). However, it is less common in Australian higher education and especially so in a first year teacher education subject (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2005). This paper reports on measures taken to constructively align an innovative subject in the first year program of a teacher education course that incorporates community service-learning and foundational principles of sociology. The subject has been offered since 2008. We initially describe the subject, its current intended outcomes and assessment practices to achieve these outcomes. This is followed by an examination of students' actual learning outcomes and how these have differed from the subject's intended aim.

Using reflective practice, we then invite our audience into our deliberations as we redesign this subject using constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) to better achieve our aim of facilitating preservice teachers' informed and experiential understanding of structural inequality within societies, and factors that impact on unequal access to education. These deliberations focus on examining and constructively aligning the intended learning outcomes, learning experiences, and assessment tools with the intended aim of the subject.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present redesign considerations of a first year teacher education subject incorporating foundational sociological concepts and community service-learning (CSL). These considerations are based on a constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) approach to curriculum design. Data used to support arguments in this paper are drawn from 100 first year teacher education students' online reflections. Twenty-one males and 79 females were involved in the 2008 study. The reflections were analysed using a simple collation of data (to ascertain the types of community service undertaken) and grounded theory processes using a constant comparative method to analyse written reflections (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Concepts of Communities

La Trobe University was initially established on a social justice foundation and this philosophy continues to inform learning and teaching within the institution. In 2008, the Bendigo Faculty of Education redesigned its Bachelor of Education program, and arguably, issues to do with social justice, equity, and widening participation in tertiary education underpinned the program's redesign and especially the inclusion of a new subject called Concepts of Communities (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009). The subject is

offered in second semester of the student's first year and was originally designed to consist of two separate, yet informing, modules. Approximately 300 teacher education students are enrolled in the subject. The first module addresses key concepts to do with community and community service. Students are expected to source a CSL opportunity and to complete a minimum of 20 hours community service over the semester. Students are free to choose the type of community service opportunity that most appeals to them. The students present their community service experience and reflections as an e-portfolio assessment in week 13 of the subject.

The second module addresses sociocultural content as it relates to education. It deals with traditional and foundational sociology content applied to education such as knowledge and power (the curriculum), class, gender and ethnicity (multicultural classrooms, social inclusion, social justice), families, institutions and education. The first and second modules are conceptualised to inform each other - as students undertake community service they personally observe, experience, reflect upon, and make links to the sociocultural content of the second module.

Community Service-Learning

Community Service-learning is not new to institutions of higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). It has been integral to teaching and learning for many decades and taken numerous forms from simple orientation activities of an afternoon's duration to individual subjects including a service component, to programs of study, which incorporate years of integrated community service (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Commonly CSL is incorporated into sociology subjects – deemed a natural fit, as both are underpinned by common concepts and philosophies (Palmer & Savoie, 2002). However, CSL is relatively unknown in first year teacher education subjects in Australia, although it is advocated as a valuable pedagogical strategy for preservice teacher's professional identity formation (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2005), and their first year transition and engagement (Donnison & Itter, 2010). La Trobe University is one of the few Faculties of Education in Australia that have chosen to incorporate CSL into their *first year* Bachelor of Education program.

Community service-learning is more than just volunteer work in that significant learning should occur as a result of the student's service to the community (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). The reciprocal nature between the community service and the learning is articulated by Prentice and Garcia (2000, p. 20), who note that 'the service reinforces and strengthens the learning and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service'. Reflection is paramount. Indeed, Vickers, Harris, and McCarthy (2004) argue that without reflection, students will not make links between their experiences and curriculum content and their service involvement will become a simple 'feel-good exercise' that does not encourage 'more considered analysis of the social conditions giving rise to service needs in the first place' (p. 131).

Community Service-Learning benefits teacher education students in many ways. It provides opportunities for teacher education students to become engaged citizens who are culturally sensitive and empathetic and have developed notions of cultural diversity, social justice, citizenship, and social responsibility (Butcher et al., 2003; Eyler and Giles, 1999). Furthermore, students can potentially apply their classroom learning to real-life contexts, thus developing an appreciation of the theory/practice nexus and the interrelatedness 'of all learning and life experiences' (Prentice & Garcia, 2000, p. 22).

On a more practical level CSL facilitates student's exploration of career options and can be instrumental in affirming students' career choices (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Arguably, this promotes engagement in course work as students become more committed to their chosen career. Furthermore, CSL that involves some form of educational element (such as coaching, tutoring, or some other supervisory role with children) can provide student teachers with an opportunity to 'act out' being a teacher. Such experiences are valuable for socialising preservice teachers into the teaching profession as they potentially shift students' perception of themselves as a student to that of a teacher; a shift that is particularly complex, yet vital (Britzman, 1993). Indeed, Moss, Pittaway and McCarthy (2006) note that students who are unable to develop their 'identity' as students and as teachers, and bridge the gap between novice and expert, may become disoriented and disengaged from one or more of these roles. Thus CSL is one approach that has the potential not only to enhance student teachers' cognitive development, self concept, and cultural awareness, but also the capacity to help student teachers appreciate the links between their learning and their experiences and develop their identities as both students and future teaching professionals (Donnison & Itter, 2010).

Current aim of the subject

The aim of Concepts of Communities is to facilitate students' experiential understanding of structural inequality and disadvantage within their own communities, and to develop a stronger understanding of factors that impact on unequal access to education for students. The subject has now been offered for three years. It is timely to reconsider the intended learning outcomes, assessment, and teaching content to determine if the original aim of the subject is being met.

Current learning outcomes

The current learning outcomes are:
1. Identify and explain how key sociological concepts such as class, race, and gender construct people's behaviour, attitudes, and values;
2. Apply key sociological concepts such as class, race, or gender in an examination of your own upbringing;
3. Discuss the value of community organisations, community participation, and active citizenship to the functioning of our communities;
4. Identify and reflect upon the links between yourself as a future educator and community member, community organisations, the local community, and society in general; and
5. Design, construct, and present two digital professional presentations that reflect your understanding of your local community and your involvement in community service.

Assessment strategies in the subject include:
1. My community – a multimedia digital story. In groups students research their local communities focusing on resources and strengths and present their community as a multimedia digital story through an e-portfolio;
2. Sociocultural awareness activity and autobiography. An individual essay where students reflect upon their upbringing in terms of class, race, or gender. This reflection is informed by a cultural awareness activity that they have participated in prior to completing the essay.

3. Community service webfolio. Students undertake a minimum of 20 hours community service and then present their community group and their service as a webfolio using e-portfolio software.

There is evidence that some students, through their community service, develop a stronger personal understanding of structural inequality in their communities. The following excerpt from student reflections on their community service, presented as part of their e-portfolio assessment demonstrates this.

> I have come to realise how social and cultural capital influences how we perceive the world around us and this realisation has helped me appreciate more and accept difference as a positive element in society which can be built on both in the classroom and wider community. I feel the learning I have experienced through my volunteering role and Concepts of Communities will help me to develop an inclusive classroom which celebrates diversity.

However, the data indicate that not all students have developed this understanding. For the majority of students, their community service reflections evidence little or no understanding of structural inequality and/or limited linkage to the sociological content in the subject. As a result we decided to examine the subject through a lens of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This examination prompted us to reconsider the intended learning outcomes, learning activities and demonstration of that learning.

Constructive alignment

Constructive alignment as a framework for designing curriculum, and the subjects within a curriculum, is based on two principles. The first is that learners construct knowledge through the learning activities they engage in, and the second that intended learning outcomes, learning (teaching) activities and assessment need to align (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 59). In doing so the focus changes from what is taught to what is important for students to learn and how they engage with and demonstrate that learning. The intended learning outcomes determine the learning (teaching) activities and the assessment tasks provide evidence of learning that has occurred.

Intended Learning Outcomes

The current learning outcomes indicate that students need to have an understanding of the personal impact of at least one key sociological concept and be able to apply this to their upbringing. They also need to be able to discuss the value of community groups to a community and reflect on their roles as community members. Finally, they are required to design and construct two presentations using digital media. Outcomes one and two refer to the second module and outcomes three to five refer to the first module and the community service. It was immediately apparent that the intended learning outcomes do not indicate that modules one and two actually inform each other and provide students with an opportunity to connect theory to practice (Palmer & Savoie, 2002). This has also become increasingly evident through three years of assessment and student feedback where students do not articulate a theory/practice nexus.

Kenworthy-U'Ren (2008) advises that 'with any experiential learning project, laying a foundation for *how* and *why* theory should connect to practice is a requisite first step for project success and heightened student learning' (p. 14). Eby (1998, p. 1) also warns that to

provide students with more than a 'truncated understanding of the nature of social problems and of strategies for fundamental social change' careful planning and articulation of CSL learning outcomes is required. This subject was not initially designed as an 'applied learning' project, which essentially it is, but rather as two separate but hopefully informing modules. It was assumed that through undertaking community service, the students would naturally make links to the subject content. This has not occurred.

As our current aim remains critical to the subject, it is important to re-think the intended learning outcomes and consider how these might better reflect our intention. Biggs and Tang (2007) advise that intended learning outcomes should indicate what knowledge or skills students should have, at what level, and how they will demonstrate that. The current learning outcomes suggest that students are expected to know a few key sociological and community concepts such as class, race, gender, community participation, and active citizenship, and demonstrate skills in using and producing presentations with digital multimedia. While we still want our students to have an understanding of these key sociological concepts, we also want them to be able to apply these as a result of their community service experiences, and to demonstrate changed understanding, attitudes, and potential behaviour. Furthermore, as this is a first year education subject we are not expecting to produce sociologists rather, our intention it is rather to 'remove the bales' so that they *begin* to appreciate diversity, difference, and social inclusion through experiential learning. Finally, our intended learning outcomes need to indicate how students will demonstrate they have achieved this understanding. Our intended learning outcomes for the subject can therefore be more effectively expressed as:

1. As a group design, construct, and present a multimedia digital story that demonstrates the resources and strengths of a specific community.
2. As an individual design, construct, and present one digital professional presentation that demonstrates:
   - your participation in a community service-learning activity for a minimum of 20 hours;
   - how this experience has contributed to your understanding of social inclusion and equity;
   - an understanding of key sociolological concepts regarding factors that contribute to structural inequality in society through a critical reflection on your community service-learning experience.

Learning experiences

The second consideration in redesigning the subject is to focus on the students' learning experiences. These are provided through the lecture content, tutorial activities, completion of the two digital presentations and the community service-learning component. It has been established that the two module format is not adequate for facilitating the student's *experiential* understanding of structural inequality and difference. It is also possible that the lecture and tutorial content may not have sufficiently scaffolded the students' ability to reflect on their experiences and to make theoretical links across the subject. The new intended learning outcomes provide an opportunity to re-examine teaching content so that it provides key sociological concepts and learning activities that better align with the intended learning outcomes to enable students' successful demonstration of changed understanding and attitudes.

Community service-learning is critical to achieving the intended learning outcomes of this subject and as Eby (1998; p. 6) advises, 'the most critical factor [for successful

community service-learning] is the local agency which provides the setting for students to work. It is important for the agency to have authentic roots in the community. . .'.
Table 1 outlines the types of community service undertaken by students in 2008.

Table 1 Organisation and Type of Work

Organisation and Type of Work		Number of Students	Total	%
Schools	Classroom assistance	18		
	Special event assistance	4	26	25%
	Administrative assistance	2		
	Other	2		
Government or State organisations	Red Cross	6		
	Aged care	5	19	18%
	YMCA	3		
	RSPCA	2		
	Other	3		
Church funded organisations or events	Opportunity shop assistance	8		
	Church events	3	17	16%
	Meals service	3		
	Support group leader	3		
Community Groups (special needs)	Righteous Pups	10		
	Able Learners program	2	17	16%
	Assistance to disabled/recent immigrants	5		
Community Groups	Local community carnival/show	6		
	Tourist information bureau	2	9	9%
	Senior Citizens bingo night	1		
Sports	Coaching	7		
	Other	2	9	9%
Other	Individual tuition	3		
	Domestic or gardening duties	2	7	7%
	Farmhand	2		

While the experiences encompassed a wide variety of community related agencies, it is apparent that not all of the community service experiences are suitable for achieving the intended learning outcomes. To be able to experience issues to do with social disadvantage and inequality students need to have sustained engagement with individuals or groups that deal with inequality or disadvantage on a regular basis (Eby, 1998). There are a number of such agencies in the students' local areas; however, the majority of students in 2008 chose organisations or groups that did not readily fit this criterion. For example, working in a local tourist information bureau, serving drinks at a senior citizens bingo night, sports coaching, walking and feeding homeless dogs, and after school care. To achieve our intended learning outcomes all students should engage in *authentic* community service (Eby, 1998), however, sourcing such agencies, facilitating and monitoring 300 plus students' engagement in them is

problematic given the students' regional geographic location, semester timetable constraints, and university teaching staff workloads. Ways to address these difficulties might include grouping of students, extending the time for completion of the community service, and linking to another subject so that the community service can be completed in stages.

Scaffolded reflection

Finally, successful demonstration of the intended learning outcomes requires that the students are able to critically and appropriately reflect on their community service experiences through a lens of sociocultural theory. While the data indicate that the students have not made the cognitive link between theory and practice, it may also indicate that they have not been sufficiently scaffolded in how to reflect. As noted by Vickers, Harris, and McCarthy (2004), reflection is the tool whereby students link their experiences and curriculum content. Currently, students are given three key questions to aid their reflections:

- What do you now understand about the role and purpose of community groups in our communities?
- What do you now understand about your role as a future community leader?
- What do you understand about your role as a community member?

It is again clear that these questions do not assist with demonstrating the intended learning outcomes. Consideration needs to be given to how to scaffold students' critical reflective abilities and designing key questions and learning activities that will guide them in demonstrating their changed understanding. These questions might include:

- What do I now know about the value of community groups to our community?
- What do I now know about social diversity in my community?
- What do I now know about how I and others can help address social inequity?
- What does this mean in terms of social inclusion in my classroom?

Our existing learning activities and assessment items have satisfied our previous learning outcomes but may not be adequate or suitable to enable and demonstrate our new intended learning outcomes. While we believe these are pedagogically sound we will need to re-consider them in light of the subject's redesign.

Conclusion

Further study and research into the subject is indicated however, Biggs and Tang (2007) have provided us with a framework with which to *begin* a re-evaluation of Concepts of Communities. This re-evaluation indicates that we need to rethink our intended learning outcomes, teaching content, students' learning experiences, and assessment of their learning. Some important considerations immediately present themselves, such as, ensuring authentic community service and other learning activities, as well as scaffolding student's learning and reflections so that they are better able to link theory to practice.

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