Engaging teachers and learners through service-learning

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The connection between student engagement and service-learning

Student engagement has been defined as: "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes" (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 2). This participation has been described as having a student component and an institutional component with:

> Student engagement represents two critical features: The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities … The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007, p. 44).

In the US, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was created by George Kuh and colleagues and since 2001 has been used to measure students' engagement with their overall university experiences by collecting responses from a sample of them in the first and final years. In 2007, the survey was adapted to become the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) and has been administered with samples of first and final year students at every university in New Zealand.

The AUSSE is divided into six benchmarks, which have been theoretically and empirically determined as central aspects of student engagement at the university level. Those benchmarks are: Active Learning, Academic Challenge, Student and Staff Interaction, Educational Enriching Experiences, Supportive Learning Environment, and Work Integrated Learning. Students' responses to items on the surveys are associated with one of those six benchmarks. Next, each student receives six scores; and each benchmark score is out of 100. Ultimately, the individual student responses are aggregated and their universities are issued six respective benchmark scores that are intended to represent first- and final-year students' engagement in their overall university experiences.

The NSSE and AUSSE benchmark scores and detailed reports have been used by universities to identify areas of strength and development at the institutional levels, an instrument for measuring student engagement at the course level was desired. In 2009 in the US, a modification of the NSSE, the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE) was endorsed by Kuh and piloted by Bob Smallwood with the intention of identifying specific practices within courses that appeared to impact student engagement. While the contexts of the NSSE/AUSSE (overall university experiences) and CLASSE (specific course experiences) are different, the theoretical underpinnings, the benchmarks or metrics, and the specific questions measuring student engagement are the same on both surveys.

Even though direct statistical comparisons of NSSE/AUSSE and CLASSE scores may be difficult due to their different contexts, it is anticipated that participating universities can use both of these instruments to better determine how student engagement can be affected through institutional and instructional practices. This complementary usage was stated by the creator of the CLASSE with, "Veteran users of the NSSE often devote considerable energy to deriving the 'next steps' to utilize their NSSE results to prompt institutional improvement initiatives. The CLASSE affords opportunities to back-up the institution's student engagement investment" (Smallwood, 2009).

From his analysis of 7 years of NSSE data, Kuh has started this process of suggesting the next steps where institutions can invest in student engagement. He has found ten educational practices at the institutional level that have a high impact on student engagement. Service-learning (also known as community-based learning) is one of these high impact practices (Kuh, 2008).

What is Service-Learning?

Stanton (2009) identified more than 165 different published definitions of service-learning. Taking this into account, it is important to note the common characteristics many of these definitions share include a situational balance of community-needed service engagement and relevant in-class curriculum with an intentional focus on the central role of reflection in the learner's experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). While the balance may differ on a case-by-case basis, in order for the pedagogy to be referred to as service-learning, it will usually have some variation of these characteristics.

Complementing Kuh's findings, research on service-learning in the US has indicated that the practice has a number of positive gains for students including: overall engagement, academic achievement, civic involvement, and personal growth (please see References and Resources on Service-Learning). While this relationship is well established and recognized in the US with a number of tertiary institutions having programmes or units entirely dedicated to service-learning, it is less developed in the New Zealand tertiary environment.

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How was service-learning used in the Geography and Management courses at University of Canterbury?

As with other instances of tertiary instructors choosing to use the practice of service-learning in their courses, these instructors at the University of Canterbury (UC) saw it as a way to engage students more deeply in their learning by providing opportunities to apply academic content to situations outside the classroom. Specifically, Professor Eric Pawson and Associate Professor Simon Kingham were instinctively inclined to use service-learning in Geography because of their preferences for an inquiry-based or problem-based approach.

As Simon explains (*see video*), they were further motivated to pursue service-learning after hearing an undergraduate student describe what she saw as a mutually exclusive choice of either continuing her tertiary studies or getting on to the real business of making a difference in the world.

In 2008, Eric and Simon used that motivation to redesign *GEOG 309: Research Methods in Geography* in order to teach it entirely with service-learning. Students in the course spent the semester working in small teams in collaboration with several non-profit organisations in Christchurch in order to research and contribute to the organisations' geography-related questions.

A subsequent iteration of the course in 2009 has led to the service-learning approach described by Eric and a student who experienced it, Selai (*see video*).

Similar to Eric and Simon, Dr Pete Cammock's teaching and research interests in leadership development and positive psychology led him to see service-learning as a practice that would provide an authentic and meaningful way for students to experience those academic fields in settings beyond the tertiary classroom. In 2009, Pete redesigned *MGMT 208: Principles of Leadership* in order to have a voluntary component of service-learning that would be implemented by Lane Perry, a PhD student at UC, alongside the teaching of the course. Students who chose to do this service-learning component worked in small teams with several non-profit organisations in Christchurch to research and contribute to the organisations' leadership-related questions.
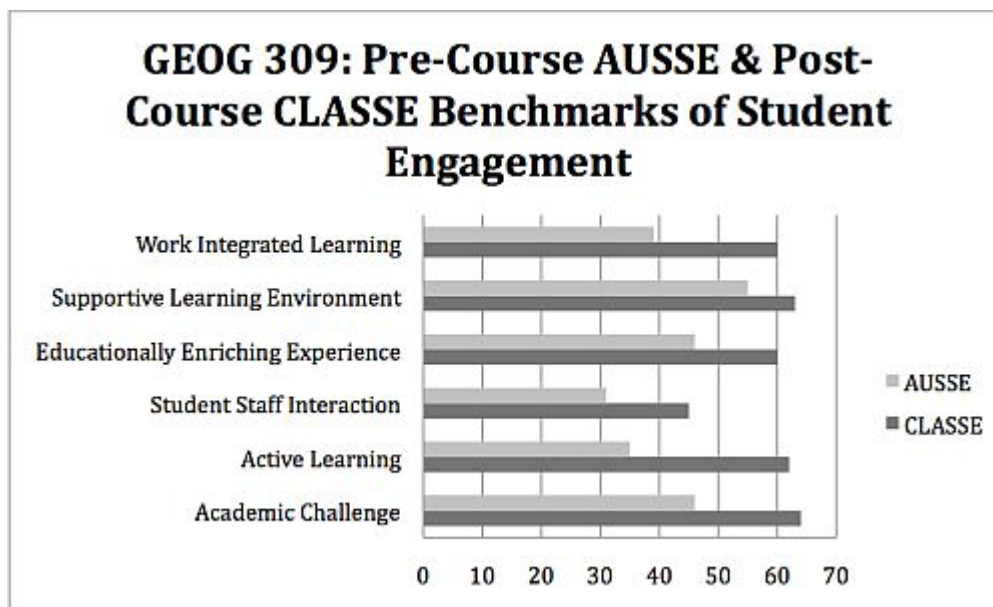
This co-curricular approach to service-learning is explained by Pete and a student in the course, Kohan (*see video*).

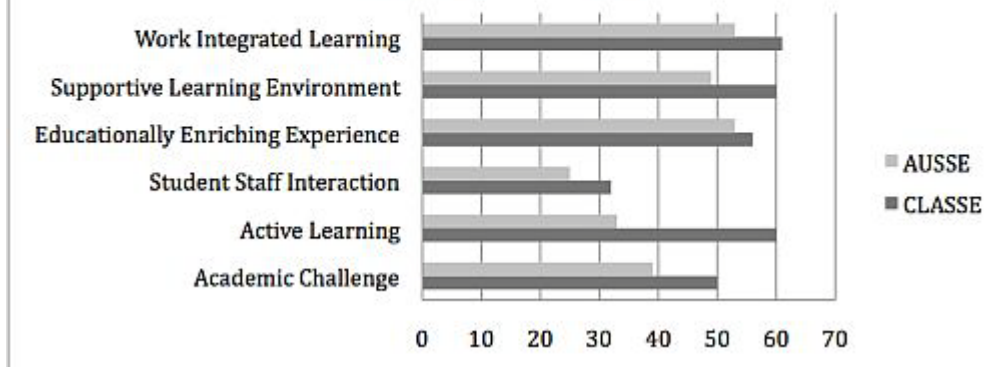## So what difference did using service-learning appear to make?

With qualitative and quantitative data collected in 2009 from 53 students as part of his PhD research, Lane used a systematic approach to examine students' experiences with service-learning in the Geography and Management courses. Through an extensive method of collecting qualitative data from artefacts, interviews, and observations, Lane was able to capture the essence of students' experiences and identify how service-learning in these courses affected them. His research and the following observations by Lane and a student in the Geography course indicate that the gains attributed to service-learning in the US in overall engagement, academic achievement, civic involvement, and personal growth also appeared to occur in these two courses (*see video*).

In addition to the qualitative data, Lane also utilized the AUSSE and CLASSE instruments as a secondary source of background data. At the beginning of both courses, students were given the AUSSE to determine what their engagement with their overall university experiences had been up to that point. At the conclusion of both courses, the same students were given the CLASSE to determine what their engagement had been within these specific courses. Despite the statistical problem of comparing the engagement scores from these different survey contexts, it was the only way to collect this quantitative data because a pre-course CLASSE is not possible nor is a post-course AUSSE that would focus on the specific class.

While there were two different approaches used to implement service-learning, the influence service-learning had on the student experience generally and student engagement specifically, seemed to have similar trends. More specifically, it was the Active Learning benchmark that experienced the greatest increase in both courses. The shift in this particular benchmark was not surprising given the active, involved nature of service-learning. The movement trends from the pre-course AUSSE to the post-course CLASSE are demonstrated in the following graphs.

GEOG 309: Pre-Course AUSSE & Post-Course CLASSE Benchmarks of Student Engagement

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MGMT 208: Pre-Course AUSSE & Post-Course CLASSE Benchmarks of Student Engagement

Overall, Lane's qualitative and quantitative research found that students from all engagement backgrounds who entered the courses appeared to become more engaged after their experiences in the courses. Some reasons for this enhanced engagement are described by Kohan and Simon (*see video*).

Through their experiences in these courses, students stated that they experienced a fundamental shift in context of what it means to be a student in a tertiary classroom. The elements they identified as being different in the service-learning courses were: interactions within the university context with fellow students and instructors, and also with people outside of the university; active learning leading to free, self-driven thinking and learning through experience; and the worthwhile value of what they were providing for the end-user – the community organisation.

Some of these elements are described by Kohan and Selai and they indicate how these were essential in creating meaningful and lasting learning (*see video).*

From these descriptions of the instructors and students and the other data collected by Lane, an emergent model of service-learning in a New Zealand context has been developed (see Figure 1). This model includes applying course concepts while working with local not-for-profit community organisations who serve as end-users for the projects. These applications should enhance course learning outcomes and be connected to opportunities for reflection on the overall experience. Both the whole curricular approach in Geography and the co-curricular approach in Management invited students to develop themselves as researchers who appreciate teamwork, work in the community, and apply a critical appreciation of others' research. By bringing their development of knowledge and skill-oriented outcomes to the research process, as Kohan and Selai indicated, students will ideally remember and continue to use their service-learning experiences.
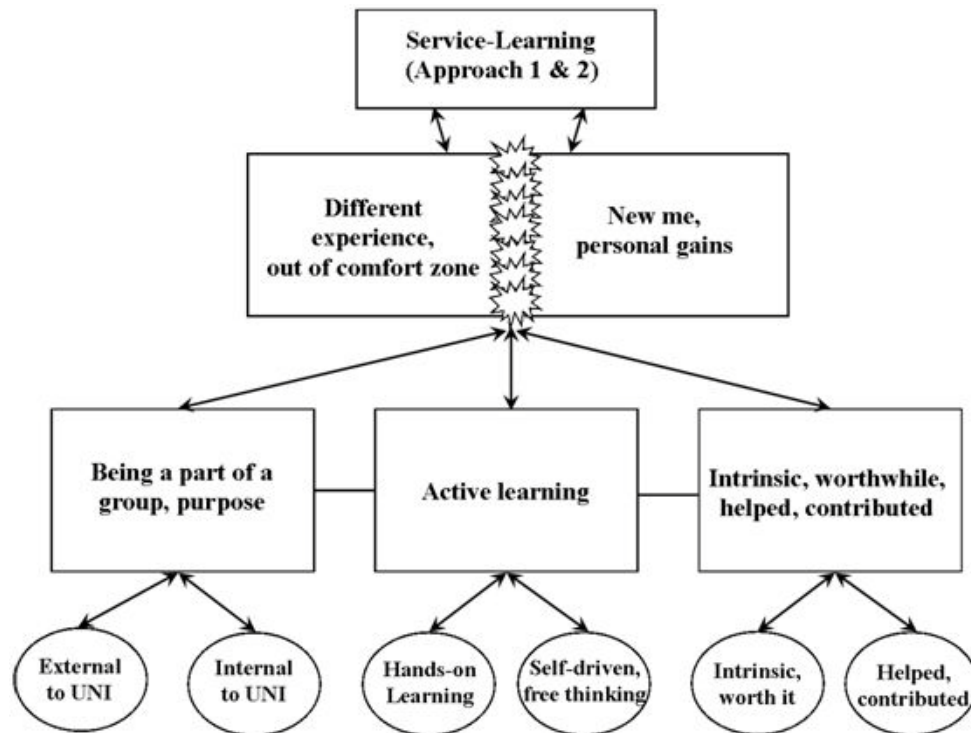
Figure 1. An Emergent Model of Service-Learning in a New Zealand Context

Now what? Advice to students and instructors considering service-learning

In the following video segments the instructors from these courses provide advice for others considering using service-learning. Their experiences suggest that while it calls for a different use of effort and energy than their other courses, they found service-learning to be well worth it (*see video*).

Considerations as a Student

- Challenge yourself
- Don't pigeonhole yourself as a student and think it's not for you
- Go for it!

Considerations as an Instructor

- It's good to have a tutor or an assistant who can work alongside the students
- Think about what you want to achieve with your course and make sure service-learning is an appropriate method
- Provide clear expectations to students, other teachers involved, and community partners
- Emphasize the process of reflection
- Make sure the community partner has at least one person who is committed to maintaining the relationship with the students

- Provide opportunities to accelerate the group formation process through guidance and team-building activities
- Ensure there is a clear outcome for the end-user in the form of a presentation or report

For questions and comments about using service-learning, please contact Billy O'Steen at billy.osteen@canterbury.ac.nz and Lane Perry at lane.perry@pg.canterbury.ac.nz.

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