

## PTAS Project 'Inside-outside' learning: understanding the learning experience from voluntary work as part of credit-bearing study

Project Lead: Dr Marion Smith

Research Assistant: Dr Veronica Adamson

### Introduction

'Learning from the Lives of Others' is a first-year 20-credit course that involves a combination of classroom learning alongside voluntary work for not-for-profit organisations (NPOs). The course is designed to complement a compulsory course on the Health, Science and Society MA programme, but it has attracted students from other degree programmes. As a new venture in teaching and learning involving partnerships with NPOs, we have started small for a number of reasons and currently offer only 10 places.

Students on the course were invited to participate in an in-depth evaluation. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the student experience of combining 'in house' regular study with voluntary work carried out through charitable organisations in the local community. The course was running for the second time in AY 2015/16 and student feedback from both cohorts has included highly positive comments, such as:

I have learnt more from this course than other elective modules I could have done. What I have gained are lifelong experiences as well as a change in attitude for the better. Having a 'placement' provided such a new perspective on learning as I have only ever done so in the classroom. It was particularly valuable as my main course is 100% academic but this provided real life experience.

I really appreciated being able to combine theory and practical learning. I'd like it if the university offered more courses like this one. Sometimes what we're learning can feel so detached from a practical, real-world setting. That wasn't the case here.

However, a more detailed understanding of the nature of the student learning experience and student satisfaction would be beneficial in guiding the further development of community engagement courses both within the home degree programme (MA Health, Science and Society) and as a potential model for other degree programmes across the University. As the course was optional and had attracted attention from students on diverse degree programmes from both first and second years of study, it was felt that we could learn both what worked well and what could be enhanced across this varied student intake.

### Methods

Focus groups were the method of choice to gain a collaborative view as well as individual experiences, thus ensuring richness of data quality. The University's ethical procedures were addressed by considering and then completing the Self-Audit Checklist for Level 1 Ethics Review. Two focus group meetings were planned, one soon after the course began and then a follow-up meeting soon after the course finished. Students were invited to participate in the study by an informal briefing during a class. They were each given a participant information sheet outlining the study and an informed consent form to sign if they were willing to participate. Their confidentiality was ensured by using a research assistant to convene, record and transcribe the focus groups. Staff involved in the

teaching for the course did not have access to the respondent identity data. Five students completed and returned consent forms which were then securely stored.

Arrangements were made for the first focus group meeting by email, a suitable room found and the topic guide for the session sent to the participants. Five students had agreed to participate but one was unable to attend the first session because of personal circumstances. The session proceeded as planned and was recorded and then transcribed with no identifiable names. The second focus group was then arranged and on this occasion only three students were able to attend. However, the two who did not attend responded to the same questions when sent to them by email. The second recording was transcribed and both were then loaded into MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool.

## Analysis

Both focus groups were asked similar questions:

- What are your expectations of the course, 'Learning from the Lives of Others'?
- What is your experience of learning on this course?
- In what ways does this experience work with or support your studies?
- What, if anything, did you find particularly satisfying with learning in this way?

The essence of the questions were used as codes 1 — 6 and the additional two, codes 7 & 8, emerged during the focus group discussions. Once the data comprising two transcripts and two anonymised email responses had been coded, summary reports were created. Individual reports were made for codes 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7 with the remaining codes, 4, 6 and 8 combined in a single report as each had only a few coded segments. The following table summarises the code system:

	Code	Description	Number Coded Segments
1	Student Expectations	What are your expectations of the course, 'Learning from the Lives of Others'?	10
2	Learning Experience	In what ways does this experience work with or support your studies?	16
3	Academic Study	How does academic study mesh with experiential learning?	21
4	Satisfying	What, if anything, did you find particularly satisfying with learning in this way?	6
5	Readings	The approach to reading on the course is a bit different - can you comment on the essential reading, the required reading and further reading. How do you find that?	9
6	Support	Do you feel that there is enough support that you, if you were struggling that there are ways or that there are people that you could ask to help you with that?	2
7	Volunteering	Aspects of volunteering experience	8
8	Next Year	What would you like to see changed for next year's students?	5

## Findings

### *Academic Study*

Respondents had most to say about positive benefit to academic study “I reread one of my first journal entries which was very interesting to like see how I’ve changed in just the process of one semester so I found that really helpful” (Respondent D). “I have been mindful of theory that we have learned and how that can be put into practice. For example, I have had opportunities where service users aren’t always able to immediately communicate what it is that they would like to do. I have been able to listen reflectively, and am much more aware of how to switch on those skills.” (Respondent E).

### *Learning Experience*

There were some frustrations with placements, “I think at the beginning I was quite, like frustrated because it was quite difficult to get placement and things like that” (Respondent A) but the benefits were apparent “I think the reflective part, that’s really struck me already. It seems like it’s half the work getting it down on paper and thinking about what does it actually mean. I think that’s something that I’ll take away from it for future placements” (Respondent C). Theory in practice was also highlighted “I think for me personally because we did do a case study in dementia, that was very helpful, very helpful. To see his perspective and to then be aware of how I can help him because although they do a good job at preparing you somewhat at the [NPO] volunteering place” (Respondent D).

### *Student Expectations*

It seemed students mostly had their expectations met “For me, I thought it would complement my other courses really well and looking at the outline of the course on PASS it just seemed to fit in really well with my other subjects and that’s why I decided to go for it” (Respondent B) and similarly “I think I really liked the idea of learning in a practical way because university so much of the time it feels like you’re kind of removed from real life so it just seemed really different to me” (Respondent C).

### *Readings*

There was not much discussion regarding the course readings and views were mixed, “I’m a second year student and so I’ve been like looking back over other readings from other classes and seeing if those are relevant. You know I think you’re kind of, you’re made to do it so that skill will develop itself” (Respondent A) and “It felt a bit lacking to be honest. I think some of the reading felt like it was on a lower level than we are used to from other courses and the books in particular felt quite repetitive. Again though, I enjoyed hunting out my own readings.” (Respondent E).

### *Volunteering*

The administrative issues around volunteering were mentioned as well as the positive aspects, “I hope I can do volunteering next semester ... this semester has definitely been tight on time ... but it’s been great” (Respondent D).

### *Other Codes*

The remaining codes were a mixed bag of minor quibbles but overall a positive response “Overall, I think this course is great because it is different, I haven’t felt as stressed for this course and I think it is because I have enjoyed it so much – it was interesting to do an academic poster, something I haven’t done before!” (Respondent A) and “I quite like having the freedom to focus on certain areas of reading and being out of the university” (Respondent E).

### *Costs and benefits to the partner NPOs*

This was a separate aspect of the research project, involving the experiences of NPOs in the partnership.

Two NPOs were interested in taking students on this course from the outset, and both were approached for their feedback on how well the partnership was working for them. Both NPOs were very positive about working with the course and the students, and very pleased with the contributions the student volunteers make to their organisations. Only one NPO had someone available for a more in-depth interview within the time frame. These comments therefore can only be taken as indicative.

### *Benefits to the organisation*

The NPO struggles to recruit volunteers to the relevant service, so this was a welcome source of people eager to be part of their work. “Just having volunteers was a huge benefit to us”. Working to a set time frame was very helpful as they knew when the course volunteers would arrive and be ready for placement. This greatly facilitated their planning.

They were very appreciative of the commitment and enthusiasm of the course volunteers: “We had some great people coming through”. The course volunteers sustained their commitment and fulfilled all they had agreed to do. The organisation welcomed receiving volunteers who did not drop out before the agreed end date. From personal experience, the respondent was able to confirm that the service recipients enjoyed their contact with the course volunteers and were satisfied with the arrangements and how they had worked. Indeed, some students remained committed to the organisation and continued voluntary work with them.

Training and supervision of the course volunteers did not add to their work load as all volunteers receive the same supervision and training. Cutting out the recruitment time was pure benefit. There were no extra administrative costs associated with working with the university: they keep their own records anyway, and the email contact and meetings with the course organiser were within what they would expect as a normal part of their recruitment work.

### *Costs to the organisation*

Things don't always run smoothly with placements on this service, and this is simply part and parcel of the nature of the work. Service recipients can fall ill and withdraw, or sometimes need a delay in starting. This causes difficulties for the volunteer working within a specific semester, and also to the NPO as it is hard for them to operate placements on less than a minimum three months of input to address the needs of service recipients. The NPO addressed this issue by seeking to find course volunteers shorter than usual placements, and felt secure in that the volunteers would not drop out.

Difficulty with placements did also cause problems for students on the course (cf. Learning Experience above), as where a placement was delayed, the student felt frustrated and disappointed with the late start, and naturally worried about being able to fulfil the requirements for the course. The course organiser had suggestions for particular events needing voluntary support which would bolster hours and enrich experience, but this was not always completely satisfactory.

The NPO experienced some difficulties in getting students prepared and through the PVG<sup>1</sup> process so that they were ready to start in January. After the first year, the course organiser met with the NPO to agree an earlier timetable through the first semester so that all students would be able to start on time in semester 2. However, this did not work better in the second year. The NPO felt they should have

---

<sup>1</sup> Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Scheme  
<https://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/disclosureinformation/pvgscheme.htm>

been a little “stricter” with insisting that students carried out more preparation in December. However, this is a difficult time of year with exams and students keen to leave for home and the winter break.

One difficulty the NPO encountered was that one course volunteer had a very full schedule, and this made it hard to schedule in the volunteering times. This is a useful point for the course organiser to ensure that students have sufficient flexibility within their schedule to be able to work round the requirements of the volunteering.

## Conclusions

There are clearly benefits for both students and NPOs to an arrangement of this nature, but more work remains to be done towards ensuring that the placements are less likely to be subject to delay, and that full preparation of the volunteers can take place in a timely manner. Further development of the reading list is also already underway to expand further reading options and increase the range to feed student interests in different aspects of their experience.

Overall, the NPO feedback obtained thus far is positive, as there are no real extra demands upon them and “It flows with what we do already”. For the students, the course fulfilled expectations of complementing other courses, having a substantial practical aspect, and connection outside the academy to ‘real world’ situations. Experience of learning on the course included development of a more self-directed approach to reading, using techniques of writing and reflection to enrich and add depth to learning, acquisition of new practical skills, and making connections between classroom learning (‘theory’) and practical or situated applications. Students showed awareness of the value of their experience for future learning and in general were well satisfied. In summary, the course offers a different way to learn and think about knowledge and its uses, and this is both stimulating and can be highly personally developmental as well as a refreshing approach.