

Learning on the Go

Voluntary work and reflective study

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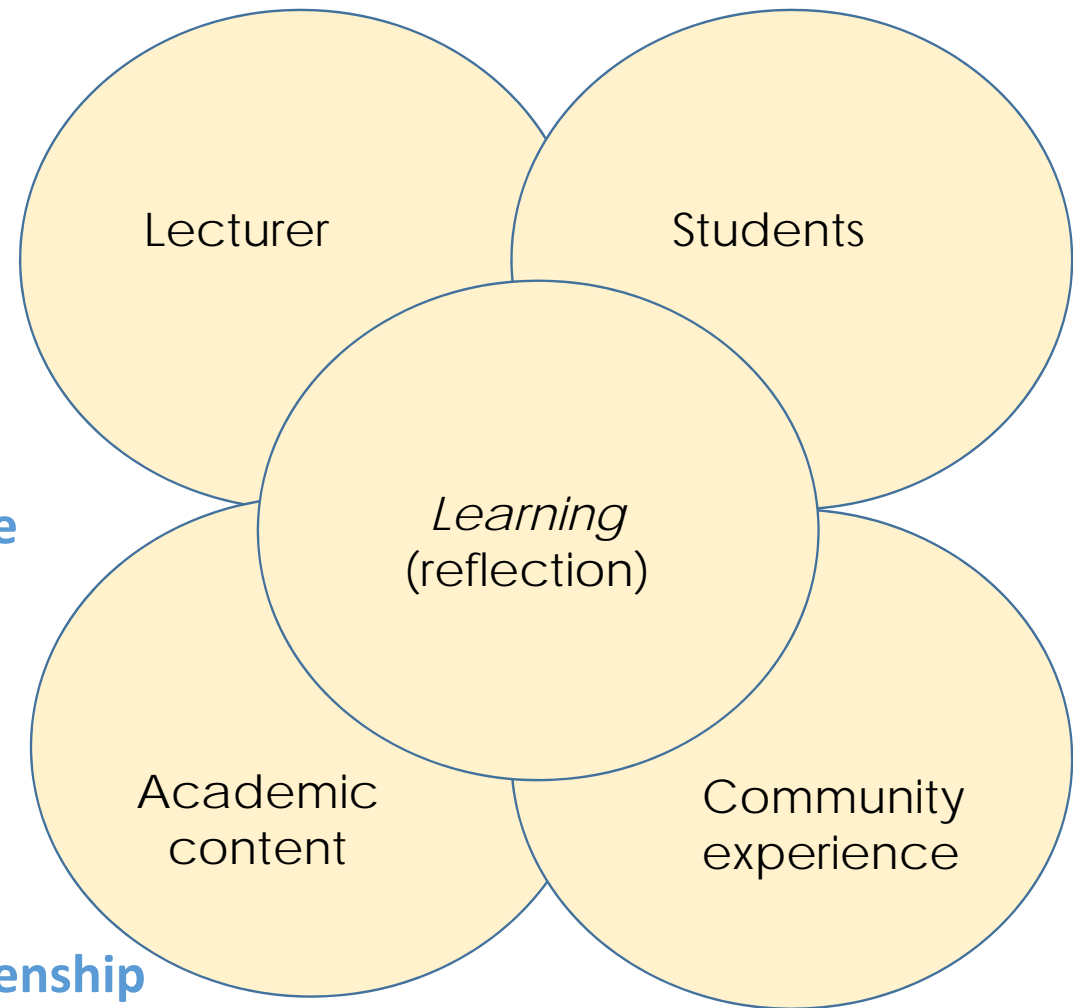
School of Health in Social Science

Learning from the Lives of Others: brief outline

- Level 8 course, designed for first-year students
- Students volunteer for 30-36 hours across the semester
- They attend weekly classes, part 'input' part discussion
- Class topics closely aligned with the kinds of difficulties service users may be experiencing
- 20 credits, assessed by:
 - a poster (30%, mid-semester), on their volunteering role and citizenship
 - and a reflective report (70%, post semester), relating volunteering experiences to their academic learning.
- Has attracted students from across the university since 2014/5

Course design

- **Why service learning?**
 - Civic capacity, citizenship and social justice
- **Why reflection?**
- **Taking the learning onward:**
 - Transferable skills, employability and citizenship



From Cress, C.M., Collier, P. and Reitenauer, V. (eds) (2013) *Service Learning: A Student Guidebook for Service Learning and Civic Engagement across Academic Disciplines and Cultural Communities*. Sterling, V.A.: Stylus Publishing, p.10 (adapted).

What is involved in running it?

- Needs attention throughout semester 1 to get the students through applications to volunteer, acceptance, induction, and ready for semester 2
- Checks throughout semester 2 to make sure volunteering is going well, is providing apposite experience for the course subject-matter/LOs, time targets can be achieved, and pastoral/duty of care ... + teaching
- Needs attention throughout the year to liaise with partner NPOs, navigate through changes of staff, maintain relationships, keep communication channels open so that mutual benefits are working well and continuing
- At the moment capped at 15 students
- Course is time heavy

What the students like:

- I have learnt more from this course than other elective modules I could have done. What I have gained are life long 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.
- The volunteering and free space to think. Not just clear cut answers, wrong or right.
- The way the course was structured each week with the classroom work was so helpful. I was able to apply the classroom learning to my volunteering sessions. And the experiences in my volunteering work were relevant when discussing different issues in class
- I'd describe myself as a seasoned volunteer. However, this experience of volunteering together with learning in the classroom has been quite different. I've learned new skills yes, but more than that, I understand now how policy decisions taken by others can impact on the lives of individuals and communities.

Improvements students have suggested:

- More theoretical work, more than one seminar per week
- I don't think there was much scope for engaging with other students on this course in particular as it is mostly placement work- but my engagement with the public has been extremely valuable.
- I think I would require the weekly diary entries to be submitted online (even if the contents stay private). Just to make sure that students stay on track. I think with so much freedom it could be tempting to not do the required work.

What the charities like about this course:

- [We] are delighted to have been part of the Learning from the Lives of Others project...The programme has worked really well and it has been straightforward to be part of.
- I have been pleased at the support and time that you have given to the students and us as an organisation hosting placements. Having a university staff member as a contact and liaison is particularly important in order to ensure the placements go well for both the organisation and students. Many universities, and even different course placements within the same university, are run differently and have a major impact on the organisation trying to do their best to support the students and give them the opportunity.

What the charities like about our students:

- The students have been really keen to help out in our community development groups and we have certainly benefited from having new volunteers within the groups who have brought their own unique skills and ideas.
- Today was the last session ...and I wanted to pass on how successful the placements were. We have received some great feedback from the people they have met and each of them really made an impact into each of the service users lives. I have just finished a debriefing session with them and have heard how positive they felt the placement was. In particular (names) explained how they are reflecting on what they have learned at uni to the experiences during placement and vice versa. This is great to hear that volunteering with us has been so useful for them.
- Ambassadorial triumph, real connection and utility to service users, real involvement in diverse communities and great learning outcomes

Conclusion

- Key aspect of this course is that students are receiving as well as giving
- Being open to otherness
- Positive interdependence and mutual trust
- Real contribution to local communities, not just practical intervention but relationship-building, developing capabilities on both sides
- Volunteering site becomes a place where people meet and do things together, and everyone learns.

Thank you!