

Using constructive alignment in the redesign of a first year teacher education subject that incorporates community service-learning

Sharn Donnison

School of Science and Education, University of the Sunshine Coast

Debra Edwards

Faculty of Education, La Trobe University

Abstract

Community service-learning is a recognised pedagogical approach in higher education especially in a North American context. However, it is less common in Australian higher education and especially so in a first year teacher education subject. This nuts and bolts session reports on an innovative subject in the first year program of a teacher education program that incorporates community service-learning and foundational principles of sociology. After describing this subject and demonstrated student outcomes we discuss how to redesign this subject using constructive alignment 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 for students.

Introduction

This nuts and bolts session is presented under the theme of Work Integrated Learning. Its purpose is to present redesign considerations of a first year education sociology/community service subject based on constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In the first part of this paper we briefly describe this first year subject, its conceptualisation, aims, and current outcomes. Our description will also highlight a concern regarding the alignment of learning outcomes with the aim of the subject. We then detail our conversations about how we might redesign the subject based on our understanding of intended learning outcomes and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This conversation raises two key questions:

1. Given cautionary tales about the utility of community service-learning for facilitating the sociological imagination (Palmer & Savoie, 2002), how do we design community service-learning experiences that will achieve desired outcomes for ALL first year students?
2. What types of community service-learning experiences will effectively deepen students' understanding of sociological factors contributing to unequal access to education outcomes and how do we build around that experience?

Concepts of Communities

Community service-learning (CSL) has been and continues to be valued in higher education (Eyler & Giles, 1999). As a pedagogic strategy it is most commonly incorporated in sociology subjects; considered a natural fit for achieving social justice and citizenship outcomes (Palmer & Savoie, 2002). Including CSL in teacher education is less common but

certainly advocated (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2005). 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. It resides within an introductory sociology of education subject called Concepts of Communities.

In 1967, La Trobe University was established on a social justice foundation and its mission continues to focus on underrepresented groups in higher education. In 2008, when redesigning the Bachelor of Education program on Bendigo campus, issues to do with social justice, equity and access 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 consists of two separate modules that theoretically inform each other. Approximately 300 students are enrolled in the subject. The first module spans the first four weeks of teaching and concentrates on key concepts to do with community such as reciprocity, trust, altruism, social capital, and social action. Local community groups are also showcased during this time and students are expected to source a community service-learning opportunity and to complete a minimum of 20 hours community service over the semester. The students present their community service experience and reflections via an e-portfolio assessment in the final week of the subject.

The second module covers sociocultural content as it relates to education and is delivered in weeks 6 – 13. It covers traditional sociology content such as knowledge, power, class, gender, ethnicity, social justice, social inclusion, equity and equality. The first and second modules were designed to inform each other whereby it is expected that as students undertake community service they personally observe, experience, reflect upon, and make links to sociocultural concepts examined in the second module.

The aim of the subject is to encourage students to gain an experiential understanding of structural inequality within societies and factors that impact on unequal access to education for students.

The current subject 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 in the subject includes:

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.

The subject has now been offered for three years. Thus, as reflective practitioners, it is timely to reconsider the subject, its learning outcomes, assessment and teaching content to determine if the aims of the subject are being met.

Current subject outcomes

There is evidence that some students, through their community service, have a stronger personal understanding that a child's education is affected by larger structural forces:

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 Community will help me to develop an inclusive classroom which celebrates diversity.

However, three years of student data, indicate that not all students have developed this understanding. For the majority of students, their community service reflections evidence a superficial understanding of sociocultural concepts and/or limited links to the sociological content in the subject. In the following section we invite you into our conversation about how to better align the subject's learning outcomes with content and assessment. This conversation is framed by Biggs and Tang's (2007) theoretical approach to quality learning in higher education.

Conceptualising the subject's redesign

To achieve our objective we begin with an evaluation of current learning outcomes. Eby (1998, p. 1), writing in the Community Service-Learning field, tells us that to provide students with more than a 'truncated understanding of the nature of social problems and of strategies for fundamental social change' we must carefully plan and articulate our learning outcomes. His warning readily applies to the whole subject not just the CSL component.

We believe our current outcomes do align with the existing assessment, however, do not adequately reflect the intended aim of the subject, that is, for our students to connect theory to practice (Palmer & Savoie, 2002). We ponder this and think that the aim of the subject was not clearly articulated in the conceptualisation and design phase or simply overlooked. This subject was not initially designed as an 'applied learning' project but rather as two separate but hopefully informing modules. In the design phase we would have done well to have followed Kenworthy-U'Ren's (2008) advice, '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).

So, our first discovery alerts us to the fact that the learning outcomes have not remained faithful to the aim. We consider the current aims are critical to the subject, thus we need to re-evaluate the relationship between the learning outcomes, teaching content, and assessment.

We turn to Biggs and Tang (2007) who summon us to rethink our outcomes by considering what knowledge we are expecting our students to understand, their level of understanding and how they will demonstrate that understanding.

Intended learning outcomes – knowledge to be understood

The current learning outcomes point to the knowledge that we are expecting our students to understand. In this case, it appears that it is limited to a few key sociological and community concepts: class; race; gender; community participation; and active citizenship. This limited range of concepts does not reflect the actual teaching content which is far more encompassing. Biggs and Tang (2007) advise that we need to align learning outcomes with teaching content if that outcome is to be achieved. Rather than sacrifice subject content, which we consider critical to our aim, we need to review our outcomes so that they better reflect the teaching content and the aim.

Our discussions lead us to consider the teaching content and how it is conceptualised. We examine the two module format and its adequacy for facilitating the student's *experiential* understanding of structural inequality. We know from our research that CSL is best positioned in sociology subjects (Eby, 1998; Palmer & Savoie, 2002) however; we think that the subject's current structure constrains students from developing an experiential understanding of key sociological concepts. We consider an alternative format where the community service frames the subject and links to sociological content is contextualised through a lens of community service.

If the subject is going to be framed around community service then the type of community service becomes critical as not all community service experiences are suitable for achieving our aim. We recall the advice of Eby (1998, p. 6), "the most critical factor . . . 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 . . .". Thus, we need to consider what community service is appropriate and how to facilitate 300 students' engagement with these agencies.

Intended learning outcomes – level of understanding

So far we know that our intended learning outcomes need to better reflect the actual content of the subject and that the content can be better conceptualised through a lens of authentic community service. The next step is to consider the level of understanding that we want our students to achieve. We note that the current learning outcomes do not indicate what level is expected although, encouragingly, they conform to the more complex levels of the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 76). Identify, explain, apply, discuss, reflect, design but to what extent, to what level of understanding? We recall Palmer and Savoie's (2002) caveat about the utility of undergraduate sociology subjects for developing the sociological imagination. They argue that sociology subjects in general have limited facility for developing this and the inclusion of community service does little to assist. However, the subject is not intended to produce sociologists rather, as a first year subject, it is to 'remove the bales' so that preservice teachers can *begin* to appreciate diversity, difference, and inclusion through experiential learning. We do not expect a grand treatise on social justice but a neophyte understanding of structural impacts on a child's education. Our new intended learning outcomes need to clearly portray that level of understanding.

Intended learning outcomes – demonstration of understanding

And finally, we think about how the students will demonstrate their understanding and our attention turns to the assessment. Our assessment items currently satisfy our learning outcomes but we need to consider whether they will when our outcomes are more aligned with the subject's aim and teaching content. We are hesitant to abandon our current assessment tasks, as we believe they are pedagogically sound and potentially demonstrate the student's changes in their understanding. However, we acknowledge that we will need to consider how best to scaffold assessment requirements so that students are better able to demonstrate their understanding of the intended learning outcome.

Conclusion and discussion

Biggs and Tang (2007) have provided us with a framework with which to re-evaluate Concepts of Communities. This re-evaluation indicates that we need to begin with our intended learning outcomes so that they better reflect the aim of the subject and the teaching content. We also need to think about how we conceptualise the subject content and evaluate the student's learning. Of critical importance are the types of community service that the students undertake. Our workshop discussion revolves around this. We ask you to consider:

1. Given cautionary tales about the utility of community service-learning for facilitating the sociological imagination (Palmer & Savoie, 2002), how do we design community service-learning experiences that will achieve desired outcomes for ALL first year students?
2. What types of community service-learning experiences will effectively deepen students' understanding of sociological factors contributing to unequal access to education outcomes and how do we build around that experience?

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Session Outline

Introduction of presenters. (1 minute)

Whole group discussion – icebreaker (5 minutes)

What do we need to consider when we are designing student learning experiences in any subject that will achieve desired outcomes for **all** first year students?

Presenters (5 minutes) Outline of the Concepts of Communities subject focusing on its aim, current learning outcomes and student learning experiences.

Whole group discussion (3 minutes)

What do you know about constructive alignment?

Presenters (2 minutes) sum up main points of constructive alignment and add to existing understandings.

Small Group discussion (9 minutes)

Given our understanding of constructive alignment what factors/considerations are important in designing the learning experiences for community service-learning based subjects so that they achieve their intended learning outcomes of deepening students understanding of sociological factors contributing to unequal access to educational outcomes?

Presenters (5 minutes) Draw ideas together. Discuss similar initiatives within participants' own institutions.