

Service-Learning and Design Education – How might we encourage applied learning for stronger community engagement?

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Service-learning projects have been recognized to enhance learning outcomes for design students by promoting community engagement and professional competence. Here, we share the results from five case studies how design education utilises service-learning to enhance the learning model beyond outcomes such as reflective practice, stakeholder management, user-centered design and experiential learning.

These case studies included partners Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, Kwong Wai Shui Hospital, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Shophouse and Co, Jalan Besar GRC, Elections Department Singapore and Children Cancer Foundation. Through these case studies, it is evident the impact that design has on the greater community and how design can move from just a conversation of aesthetics and function but into the discussion of social impact as well.

In the recent Design Conversations 2019, Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing mentioned that designers in Singapore can help create solutions for major challenges such as reducing carbon footprint and organising public housing to foster social inclusion. Mr Chan also mentioned that design was not just about designing products but about designing how Singapore can develop as a society.

These five case studies showcase projects are done by Singapore Institute of Technology-Glasgow School of Art Interior Design and Communication Design students.

The case studies may vary from each other in terms of, problem statements, research methods, design outcomes, scale, duration and context. For example, one of the organisations, Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, solicited the students' help in developing design ideas for a community café located at their nursing home facility which will serve as a hub for learning, socializing, and providing physical and psychological care to residents including those suffering from loneliness, dementia, and a variety of other physical and psychological conditions.

Another example is a project with Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). The Car-Free Sunday event looks to promote ideas and activities that will help promote a car-lite community that moves towards a livable and sustainable environment. As part of this initiative Walk the Chalk was created to bring the younger generation closer to the initiative. The event was a success in showcasing how the roads could be maximized to promote community building and sustainability through chalk art.

Students who work on these projects work in small teams while being consulted by the faculty and industry partners. The presence of a “real-life” design problem and the interaction with an actual client provided a level of reality not achievable through fictitious design scenarios. Students expressed an increased motivation to conduct more thorough research in an effort to

produce the best possible design solution for these clients to whom many felt personally connected due to their interaction. Outcomes revealed student opinions regarding how the service-oriented nature of these projects impacted understanding, motivation, and the quality of outcomes.

Design education as a practice is tacitly applied in nature. Working on live briefs is an integral part of the pedagogy, however projects which have a community or social engagement nature are not common. Through these community and socially based projects the students use an exploratory research approach that understands the special physical, cognitive, social, and psychological considerations of the user groups of each project. The research-based approach is believed to have not only improved the learning outcomes of the students but also improved the quality of the design solutions produced for the community partners. When service-learning is embedded, it proves to be a viable strategy for facilitating leadership skills and increased awareness of social issues for these students.