How to Better Integrate Summer Projects: Insights from Students' Comments

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During the past two summers, I supervised student summer projects at an English-medium liberal arts university in Bangladesh. These projects are meant to encourage students, who have just finished their first year at the university, to connect their education to communities outside the university through research and service. Developing such connections early on is important because students are more likely to see the significance of their university education and to understand and hopefully tackle complex issues in society. Having overseen a few projects and taught those who returned from projects in classes, I started to wonder how the students actually think about their summer projects and how they feel their projects fit into their university education. Students' comments revealed their struggles to see these connections and made me aware of the importance of making greater efforts to provide opportunities for reflection through regular classroom activities.

Almost all first year students voluntarily participate in these projects, which are conducted in Bangladesh and students' home countries throughout Asia. Some are service-oriented projects, such as teaching English to children in China and coaching basketball and leadership to teenage girls in Nepal. Other projects are more research focused, for example, collecting oral histories about the Vietnam War and surveying attitudes toward corruption in Bangladesh and India. Both faculty members and students can propose projects, and university funding is available for high quality proposals. In the fall semester, each project presents their results in a poster or a PowerPoint oral presentation to the university community. A few projects in the past have refined their work and presented at academic conferences. While these presentations provide an opportunity to share project results, little has been done to explore how students think about their summer projects, particularly in relation to coursework at the university.

A work-study second-year student, Jyoti, helped me to do interviews with students. Jyoti participated in a summer project in 2011 and I thought that students might feel more comfortable talking with her than with me. Jyoti explained to the students that I wanted to explore how they perceived their summer experiences with the hope of finding better ways to provide support for future projects. By December 2012, we interviewed twelve students who had just participated in different projects.

We first explored to what extent students were aware of the connections between their coursework and projects before beginning their summer projects. I expected that their answers would be about how they developed their projects, such as how they found project topics to pursue. Interestingly, most students pointed out a specific course ("Social Inquiry"), saying that this course was particularly helpful because it taught them the basics of how to develop a research project. As I read many student proposals for review, I could relate to their comments. It was a challenge, as some students pointed out, to write a proposal by themselves, even with the help of supervising professors. Many proposals could not present a good and manageable research question or a realistic research plan. Not all students take this course, but others often get hints and advice from students who did and our interviewees felt that systematic instruction and practice developing research projects were helpful.

In general, students have the easiest time making connections between coursework and projects when instructors make a point of modeling this practice in the classroom. The course does not have to be about research processes and methods. For instance,

one student who did her research on female politicians in Afghanistan said that her project grew out of several courses and workshops she had taken, including religion and politics courses. These courses and workshops did not particularly focus on Afghan cases, but class discussions and activities guided her toward finding relevance with other contexts. When she developed her project, she saw clearly the importance of understanding the multiple and complex factors that are associated with female politicians. This shows that to increase summer project learning instructors must make efforts in the regular classroom to connect course content to external settings and situations where students find some relevance.

I also tried to assess how summer experiences affect students' subsequent studies at the university. Several students said that their projects helped them to choose courses or to understand better the course discussions. A student who collected life histories of Bangladeshi members of UN Peacekeeping Forces explained that she became more interested in taking politics courses because she wished to understand the international conflicts she had heard of in the project.

However, many students had difficulties answering this question because they had few opportunities to analyze their own experiences in such a way. After discussion with Jyoti, we rephrased the question and asked whether students thought of (or talked about) their projects in class activities. It was still not easy for many students to think of such occasions. This response was surprising for me as I had expected that project experiences could be easily used in class discussions. For instance, a student who conducted a survey among Bangladeshi handicraft artisans had felt that she needed to carefully translate questions so that her research participants could understand. Most of them had limited formal education and some vocabularies, especially complex academic concepts and terms, did not make sense to them. She, as well as several others, mentioned how important it was to explain their ideas sufficiently to project participants. Such experiences could easily relate to many courses, including politics, philosophy, and sociology courses, as these disciplines often discuss power dynamics and the complexity of research and academic projects. Students, however, fail to find such relevance by themselves. More encouragement on the part of the faculty for students to examine their project experiences could be helpful.

It also became clear to me that reflecting on the projects in a timely manner is important. As time passes, students are not able to summon up their summer experiences. For example, a student said that she simply forgot the specifics of what she learned during the summer. While she presented her project in early October, since then she had not had opportunities to think back on her project with her peers or professors. Even if students have rich experiences, without reflecting on their experiences in course contexts, they cannot take full advantage of the project learning.

The comments here are not a comprehensive overview of students' experiences, but they gave several insights to me. Concrete and practical instruction on how to develop and conduct research is helpful. In addition, providing students with opportunities to think about how course materials and subjects relate to other cultural and social settings can help students to develop their project ideas. Students often give thoughtful comments about their summer projects, but to integrate their summer experiences into their subsequent college education further, it is essential to provide

post-project opportunities for them to reflect on their summer experiences in relation to their coursework and other college activities. With these findings in mind, I hope to design course activities that help students to consider how their learning can be used to examine diverse social and cultural settings that they may encounter.