

Service Learning in Business Education: Expectations and Reality

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Abstract

Service learning (SL) is an education approach that embeds community services elements in formal learning curriculum. It aims to develop students' empathy, sense of global citizenship, soft skills, and disciplinary knowledge at the same time. Success cases of service learning subjects across the globe, including cases from Chile, South Africa, India, Hong Kong and many other places, are reported and cherished by academics. However, these courses are often offered by engineering, social science and health related faculties, while successful and sustainable business service learning courses appear to remain limited. This paper traced the validation process of a service learning course initiated by a business school in Hong Kong which students were proposed to conduct applied business research for non-profit organisations (NPOs). With a thematic analysis of documents arose from 17 rounds of revision in a 29-month period, this paper aimed to explore the expectation gaps between the business faculties who developed the service learning course, and reviewers involved in the internal and external screening, and the university's validation process. The results suggested that business faculties and reviewers held very different views in students' ability and choice of service partners. Furthermore, the results revealed that the reviewers held diverse understanding towards the service recipients during the review process. Our findings highlighted the different epistemic beliefs about service learning held by different parties and provided practical insights in setting up service learning courses in business related disciplines.

Keywords: Service Learning, Business Education, Applied Business Research

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Introduction

Service learning curriculum places equal emphasis on service and academic learning elements in an education programme (Sigmon, 1994). In a service learning course, students are expected to apply their academic learning during a service to the community. Service learning courses benefit students' cognitive skills, leadership skills, social skills and civic responsibilities (Godfrey et al., 2005; Moorer, 2009; Sivan et al., 2023). Although this concept could trace its origins to the 1960s (Sigmon, 1979), service learning is still gaining a lot of attention in recent years.

Nowadays, a successful business is not purely defined by how well its financial goals are met. Instead, governing bodies, investors, consumers and employees increasingly emphasize a company's environmental, social and governance (ESG) attributes (Deloitte, 2021). This means that business decision makers should be able to bring positive impacts to their business while addressing several global challenges, for example, climate change, increasing inequality, and other societal needs. In this sense, calls for changes in business education to reflect global challenges and build sustainable society are becoming more common (e.g. Kolb et al., 2017; Elmassri et al., 2023). As such, service learning subjects can serve multiple purposes in business education. First, it can complement traditional business education curriculum to nurture students' decision making abilities in meeting sustainability needs. Cheung (1998) stressed the importance of decoupling business education from pure vocational training. It is essential to help students build citizenship of business students so that they can make ethical business decisions. Second, service learning reinforces business students' academic abilities in the real world setting (Furco, 1996). In the increasingly complex workplace, this training is valuable for students' critical thinking ability and other desirable broader learning outcomes (Braun, 2004).

Yet, the service learning education model was less commonly adopted in business schools (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002) and was seldom reported in business discipline-specific journals (Andrews, 2007). Given that service learning is of the utmost relevance to the recent development of business education, the current literature addressing the challenges of setting up service learning in business schools remains very little. By utilizing a case from a pioneering higher institution in Hong Kong which adopts service learning as a graduation requirement, this study is driven by two main research questions:

- How do the expectations of service learning subject reviewers differ from the course proposer from business faculty?
- What other factors affect the validation of a business service learning course?

In the following sections, we will first present the literature review on critical service learning concepts and their application to different academic disciplines. This is followed by a detailed description of our methods, as well as the business service learning course for our study and the validation process of this case. The key concerns of different reviewers will be summarized in the results section. We will then discuss how the various concerns outline the expectations mismatch among stakeholders and report other special insights in the discussion section before the conclusion.

Literature Review

Service learning, as indicated by its name, combines service concepts in a formal curriculum that aligns with academic learning goals (Furco, 1996). It is intended to enhance students'

knowledge and skills by extending their learning into the community. Service learning subjects should differentiate from volunteerism, community service, internship in a way that service learning subjects strive for an equal balance between service and learning goals (Sigmon, 1994). While volunteerism and community service focus primarily on the service elements, internship aims to develop students' hands-on experiences in a particular area of study in the real world. In light of this, service learning must serve some academic purposes in students' service process (Furco, 1996). Furthermore, service learning should be differentiated from field education, implying the service elements were added on top of regular learning. The service learning programmes must be designed in a way that students are "Serving to Learn. Learning to Serve" (Sigmon, 1994). Both service and learning elements are mandatory in a service learning course. The service element must be able to enhance the learning and the learning design is to improve the service quality in a good service learning activities design.

Seeing different ways of using the service learning terminology, Sigmon (1979) first proposed three guiding principles in developing a service learning course. First, the "service recipients" should have a say on what services should be provided. They should be involved in stating the issues they are facing and determining the nature of service. This led the second principle: the situation of "service recipients" should be better off after the service learning activities. Therefore, criteria for assessing the service outcomes should also be established. This ensures that students provide quality services to the service recipients. In ideal situations, the service recipients should be able to serve themselves by their own actions, which means that they can actually gain improvement in skills and knowledge in dealing with the issues they face from the students and the education institutions.

Third, while students are learning by serving the service recipients, the educational experience of students taking part in the service learning courses should be carefully planned and under controlled. Therefore, educators who initiate the service learning programmes should establish clear learning objectives and be held accountable for bringing meaningful learning experiences to students. These guiding principles are established to help designing service learning tasks, but at the same time avoid the so called "utopian vision" problem which perfectionists criticize unnecessarily based on their personal experiences or beliefs with service learning subjects (Sigmon, 1979). These principles are still very influential in designing service learning courses.

Service Learning Benefits

The benefits of service learning courses to students can come in many forms. In her ethnographic reflection, Ramdhani, (2023) states that service learning could benefit students' cognitive learning and help them gaining knowledge about critical social problems through reflection. As such, students' willingness to engage in society is also expected to be increased. Moorer (2009) also suggests that through service learning in the business context, students could be trained to make business decisions more holistically.

Service learning subjects also develop students' leadership skills and understanding of civic responsibilities more rapidly (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002). Sivan et al. (2023) further suggest that leadership skills of students are developed by empowering students in real-life settings. Many service learning subjects are designed in project-based settings. In these subjects, students have to take charge of major planning and execution, and be accountable

themselves for the project's success. Exposure to this experience could be less likely to happen in early business careers.

Godfrey et al. (2005) also suggest that service learning can create breadth for business education. Apart from broadening students' perspective on different social issues, service learning subjects might also build students' social skills and intercultural understanding depending on the course design (Andrews, 2007; Moorer, 2009). In most cases, service learning courses could also achieve broader learning outcomes, including team working skills and critical thinking (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002), which are considered as important common skills in business workplaces (Burnette, 2016).

Service Learning Courses Developed

Throughout the last decades, a lot of successful service learning subjects were reported in many developing countries, e.g. South Africa, India, and Indonesia and in developed economies such as Spain, Hong Kong and Singapore (Shumer et al., 2021; Blessinger & Sengupta 2023). For example, Ramdhani (2023) provides an ethnographic reflection of her service learning experience in a children shelter in South Africa. Sivan et al. (2023) take an integrated approach in setting up their service learning course in Hong Kong, which integrated theories from psychology, sociology and education to plan and implement inclusive learning activities for students with and without special education needs (SEN). Behrends and Binder (2022) established a service learning subject in Germany, sending student teams to non-profit organizations (NPOs) in supporting their fundraising or image campaigns. It is suggested that these service experiences were relevant to students' business studies, as NPOs often encounter fundamental similarity with small and medium enterprises regarding resources and management competencies.

Service Learning for Business Education

Although service learning could benefit students considerably, its degree of adoption is not the same across different academic disciplines (Andrews, 2010). Despite some successful attempts in business education were reported (e.g. Behrends and Binder, 2022), the number of service learning courses in business education accounts for only a small portion of the overall amount of service learning courses. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the service learning subjects across different academic disciplines offered by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Pontifical Catholic University of Chile respectively. According to the yearbook of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2020, only 3 out of 69 courses were offered by business schools (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2020). Business service learning courses accounted for only 4.37% of the total courses, which is far from the percentage of students that their business school accounts for (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2022). A similar situation is also observed based on the Service Learning Yearbook of The Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (The Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, 2022). In particular, the number of service learning subjects offered by their business schools is the second lowest together with two other schools or departments. There is also a service learning course under their theology discipline, which is regarded as a very early adopter of the service learning education model (Sigmon, 1979).

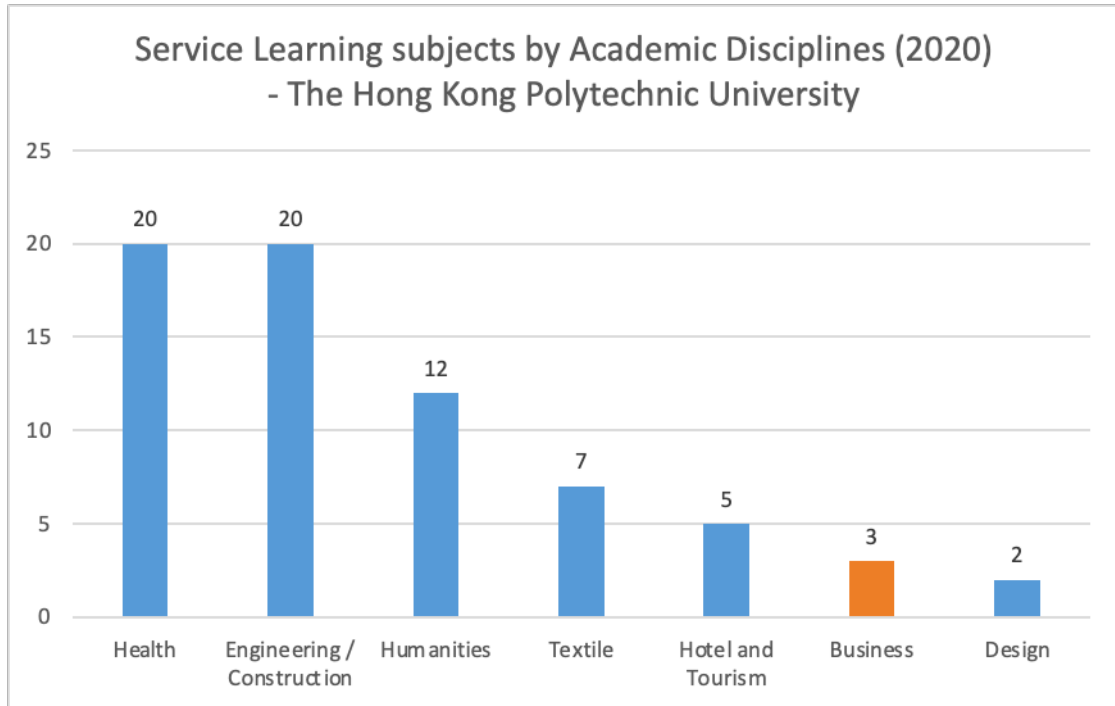


Figure 1: Academic Disciplines of Service Learning Subjects in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University

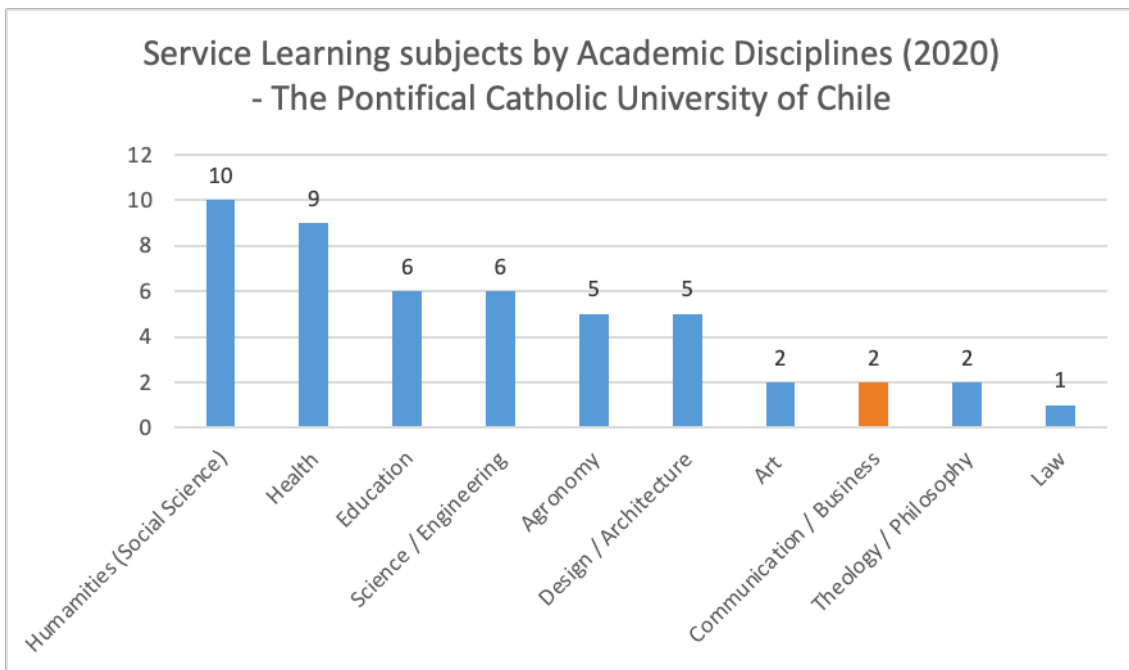


Figure 2: Academic Disciplines of Service Learning Subjects in The Pontifical Catholic University of Chile

In the two abovementioned universities, health, social science and engineering-related faculties offer the most service learning subjects. In this sense, service learning seems to offer more significant opportunities for students to practice and apply health and engineering concepts to the public for free as a service. For social science-related disciplines, students might be able to gain new perspectives in different social problems, such as poverty, discrimination, and crime, through various services (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2022).

A few possible reasons could contribute to the limited amount of business service learning course. First, business faculties are less trained in providing service learning courses (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002). As service learning is a relatively new education approach when compared to education, business faculties might not be experienced in planning and organizing credit-based service learning courses as teachers in social science and education disciplines. Business faculties also face additional challenges in convincing reviewing parties that the proposed service learning courses are “legitimate academic exercise”, as business curriculum is often considered as technical and standardized (Moorer, 2009). Gujarathi and McQuade (2002) share how special adjustments are applied to the assessment of service elements for their intermediate accounting course while conforming to the requirements of the accounting professional bodies.

Furthermore, Gujarathi and McQuade (2002) recognize the difficulties in finding out suitable community agencies and forming alliances with for business service learning courses. Community agencies might not realize their role in service learning projects and the differences between service learning and voluntary service. Additionally, community agencies might spend significant time training, supervising and providing feedback to students.

Moorer (2009) suggests that the readiness of undergraduate business students might also hinder the success of business service learning subjects. If the service learning experience far exceeds students’ capacity and maturity, students might end up becoming less engaged and less likely to realize their learning in business service learning courses. Although it is important that service recipients should be involved in assigning service elements to students (Sigmon, 1979), business educators should carefully examine whether students can complete the tasks (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002).

Today, a new direction to business education is observed in which business curriculum should be responsible to enable students to positively influence their community (Moorer, 2009; Schweinsberg et al., 2013; Kolb et al., 2017). Students nowadays are taught about the environmental, social and governance (ESG) concepts (Deloitte, 2021). Yet, the ability to drive business towards ESG goals is often developed beyond the teaching of textbooks (Acevedo, 2013). To this, business service learning courses not only provide a solid reinforcement to their business foundation knowledge, but also give students good chances to engage in projects that improve social wellness and reflect on their involvement. Seeing a growing need to develop business service learning courses, research on how reviewers as gate keepers perceive the challenges mentioned above could be vital for successful course initiation and implementation.

Methods

This study utilizes a thematic analysis of documents from the reviewing process in a business service learning course in Hong Kong. As suggested by Nowell et al. (2017), thematic analysis could be an easy but powerful tool for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes in a rich and detailed manner. A thick description of an authentic case could lead to better transferability of the research. Besides, thematic analysis is considered a flexible approach to analyze different qualitative data. In the current study, thematic analysis is applied to the reviewing documents of a business service learning course. Apart from the formal documents that carry the reviewing comment, meeting notes and comments in email format are also collected together with the policy documents of the case institution.

The researchers first familiarized themselves with the documents (Nowell et al., 2017). In the process, documents were organized based on different rounds of review. Initiated codes were then generated to differentiate different possible themes systematically. In the current research, coding was based on different types of reviewing comments to understand the different expectations of the multiple reviewing parties. Themes were then developed based on the recurrent and variant comments. Before naming each theme, researchers reviewed the coded reviewing comments extracts to ensure a coherent pattern. In the reporting process, the research team presented the organized data, direct quotes of reviewing comments, and the linkage with existing literature (Nowell et al., 2017).

The Case Institution and the Service Learning Course Concerned

The case institution names itself a pioneer in applying service learning education in Hong Kong. It is one of the few universities in Hong Kong that require students to complete credit-based service learning courses as a graduation requirement. In order to support the development and “institutionalization” of service learning courses, the university starts a Service Learning Office while a service learning committee is responsible to endorse every course proposal from all departments.

The course proposed is to conduct research projects for Non-profit Organisations (NPOs). The target students are at least in their third year or above in tertiary education. This course is developed based on an idea raised by one of the trainers who was also an external reviewer. As stated by Behrends and Binder (2022), when they were planning their business service learning course, NPOs share a high degree of similarity to small and medium enterprises from a management science perspective. The proposed course is supposed to last for a 13-week semester. In the earlier stage, students shall meet with service partner and recipients and participate in volunteer work or job shadowing after completing a basic e-module that introduces the service learning concepts. Then, the course proposers would conduct a few interactive lectures to refresh the research skills, such as the use of essential statistical tools, and to enhance their understanding of the service targets. Students then contribute questionnaire items for the survey based on their experience, observations and reflection from their service, followed by conducting a pilot test and making necessary adjustments. After completing their questionnaire survey, they are supposed to report findings and reflections to NPOs and teachers.

Meanwhile, several assessments shall be conducted based on students’ performance in research proposal, pilot test, questionnaire survey and final reports. Students’ affective outcomes are supposed to be assessed as well in reflection and debriefing sessions after major research works. Students are also required to submit a reflective journal. Finally, students’ performance in volunteer work or job shadowing would also contribute to their final grades.

The Reviewing and Validation Process

With a high expectation of quality of service learning courses, the review and validation process lasted for an extended period from June 2021 to November 2023 (Figure 3). A total of 17 rounds of reviews were documented. The first eight rounds of reviews were the brainstorming phase, where the course proposers interacted with external reviewers and internal reviewers with a brief “brainstorming form”. The reviews in this phase were more timely and frequent.

With the endorsement of the brainstorming form, round 9 to 14 represented the proposal preparation phase. The course proposers prepared a 15-20 page proposal form to specify the general information, recourses involved, course details and service elements. The course proposers also introduced the potential NPOs and their applied research needs based on the reviewer’s comments. The proposal was then going through a formal vetting procedure from an internal screening committee at the department level and finally, the university committee overseeing all service learning courses at the university level.

		Reviewing Party	Summary of key concerns and changes
Brainstorming Phase	Round 1-4 (June – July 2021)	External Reviewer	1 Selecting Partnering NPOs 2 Determining Service recipients
	Round 5-8 (July – September 2021)	Internal Reviewer	3 Designing Learning objectives
Proposal Preparation	Round 9 (Nov 2021)	Internal Reviewer	1 Qualification of course proposer 2 Students’ ability
	Round 10-14 (Dec 2021 – May 2022)	External Reviewer	3 Designing Learning experiences
Internal Screening	Round 15-16 (Oct 2022 – Jan 2023)	Internal Screening Committee	1 Determining Service recipients 2 Designing Learning objectives 3 Designing Learning experiences
Submission for University’s Validation	Round 17 (Mar – Nov 2023)	University committee	1 Students’ ability 2 Determining Service recipients

Figure 3: Reviewing and Validation process

The Majoring Reviewing Comments

Based on the reviewing comments, three major themes were developed: selecting service targets, designing learning objectives and experiences, and the capability of students and course proposers.

Selecting Service Targets

In the earlier stage, reviewers placed many concerns on the Partnering NPOs, which was also stated by Gujarathi and McQuade (2002). Even at the time which was two years before the course was supposed to be conducted, the reviewers urged the course proposers to initiate connection with different NPOs and understand their research needs:

(It) might be a good idea to first talk to these NPOs to see whether they indeed lack research manpower. (Round 6)

Furthermore, reviewers were keen to judge the quality of potential NPOs to be collaborated by their exposure. As stated in a review comment, “it is encouraging to see that the teaching team took the initiative to reach out to an NGO for their opinions, but unfortunately given the track record of (*name of NPO anonymized*), we are quite concerned of its longevity and representation of NGOs in HK (Round 5).”

One key concern from later rounds of reviews was related to the actual service recipients. A big expectation gap between the course proposers and the reviewers were observed whether it was the NPO or their service target, which were the direct and indirect recipients stated in the official document respectively, should be considered as the actual service recipients:

If I understand correctly, the service recipients are the NPOs, not the disabled people. Yet, students' survey and research in the process can help them relate to the people in need and benefit the community in the long run. (Round 15)

To this, the course title was also adjusted a few times, from “Research for Non-profit Organization” and then “Applied Research for the Physically Challenged” to “Applied Research for People with Physical Disabilities”. Besides, comments also covered very detailed definition of physical disabilities:

Will "people with physical disabilities" include those "visually impaired"? (Round 15)

Designing Learning Objectives and Experiences

Designing the right learning experience was a concurrent concern as early as the service learning concept was developed (Sigmon, 1979). In the current study, many concerns were placed on the description of the learning objectives and course focus to ensure the course a “legitimate academic exercise” (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002) as a service learning course that developed students’ applied research skills:

What type of research? Research is a very broad term, covering a very wide range of activities, usually carried out by people with PhDs and professional training. (Round 6)

Will the research objectives be determined by the joint agreement with the service partner after meetings with (the) service partner and recipients? (Round 11)

Please elaborate how students can help research these needs. (Round 14)

Meanwhile, reviewing comments were also addressing whether sufficient knowledge and cognitive skills were transferred to students before their service:

There is very little coverage of the topic of “Physical Disabilities” in the subject syllabus. (Round 17)

The current syllabus does not seem to offer many opportunities for students to learn how to conduct social science research. (Round 17)

Furthermore, reviewers also emphasized on the length of time on students’ learning experiences. While a packed schedule might be considered as a heavy burden to students, a short learning experience might not sufficiently develop students’ affective learning outcomes, especially for empathy:

Is it correct that students have to attend fieldwork sessions and interactive lectures within the first four weeks? Will the workload be too heavy? (Round 14)

We are particularly worried about the empathy part because our students spend very little time with the partners and the indirect service recipients in the proposal. (Round 5).

As a key learning objective across all service learning courses in that university, reviewers also raised comments on what empathy meant to the course proposer:

Empathy towards the community in what sense? How to develop students' empathy in this project? (Round 6)

Assessing the learning objectives was found to be another major area of concerns of reviewers. While Sigmon (1979) suggested that the assessment should be judged by whether service recipients were better off, the key reviewing comments were sticking to how different learning outcomes were effectively evaluated. In a particular comment, an internal reviewer strictly prohibited the involvement of NPOs in assessing students' performance in volunteering work, as he wrote, "all the grading and assessment should rest with our academic staff for QA purpose (Round 15)". Besides, how the affective outcomes were evaluated were also concerned:

One reflective journal through the course is not sufficient, the teaching team should plan more reflective activities throughout. (Round 5)

What we meant is not a progress report, but a reflective assignment or debriefing session to consolidate and reflect. (Round 7)

Capability of Students and Course Proposers

Students' ability was a major concern throughout the reviewing process, which was also noted by few researchers, such as Moorer (2009). The reviewing comments suggested that the students' ability to carry out research were frequently challenged:

Doing research on disadvantaged communities is very hard... We are not convinced that the issues the students will conduct research on are clearly thought out. We are also not convinced that our students can acquire sufficient understanding of the issues, the community and their needs, and the capabilities of the NPO, etc. (Round 8)

To this, a few categories of research for NPOs, such as to evaluate campaign effectiveness, were removed from the course document based on a comment stating "both research to identify new clients and research to evaluate campaign effectiveness are probably beyond our students' knowledge and skills to be done in a single semester (Round 14)."

Gujarathi and McQuade (2002) suggested that business faculties were less experienced in developing service learning courses. In the whole review process, the course proposers' CVs were collected twice to prove that they could deliver the service learning course. When compared to the capability of the students, the course proposers' ability were less challenged. It was yet recognized as a key enabler of successful course development, as a reviewer wrote, "the success of the subject depends on how willing the teachers are to become experts in the issues the NGOs are concerned with, in addition to experts of research methods (Round 15)". Still, a reviewing comment "since the proposers' expertise is in a business-related discipline, will sufficient guidance be provided for students to serve people with physical disabilities? (Round 17)" was raised in the final round of review.

Discussion

Results yielded from reviewing comments state that the majority of the concerns, such as identifying appropriate service partners, the ability of business faculties (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002) and developing meaningful learning experiences (Sigmon, 1979), still apply in the reviewing process. It is also noted that the “Utopian vision” problem suggested by Sigmon (1979) could still be observed. To the course proposers, it seems that the challenge on whether "people with physical disabilities" include those "visually impaired" is not as constructive as other comments. Besides, challenging the NPO, which provided information on their research needs in the very early stage, is also deemed unnecessary. Meanwhile, a huge expectation gap is also observed in the ability of students. While students who enroll into this course could be at their final year of study, reviewers are obviously worried about students' research skills and understanding of the community. Instead of working on their own research items, students are only required to contribute questionnaire items after adjusting the course document. To this, course proposers for business service learning subjects might also have to link the subject with students' previous learning experience to grant greater support and understanding.

Reviewing comments also indicate that reviewers might hold different epistemic beliefs on specific concepts related to service learning. Empathy is considered a significant learning outcome in service learning subjects (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002). However, reviewing comments reveal that reviewers seem to hold different ideas on what empathy means and how it is developed. While the university's official document stipulates that service learning activities could be carried out to different NPOs as indirect service recipients, reviewers suggest that the desired affective learning outcomes might not be sufficiently developed without structured contacts with direct service recipients.

An ideal service learning curriculum should place equal emphasis on the service and academic elements (Sigmon, 1994). For business service learning subjects, it seems that this balance could be hard to achieve, which is a potential reason of the relatively few business service learning courses that have been developed. Reviewing comments that suggest increasing delivering knowledge and cognitive skills might result in an over-emphasis on academic aspects, increasing service to NPOs might eventually be considered a mere fulfillment of service elements. Another concern for business service learning courses is that practising business skills in a real world context can be easily understood as internship rather than service learning based on Furco's (1996) model, unlike the health or engineering disciplines. Reviewers seem more keen to judge the collaborating NPOs on their intentions, background, resources and track records. Yet, a service learning embedded business curriculum in Hong Kong is with high importance due to its economic structure (Cheung, 1998). Therefore, a broader and more open understanding of service learning for the business curriculum is perhaps needed to judge the quality of these courses.

Conclusion

This paper outlines different concerns of multiple reviewers of a business service learning course in the higher education context, namely selecting service targets, designing learning objectives and experiences, and the capability of students and course proposers. In particular, substantial expectation gaps between the course proposers and reviewers are observed in terms of the ability of students and the selection of collaborating NPOs. This paper also highlights how course reviewers are setting additional expectations on business service

learning courses when compared to service learning courses from the health or engineering disciplines. Taking this paper as an example, future research could also expand to other disciplines in which service learning as an education model are less applied, in order to understand the struggles of those specific disciplines.

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