

***How the Community Participative Courses Are Carried Out
–From an Interdisciplinary Perspective***

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Abstract

Sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, three teachers from different department work on the project, and co-teach the course “Eco-Tourism and Community Narratives.” Students were led to the community affairs and public issues that were crucial to the community. How the course was carried out and the dilemma the teachers encountered were discussed, and the reflections on how interdisciplinary courses could be better operated were also described.

Keywords: Community Participative Courses, Interdisciplinary Courses, Sustainable Community

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Introduction

Ministry of Education in Taiwan launched a five-year Higher Education Sprout Project (HESP) from 2018. By walking out of the ivory tower and into the local community, universities are encouraged to get teachers and students involved with the community affairs and local development (Su, 2018). Universities are expected to build partnership with the local folks and industries.

Under a Project sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, three college teachers co-teach a course named “Eco-Tourism and Community Narratives,” one from the Department of Tourism Management, one the Department of (Chinese) Literature, and the other from the Department of Communication who is the author of the article.

By interviewing the other two teachers, the present study demonstrated how a community-based, interdisciplinary course was operated, despite quite a few obstacles.

The field/site in which the community-based course was implemented

A small community was chosen as teaching field /site to practice, located near the university, where people are mainly farming for a living. One of the important cash crop for the community is the bamboo shoots, however, a precious animal species which is also an endemic species in Taiwan lives in these bamboo grove, that is called “farmland tree frogs.”

According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by United Nations, this course is designed to fulfill the 11th goal, Sustainable Cities and Communities (The Global Goals, 2023), thus, to make cities, human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. More precisely, it's the target 11.4 the course aims to get to, to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. By preserving the species' habitat, the natural environment of the community is to be safe for wild animals and human beings.

To raise the awareness of ecological conservation, one of my colleague in the department of tourism management, Dr. Hsu has long been working with the local bamboo shoot farmers, encouraged them not to use the pesticides and conventional chemical fertilizers to avoid destroying the tree frogs' habitat.

To promote the sustainable development for the community (Chen, 2017), our colleague and local folks have been giving guided tours in which the local environment, ecological system and animal habitat were introduced and local food (bamboo shoots, of course) was provided to the tourists. The income from the guided tours was given back to the community and those farmers who worked with the university.

This course took students to the field to see people, their land, what they live on, and also the animal species needed to be preserved; the tree frogs and their habitat, and how they can live with people's farming.

Tourism majors vs. Non-tourism majors

Students were asked to differentiate the Eco-tourism and other types of tourism. According to the teacher, students majoring in tourism perform worse than their non-major counterparts in pen-and-paper test, since the tourism majors focus more on the practical perspective, such as

tour planning and design. Tourism majors were led to think as the tourism industry and the practitioners who intend to propose appealing itineraries to the potential customers. On the other hand, the course aims to arouse the non-majors' interest in Eco-tourism and broaden their horizon.

By personal contact with local people and ecological environment, the students should build up the connection physically and sentimentally with the community (Business today, 2018). Furthermore, their engagement might get deeper, such as the produce purchase from the residents, or returning to the field frequently, or even become a tour guide of the community.

Reflections on the interdisciplinary courses: benefits & Challenges

To make the interdisciplinary courses work, the study found the following:

First of all, the courses need sufficient budget to take students to the field to get to know the historical, economic, social, cultural, environmental, industrial or even political backgrounds and contexts. Lecturers, practitioners from the community and industry are needed. To provide activities such as DIY for students to make small souvenirs using local produce and food also needs funding.

It was found that the field trips give students the first-hand experience, to connect students with the community, to build up a sense of identity and empathy. Students from all different disciplines have an opportunity to interact and to work together, formally and informally (Lin, 2019). This is the core value of the interdisciplinary courses.

All three teachers acknowledge that everyone should be in one another's classroom/teaching field, and not to separate the course into three parts and to teach independently. In other words, teachers should genuinely work together, teach together and should be very clear about what the other two had given to the students.

Yet, it is hard to do so since the school or even the project sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan will not pay the hourly fee to the three of us, only to the lecturers.

Another problem is about time arrangement. Not only the teachers, the students are from all different departments and have different timetables and different commitment to the class. If it's not mission impossible, it is still very hard to arrange the schedule to enter the field and the lectures given by local residents or industry practitioners. We can but admit that it's easier to work with students from the same department, more precisely, students from the same department as the teacher is. With their similar timetables and similar attitude and concern about the course, the community-based courses seem to be more likely operated smoothly.

For its inter-disciplinary characters of the course, the students learn knowledge and techniques from at least three areas. Compared to the one-dimensional course, the teacher would not go too far, or too hard, if the students want to learn better, they might have to spend extra time to self-study to master what they learn in the class, such as making videos or giving guided tours.

How different areas of knowledge and skills integrated in the interdisciplinary, community-based course

The teacher from the tourism management elaborated the concepts and definition of Eco-tourism and showed the students the examples of successful eco-tourism around the world, such as those in Japan and Australia. He also indicated how to lead a guided tour. The teacher from the Chinese literature took the responsibility to enable students to tell good stories about the community and the farmland tree frogs, the species to be preserved. As a professional in the area of communication and media, I was asked to do marketing for the community. I try to make students to write a news release, to build up relationship between media (local or national) and the community.

I engaged students in community events or even hold or assist the events for the community. To spread the information of events via social media, social networking service (SNS), such as FB and Instagram is also what students can do for the local people. After all, young people are the digital natives and the target population we want to arouse the most about the sense of community.

Although the three teachers in charge of this interdisciplinary course have been participating in a project sponsored by the Ministry of Education for years, this is the first time to co-teach. We spent quite amount of time to set the goal for the course and identify the role and mission for each one of us. However, we realized the discussion, communication, coordination is never enough. The students reported that the course has a heavy workload, especially the final project. The three of us assign separate, independent final project, and this is too much for students. Actually we should have integrated the three final requirements into one.

We also came across some unsolvable problems, like, to give a guided tour is not as easy as it seems. Students were asked to search for, edit and create the guiding texts, yet not just pile up some popular science knowledge to cram into the tourists' heads. Most tourists expect to have fun to go on a tour, and not to gain a lot of knowledge. The community narratives should be embedded into one's life and experiences, that is, only when the story teller has the affection for what he tells and the unique, personal experience with what he tells, he may tell a good story. Since most students have limited interaction with local people, community and even the tree frogs and their habitat, it is really hard for them to do a good guided tour. To make the situation worse, we came across the worst outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Taiwan when we were carrying out the course, most communities did not allow outsiders to go in, and the school turned on-line and all these impacted the course harshly, especially for my part of the course, since I wanted the students to get into the community to talk to the local residents, to see and record their lives, to film the tree frogs and also the process of the guided tour. In the end, I was forced to compromise with some alternatives, and that was quite frustrating experience in my teaching career.

Conclusions

Interdisciplinary courses have been promoted for quite some time, and considered a good approach for higher education. The administration of education in Taiwan pushed the approach by asking the universities to develop interdisciplinary courses and programs. Some schools even make it mandatory to take these courses or programs before graduation. However, very few discussed how an interdisciplinary course is carried out, and what really

happened in the education site. There are still a lot of problems to be solved and issues to be explored.

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