Applying Service-Learning in Photography Course for Community Support Projects

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Service-Learning into the Photography course for fourth-year Graphic Design students at Danang Architecture University. As enrollment in Graphic Design increases, there is a pressing need to enhance practical skills and social communication among students. The course combines theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, allowing students to engage directly with children at Hope Village, a community with limited access to artistic resources. The Service-Learning model fosters empathy and civic engagement, encouraging students to address community needs through creative expression. This approach enriches the student's educational experience and empowers children by helping them visualize their dreams through photography.

1. Introduction

Photography is compulsory for fourth-year Graphic Design students at Danang Architecture University. Before enrolling in this course, students complete foundational courses such as "Graphic Design Principles," "Color Science," and "Adobe Photoshop" [1]. This background enables them to apply basic design principles and develop personal skills for their final assignments. The course comprises three chapters designed to enhance community engagement alongside foundational photography skills [2].

In the past, this module focused mainly on theoretical instruction, with students primarily practicing through online resources and personal collections. This year, we introduced the Service-Learning model, which emphasizes experiential learning through direct engagement with children at Hope Village. Students not only learn professional photography and design skills but also develop social skills as they guide children in using cameras and editing images [3].

Children at Hope Village can take portrait photos and express their dreams, which students then edit to reflect these aspirations. This interaction brings joy to orphans with limited opportunities for creative expression and helps them visualize their dreams through the portraits created by the students.

2.   Literature Review

Educational practices in graphic design

The increasing enrollment in Graphic Design at the Faculty of Architecture highlights its growing importance. Constructivist learning, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizes the value of practical experiences in bridging theory with real-world application (Vygotsky, 1978) [6]. However, the current curriculum lacks adequate opportunities for practical skill development, especially in social communication.

University-community engagement

Dewey's theory of experiential learning connects education with real-life experiences and societal contributions (Dewey, 1938) [4]. Integrating community engagement into education enhances learning while fostering social responsibility.

Social responsibility and human development

Paulo Freire's principles advocate for education as a means of social change (Freire, 1970) [5]. Engaging with underprivileged children in Hope Village promotes skill development and social empathy, fostering civic duty among students while empowering children through access to photography and design tools.

Application to graphic design education

This study proposes an educational model for Danang Architecture University that integrates practical training, community engagement, and social responsibility, aiming to produce skilled graphic design professionals who are also socially responsible citizens.

3.   Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the integration of Service Learning into the Graphic Design curriculum, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the impact on both student learning and community engagement. The study comprises 40 fourth-year Graphic Design students and 30 children from Hope Village involved in photography and design activities. Data collection includes surveys measuring changes in students' knowledge and attitudes, child feedback forms gauging satisfaction, interviews exploring student experiences, observations assessing engagement, and document analysis of final projects and reflections. Quantitative data compares pre- and post-module results, while qualitative data evaluates assignment effectiveness.

The study also follows a step-by-step implementation method:

Fig.1 Six-step implementation method.

Step 1: Selecting the location: A child support center or Hope Village in Da Nang is chosen to accommodate a survey team of 8-10 students.

Step 2: Surveying the area: Students observe the space and select suitable angles for portrait photography.

Step 3: Engaging with the user community: After presenting the project to the center's management, students pair with children, exchange personal stories, guide them in using cameras, and take portraits.

Fig. 2 Engaging with the user community.

Step 4: Developing ideas: Students use the photos and children's drawings to sketch photo designs, selecting appropriate materials for editing and collage.

Step 5: Practicing creative photography: Students use Photoshop to edit portraits, ensuring the final images align with the children's dreams and ideas.

Step 6: Exhibiting the results: The final exhibit includes children's portraits with reflections from both the students and children, as well as feedback on the edited images.

Fig. 3 Community-engaged student assignments

4. Results and Discussion

Feedback - Evaluation in the Photography Course

A survey of 40 students was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the service-learning project. The results revealed that 95% of participants found the project to be well-aligned with the course objectives, while 88% believed it was beneficial for the community. Additionally, 82% reported that the project helped them develop valuable professional skills. These figures demonstrate the project's success in integrating academic learning with community engagement.
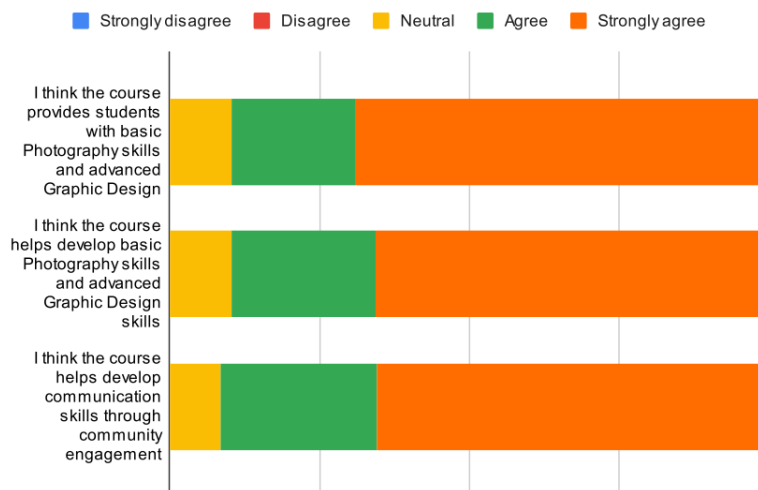

Fig. 4 Evaluate the course objectives

The survey data also indicated that the service-learning project had a positive impact on students' personal development. For example, 80% of participants felt a greater sense of responsibility towards the community as a result of their involvement, and 92% found the project to be more engaging than traditional learning methods. These findings highlight the project's potential to foster civic engagement and enhance students' overall educational experience.
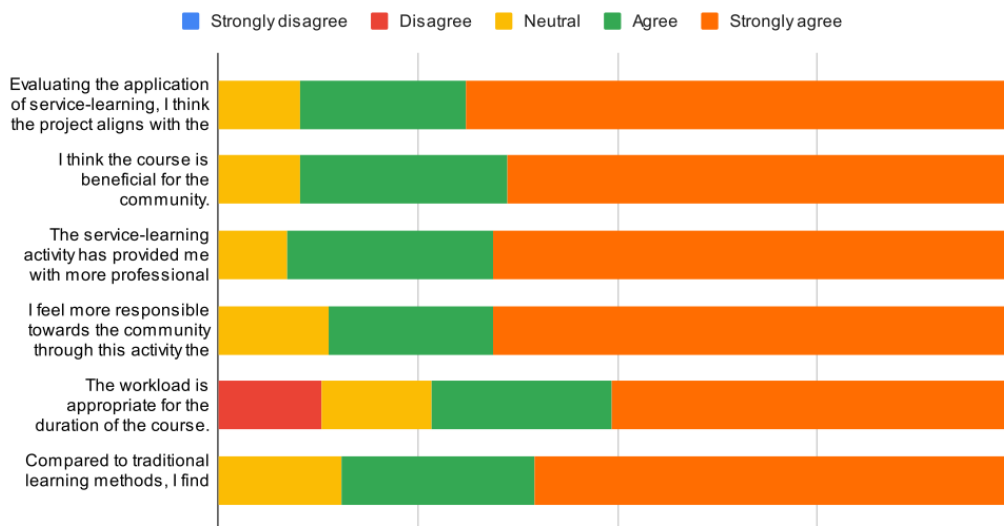

Fig. 5 Evaluating the application of service-learning activities

Furthermore, the survey collected feedback on the skills that students acquired in addition to their specialized knowledge. These skills included teamwork, interpersonal interaction, and task delegation. Participants reported that engaging in collaborative critiques during lessons helped them gain a better understanding of their peers' strengths and weaknesses, which facilitated a more effective allocation of responsibilities. Additionally, students developed communication skills and learned to interact with the community with greater tact. They also demonstrated the ability to research supplementary materials relevant to the lessons and integrate the knowledge gained in class with insights from their research to enhance their assignments.

However, the course faced several challenges, including the time-intensive nature of the projects, limited access to photography equipment, insufficient communication skills among students, budgetary constraints, and inconvenient locations for conducting activities.

Enhancing societal and humanitarian values through service

Applying service learning in the Photography course emphasizes not just technical skills but also the development of soft skills that contribute to societal and humanitarian values:

Empathy and emotional intelligence: Working with vulnerable children helps students develop empathy, understanding others' feelings, and fostering a compassionate outlook.

Emotional intelligence: Contribution to Societal Humanitarian Values is built as students

navigate the emotional landscapes of the children they work with.

Social Responsibility: Engaging with the community instills a sense of social responsibility, encouraging students to contribute positively to society [4].

Humanitarian Awareness: Exposure to the challenges faced by children in Hope Village raises awareness about social issues, fostering a commitment to humanitarian causes [5].

Empowerment: By teaching children valuable skills, students help empower them, contributing to their personal development and future opportunities [8].

> *I walked towards a little girl and suddenly realized she couldn't hear me or say hello. Feeling empathy for her, I tried to connect on a deeper level. I asked her, "What is your dream?" I wrote it down on paper, and she pointed to my iPhone wallpaper—a singer I admire. I felt a rush of emotions. Inspired, I decided to draw a mermaid, symbolizing her dream, as a word of encouragement. "Chi, don't give up," I told her. "Sing with all your soul and pure heart, and one day, you'll find the prince of your life, just like in a magical fairy tale." (A student's reflection)*

Incorporating business processes or NGO models can further enrich the course. For example:

NGO Operations: Teaching students about NGOs' structure and funding mechanisms can provide context for their community work, helping them appreciate the broader impact of their efforts.

Project Management: Introducing basic project management principles can help students organize their work more effectively and understand the business side of running community projects.

By addressing these aspects, the course can ensure a comprehensive development of both technical and soft skills, fostering a well-rounded educational experience that contributes meaningfully to societal humanitarian values [5].

Fostering creativity and community engagement

In previous years, the Photography module was predominantly delivered through traditional pedagogical methods, allocating approximately one-third of the course to theoretical instruction and the remaining two-thirds to practical software training and outdoor photography. However, student projects frequently focused on familiar subjects, such as portraits of friends, family members, or household objects, which limited both the diversity of their creative expression and the overall effectiveness of their inspiration.

In recent years, the course has integrated a Service-Learning model, emphasizing experiential learning through community engagement [3]. This approach requires students to develop teamwork and communication skills by interacting with a target community, specifically children in this case. Students actively participate in exchanging, sharing, listening to, and analyzing the stories and personalities of community members. Through this process, they identify potential issues and propose appropriate solutions tailored to the needs of the

community. This method requires students to carefully understand the desires of the community, synthesize information, and create photography and design solutions that are responsive to the community's context and needs.

Fig. 6 Community-engaged student assignments.

Fig. 7 Images of the commemorative photo-giving session for children at the Hope Village.

5. Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

The implementation of the Service-Learning model in the Photography course at Danang Architecture University has garnered institutional support. Despite some challenges during execution, the model allowed students to enhance their photography and graphic design skills in a real-world context while also improving soft skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving. The emotional impact on both students and faculty was profound, as the community's

acceptance of the student's work provided valuable support for orphaned and disabled children, contributing to societal humanitarian values.

The pilot has yielded significant outcomes, and expanding this model to other skill-based courses will require adjustments to syllabi and strategies based on feedback. Further discussions within the department are needed to refine and integrate Service-Learning methods, making future courses more engaging than traditional ones.

Keywords: Graphic design, photography, children, portraits, community support, community partners

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