

Service Learning at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

This report serves to identify the impact and the effectiveness of project-based, service learning at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). It will highlight the rationale for using this pedagogical approach, how student learning outcomes (SLOs) were integrated, some of the challenges faced, future modifications, accomplishments of the project, and finally student feedback and future plans.

Service learning in AUIS' Academic Preparation Program (APP) first began in the fall of 2014 when teachers Sean Smith and Chris Guajardo introduced their proposal to APP admin. The proposal was accepted as a pilot to be tested over the course of half the semester (5 weeks). 8 classes of approximately 180 students in Level 1 participated in this first trial of service learning at AUIS. Considering the refugee crises of 2014 in the KRG, Iraq, and Syria, teachers chose a theme to focus the project on helping the IDP and refugee communities.

Service learning was implemented again in the spring semester of 2016. Six teachers from levels 1 and 2 and approximately 320 students participated. In Level 2, students voted on two different issues to take action on, environmental action and addressing basic needs of the refugee and IDP communities in Sulaimani. In Level 1, students chose individual or small group topics that they felt passionate about and needed attention in the local community.

Service Learning and Teaching

Service and project-based learning differ from conventional teaching methodology, which mainly use external motivating factors, such as grades, to try and encourage successful learning. Service and project-based learning, on the other hand, aim to tap into a student's intrinsic motivation. This method of instruction, which merges SLOs with meaningful and real-world tasks, has its roots in pedagogy and educational theory of notable figures in the field of education such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and David Ausubel. By connecting SLOs with relevant and real-world challenges, a framework is provided to value learning as something more than just a grade.

Service learning projects include either real-world or simulated real-world performance tasks which address needs or challenges faced by the local or global community. These performance tasks provide students with divergent mediums to creatively demonstrate specified learning outcomes. They also provide students greater opportunity to express what they have learned according to their unique learning style and multiple intelligence. Examples of some of the performance tasks that have implemented at AUIS include: public service announcements, presentations, local fundraising events, crowdfunding campaigns and videos, river clean ups, and plastic recycling. While teachers provide the framework, infrastructure, and facilitation, performance tasks are executed and lead by the students themselves.

There are three main goals that drive the implementation of service learning projects at AUIS. First, using English and academic skills in a real-world context. Second, providing students experience to enact future change in their local communities. And thirdly, taking action on relevant and pressing issues in the community.

Service and project-based learning also provide themes and skills that are highly transferable across disciplines, topics, and over time. This semester students were given the opportunity to vote on a topic of their choice. Out of five possible topics, environmental action and helping the refugee and IDP community were chosen. These topics were applied to both Reading/Academic Success classes and also Writing/Grammar classes. Students read, listened to, and took notes on related news articles, reports, and other sources that were connected to the chosen project theme. Projects of this nature can likewise utilize Writing/Grammar SLOs to communicate ideas, opinions, reports, stories, and experiences throughout the project. A class blog, website, and other social media platforms have been successful ways to display student work. Other academic and critical thinking skills such as goal setting, time management, group collaboration, project management, technology, etc. are all essential and also practiced in service and project-based learning pedagogy.

The following were Level 2 Reading and Academic Success course SLOs that were integrated throughout the project:

- **RAS2.1:** Read academic texts on a variety of topics at a grade 8-8.5 level
- **RAS2.2:** Demonstrate organizational and study skills
- **RAS2.3:** Identify and apply successful Academic Skills practices
- **RAS2.4:** Apply basic keyboarding skills
- **RAS2.5:** Produce legible, organized notes
- **RAS2.6:** Apply skimming and scanning techniques
- **RAS2.7:** Identify, outline, and summarize main ideas and supporting details
- **RAS2.8:** Identify the meaning of unknown words in a text or listening using context clues.
- **RAS2.9:** Apply pronunciation
- **RAS2.10:** Orally discuss, explain, and debate ideas

Successes and Accomplishments

Guest speakers proved to be very motivating for students and provided a detailed and realistic account of experts in the field. Guest speakers included representatives from Waterkeepers Iraq, arche noVa, UNHCR, and CDO. They helped guide students to focus on the most imminent needs that our projects could address.

Through online crowdfunding and local fundraisers, students raised a combined total of \$3,550.00 USD. Students decided to use these funds to purchase educational materials and soccer balls to give children in the nearby Arbat Refugee and IDP Camps of Sulaimani. Classes partnered with Civil Development Organization to make contact with camp managers and help distribute the materials to appropriate age groups.

In partnership with Waterkeepers Iraq, students focusing on environmental action organized a river clean up. Local television, how many bags...

As a result of these projects, students have begun independently volunteering in the community. One group has already created their own environmental action club at AUIS and are launching 15 projects in the local community. Other groups have either joined AUIS' 'The Action Group' or have begun volunteering and working with UNHCR on a summer project called *Refugees Got Talent*.

Service learning was also implemented for a first time by Level 1 Writing and Grammar teachers, Katy McGarr, Tim Diesslin, and Casey Poe. Their approach gave students more choice by allowing implementation of independent service projects either individually or in small groups. Some of the projects included a plastic bottle recycling program at AUIS, volunteering with the elderly and cancer patients, and planting trees with local high schools. Teachers noted that it was difficult managing several different projects and stated that if they were to implement another service learning project, they would recommend limiting the topics.

Project websites created and developed by students:

- Crowdfund: <https://www.crowdrise.com/aUIS-helps-refugeesauis#projects>
- Websites: <http://www.aUIS-env.org> and <http://aUIShelpingrefugees.org>
- Facebook:
 - Environment Keepers:
<https://www.facebook.com/EnvironmentalOrganization.AUIS/?fref=ts>
 - AUIS Helping Refugees:
<https://www.facebook.com/AUIS.helpingrefugees/?fref=ts>

Challenges and Recommendations

This initiative has not come without its challenges, however, and the spring 2016 service learning project has made us aware of some of the difficulties in trying to implement a project of this magnitude. Three teachers, Peter Choi, Glynis Hughes, and Chris Guajardo, decided to implement a 6 week service learning project in the second half of the semester. This included,

having students vote on a topic to take action on, forming working groups, researching the topic, developing social media, blogs, and a website, producing a crowdfunding video, organizing fundraising or awareness event, and delivering goods and donations.

In an effort to give students more direction and choice of their educational experience, teachers gave classes the opportunity to vote on a topic that they all felt passionate about. All classes chose the theme of either environmental action or helping the refugee and IDP communities. Because students chose different topics, however, it meant that all three teachers would not be able to collaborate, seek advice, and pool efforts with one another. Energy, time, and effort weighed on teachers and the team would recommend that there should be one topic decided for the entire level. Moving forward, Chris Guajardo has decided to choose and continue the theme of environmental action in the summer semester of 2016.

Another challenge was also due to the unfamiliarity of managing a project of this size, which entailed 50 students working collaboratively towards one common goal. To help manage, 4-5 students were assigned to five different working groups, i.e., media, community outreach, crowdfunding, events, and social media. Each group was responsible for contributing to the overall project based on the group's created mission statement. This structure helped guide and direct groups, but individual student accountability was still a common thread among classes. A collaborative google spreadsheet was quickly implemented. Students met on a weekly basis, set a weekly goal for their respective group, and assigned one task to each individual member on the google spreadsheet. This allowed for equal distribution of work and also aided the teacher in marking individual grades of each student.

Student Feedback

Below are results of a student survey meant to review the students' experience of the spring 2016 service learning project. It was taken by Chris Guajardo's Section 5 and Section 6 Level 2 Reading and Academic Success Students.

Feedback: 34							
Questions: 10							
Label	Question	Responses					
Question1	I found the SLP useful and challenging.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		1	2	3	16	12	4.1

Question2	The SLP helped me improve my English skills in this course.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		4	4	11	11	3	3.2
Question3	The SLP helped me improve academic and critical thinking skills like collaborating, problem solving, planning, and time management.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		1	0	5	10	17	4.3
Question4	The SLP was organized as a whole and on a weekly basis.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		2	2	5	14	9	3.8
Question6	The SLP was mainly driven by student ideas with the teacher's help and facilitation.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		1	1	2	15	14	4.2
Question9	If I had the choice to do a SLP in level 3, I would vote 'YES'.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average
		7	2	4	7	13	3.5
OVERALL	In general, I would say this SLP was.	Very Poor (1)	Poor (2)	Average (3)	Good (4)	Very Good (5)	Average
		2	1	2	15	14	4.1

After reviewing the spring 2016 service learning project in level one, Chris Guajardo has decided to continue the development of service learning this summer with a project focusing on environmental action. Recommendations from both teachers and students will be carefully considered and applied where seen fit and appropriate.

Service Learning and Project-Based Sources:

<http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning-guide-importance>
<http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning-student-motivation>
<http://elearningindustry.com/subsumption-theory>