

## How to Involve, Motivate and Sustain Students in Service Learning Programs

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, service learning has gained much attention among universities as a complementary form of teaching and learning. Despite the popularity of such programs, very often, service learning activities have no standard framework and hence suffer from problems such as lacking attractiveness and sustainability. This essay therefore seeks to provide insights on key elements that could contribute to a high quality service learning program that emphasizes student involvement and sustainability.

In the past 6 years, as a student run service learning organization in Hong Kong, we have delivered more than 24 service trip projects with more than 300 student volunteers participated, serving 22 target schools in mainland China and Taiwan. From both our experience and a recent survey carried out among project participants, we suggest that an attractive and sustainable service learning project should first be able to present high quality program content that generates profound social impact. Next, the program should provide team members sufficient autonomy in designing the program contents themselves. Lastly, the bonding of the students themselves is crucial. It assures commitment, sharing, and sustainability from one batch to another, and ultimately creates unique experience, inspires minds, and stimulates positive long-term impacts.

Keywords: Student Involvement, Service Learning Sustainability, Program Quality, Organization Autonomy, Student Bonding

### 1. STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICES

The idea of service learning stems from the recognition that the any form of education aims to bring students back to the community and contribute with both soft and hard skills. With this principle in mind, service learning emerged as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful services, learning and reflections to enrich students' experiences and responsibility, as well as strengthens the communities (Generator School Network - NYLC, 2011). It is one step further from pure classroom learning. Students will have the opportunity to learn and apply, with the additional value of benefiting the society.

The benefits of service learning are multi-dimensional. It first provides a valuable chance for students to learn and experience. The value of experience is beyond measure. In many cases, targets of such services have very different cultural or educational backgrounds. They are mostly underprivileged groups in our society. Service learning brings these diverse groups of people together, and through such experience, both students and the served participants can gain much deeper understanding of each other's cultures and backgrounds.

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This is especially true in China, whose Gini Index has increased from around 30 in early 1990s to 42.1 in 2009, indicating a rapidly widening rich-poor gap. (World Bank, 2014)

Service learning is also an inspiring process. Participations of these service works have a powerful impact on young people's mindset and their development (ChanLin, et al, 2012). Students can learn to appreciate others' way of thinking, to develop sympathy towards others, and to become more passionate about serving others and creating social impact with a sense of accomplishment. Ultimately, students themselves would also start to change: through practicing and servicing, they gradually acquire the ability to influence other people, polish the skills of communication and teamwork, and adjust their values and visions of life with the new experience and broadened horizons.

From another perspective, service recipients are not benefiting less than the students do. They could enjoy the services at much lower costs as service learning projects are usually sponsored by universities or foundations. For many under-privileged groups, cost is an important concern, so does the accessibility of those services. Through service learning projects, they are able to access service provided by highly educated students and experts, to knowledge and technology that is new and up-to-date, and sometimes, to stories and life experiences that they never knew before. In a nutshell, service learning fosters mutual development of both students and the served community.

## 2. SELF-INITIATED SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

The idea of service learning with above mentioned benefits soon captured the heart of many educators. Many schools and universities, such as Duke University and Arizona State University, have been promoting this as part of their student education<sup>23</sup>. In the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), since the re-structure of undergraduate curriculum from 3-year to 4-year programs, service learning is part of the compulsory requirements for all undergraduate students<sup>4</sup>. There have been many service learning subjects proposed and executed by departments and schools. A special office is established to coordinate and provide advice on all these subjects. Many successful service learning projects have been resulted with the newly introduced subjects.

Other than curriculum-based service learning projects, there are community service opportunities self-initiated by students. These extra-curricular service projects usually cover a longer time-frame than the curriculum-based ones. However, unlike curriculum-based service projects, these projects often lack guidance and have limited resources for repeated service (Jeandron & Robinson, 2010). Also, it is observed that not all extra-curricular service learning projects can serve their purposes well. In many cases, feedbacks from the participants are not as satisfactory as expected. Hence, we need to have a more effective way to assess and organize self-initiated service learning projects (Nicotera et al, 2013).

The first issue that is always brought up by studies and media is the sustainability of such services (Lambright & Lu, 2009). There has been increasing concern on whether service learning can really benefit the community on a long-term basis (Talyor, 2008; Burns, 2011). The outcome of service projects is also affected by effectiveness of interaction among different parties during service projects. It is quite common that students and the served targets have gaps in culture or language. Besides, the services are usually executed in one

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<sup>2</sup> See Service Learning in Duke University: <http://servicelearning.duke.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Service Learning in Arizona State University: <https://communityengagement.education.asu.edu/programs/university-service-learning/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Service Learning in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, <http://sl.polyu.edu.hk/>.

direction and lacks mutual exchange. Therefore, to optimize service learning results, the programs need to ensure sufficient communication and sharing in both ways.

Another issue is how to keep students motivated and continually engaged. Ideally, service learning projects need to be attractive by themselves and students should participate not only for fulfilling subject requirements. Project ownership is important and students need to develop their own values through the implementation process.

### **3. KEY ELEMENTS TO INVOLVE AND SUSTAIN STUDENTS IN SERVICE LEARNING**

Experiences speak for themselves. As one of the many social groups that are involved in conducting service learning programs, we wish to share our practices and hope to shed some lights on the essential qualities or elements that an attractive and sustainable service learning program should have, either supported by quantitative survey data or experience.

#### **3.1 Introduction HeartFire Education Service**

Starting from a student-run service organization five years ago to a registered NGO in Hong Kong, HeartFire Education Service (“HeartFire”) has been striving to develop innovative service learning models that fit both educational goals and community needs.<sup>5</sup> HeartFire’s mission is to address inequality in education opportunities and thus alleviate poverty through inspiring service projects and experiential learning functions. In May 2009, HeartFire’s first service project started with 11 students going to a rural middle school in Shaanxi, China. The responses from recipients were surprisingly overwhelming. HeartFire continued to expand throughout the years. By July 2014, it has over 300 project members, and has successfully conducted 24 service learning projects to 22 schools in 10 districts in mainland China and Taiwan.

#### **3.2 Methodology**

From May to June 2014, 4 service projects were conducted simultaneously at 4 schools in Mainland China and Taiwan. Two sets of questionnaires were designed and distributed to project participants and the served students at the end of each project (as shown in Appendix I). Questions cover a wide range of topics, including motivation of joining the project, satisfaction of each function conducted, the key learning outcomes from the projects, and potential areas for improvement, etc. A total of 660 valid responses were received, 24 from HeartFire members and 636 from served students. After analyzing, three main factors (pillars) have been identified as the key contributors to high level of student involvement, motivation and sustainability of service learning projects.

Nevertheless, it is recognized that this study is of limited scope and may not be widely applicable to all service learning projects. Results may also be affected by the list of options available in the questions which were pre-defined by HeartFire committee. Some arguments also come from experience which might be subjective and difficult to quantify. Lastly, findings presented in this paper need to be further reinforced by future follow-up studies.

#### **3.3 Three Pillars to Involve and Sustain Students in Self-Initiated Service Learning Projects**

Three main factors (pillars) have been identified as the key contributors for high level of student involvement and sustainability of service learning projects, which are premium program quality, autonomy and flexibility in organization, and strong bonding of team members.

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<sup>5</sup> See HeartFire Education Service: <http://heartfirehk.org/home/>.

3.3.1 Premium Program Quality

An attractive service learning program must first offer well-structured and high quality products that serves the recipients’ needs. HeartFire’s service trips are built up on several interrelated projects. Each project has its own theme and purpose, and they are designed to deliver value that can positively influence the children in ways that they can understand.

Before every trip, the organizers would spend sufficient time to communicate with the target schools and learn about the children’s backgrounds, and try to understand if there are any specific issues or needs from them. Then the project designers will construct the detailed program contents accordingly. After several projects’ experience, HeartFire realized that primary and secondary school education in China is mainly focused on academic and classroom learning which is test-orientated. Children are not guided on many other aspects such as their attitudes or values towards life and people, their independently learning and thinking abilities, etc. They are also not aware of the importance to develop their soft skills apart from learning classroom knowledge. Another major problem is that children in rural areas of China could seldom have access to the outside world, which prevents them from exploring their own dreams. To address these issues, HeartFire has developed six core projects that are implemented regularly in each service project now: Happy Camp, Study Sharing, World Travel Sharing, General Education, English Fun Class, Book and Film Sharing. Table 1 provides a summary on project focuses and purposes.

Project Name	Main Focus / Content / Format	Needs / Issues to address
Happy Camp	To develop students’ positive attitude towards life through various group activities guided by helpers	Lack of guidance on positive life values and attitude; Lack of teamwork awareness;
Study Sharing	To share valuable study tips and methods to increase effectiveness of learning through interactive seminars	Lack of guidance on study methods, advice on “smart learning” and life- long learning attitude.
World Travel Sharing	To introduce life styles and cultures of different countries and cities worldwide through seminars	Lack of access to outside world; Lack of incentive and courage to pursue bigger dreams
General Education	To share handy life tips and general knowledge through interesting presentations	Lack of knowledge on general life tips (such as hygiene, etc.); Lack of independent thinking skills and interest on learning
English Fun Class	To stimulate children’s interest in learning English through various games, role plays, literature reading, study tip sharing, etc.	Students in rural areas often lack incentive to learn English and regard English learning as boring and useless, as reported by most
Book and Film Sharing	To deliver positive life values and broaden horizons through sharing of good books and films, guiding them to read and watch	Lack of guidance on positive life values and attitude; Lack of access to and guidance on good out-of-class reading materials and model in life.

**Table 1 Examples of Core Project Design – It’s all about matching needs**

These projects received warm welcome in all schools. On a scale of 1 to 7 with 7 being “strongly agree”, all projects received high overall scores of 6 to 7 among children, agreeing that the activities are fun, the sharing and seminars are eye-opening and inspiring, and they are willing to share and recommend HeartFire activities to more fellow students and friends.

Furthermore, the projects are carried out in formats that emphasize interaction and mutual sharing. They aim at delivering values and encourage students to think proactively rather than passively receiving knowledge. HeartFire members would invite children to share and ask whenever possible during seminars, not to mention Happy Camp during which the children are playing the leading roles. It is much easier for them to digest and understand when they participate actively. Among all the feedbacks received, the statement

“I like the way that project members deliver the class” obtained almost the highest overall “agree” score. (Figure 1)

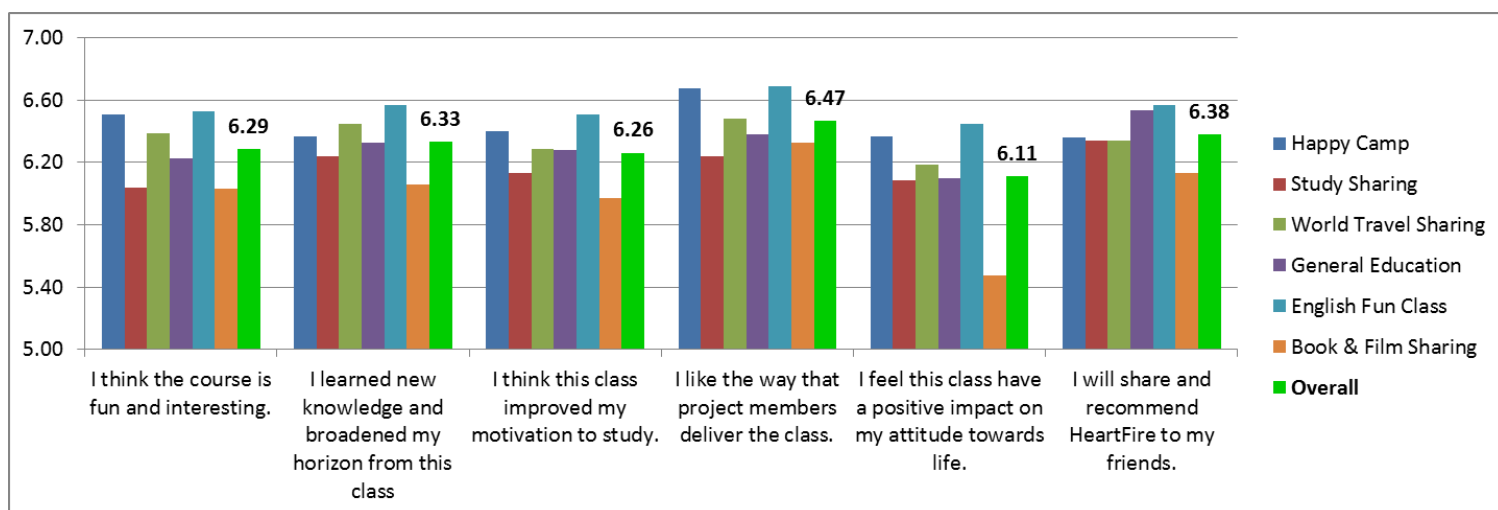


Figure 1 Overall satisfaction levels of the six projects

It is believed the main reason for HeartFire’s popularity is that the projects are tailor-made to cater for specific needs of the service targets: when asked about the main reasons to join HeartFire, majority of members expressed the wish to contribute to the improvement in education and living qualities for children in rural areas of China (Figure 2).

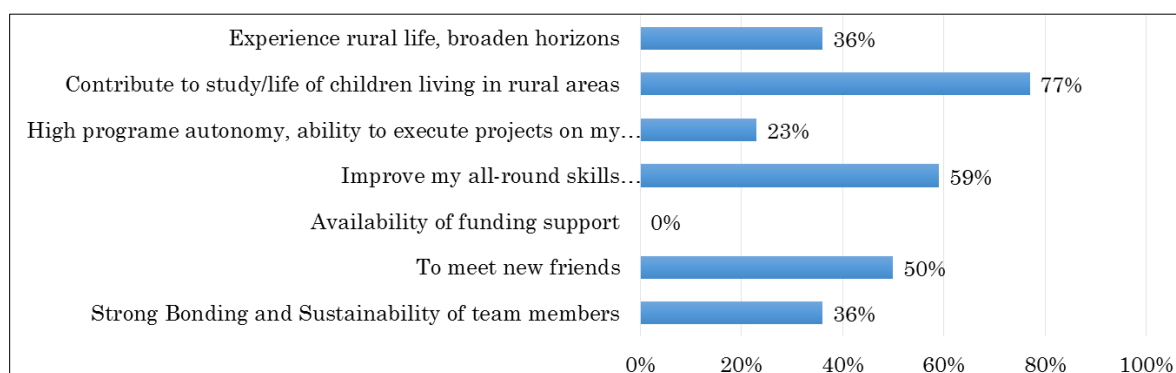


Figure 2 Most important reason(s) attracting members to join HeartFire

Finally, reflection is a key component for every service learning project. After each service project, feedbacks are collected from university students (project members), mainland local students and their schools. Through such feedbacks, future HeartFire members will be able to strive for continuous improvement when organizing activities.

### 3.3.2 Autonomy and Flexibility in Organization

The second key element lies in the way that service learning program organizers work. It is believed that within the strategic framework, project organizers should be given maximum flexibility in organizing activities, as the specific situations of every served school may be different. It is believed that such autonomy will also help encourage project members to bring new ideas and seek for consistent improvement in program quality.

Within each service team, HeartFire believes in project-based organization. There is no one fixed team structure; instead, a team of 10 to 20 students is divided into several small project groups, with 2-4 members in each group. Each group will be in charge of one of the six core projects and arrange all relevant details relating to this project. This would include

designing course contents, preparing necessary materials, and selecting the suitable target students and helpers. This would ensure that every project has a key focal point and is taken good care of, and every member will be able to polish their leadership skills through this process.

Team members of one project might also be responsible for all functional roles apart from the service projects themselves. Project members will undertake supporting tasks, such as designing materials, promotions, organize pre-project fund raising, finance, logistics, etc., based on their areas of interest or expertise. HeartFire attempts to maximize each project participant's full potential by providing them opportunities to contribute with their talents and apply their knowledge acquired in universities. In this way, students are more motivated and willing to involve more with stronger commitment. In the survey for the team members, 96% of respondents stated they would like to sign up for future HeartFire service learning projects.

### *3.3.3 Strong Bonding of Project Members*

The third key element concerns the bonding of service learning project participants. Teamwork cannot be more important in ensuring the success of service learning programs: it ensures open dialogue, encourages sharing and understanding, and significantly improves productivity. In recruiting team members and forming each project team, HeartFire puts teamwork in the first place. In addition, HeartFire's executive committee includes an operations department which is responsible for enhancing internal team-building and communication.

Team-building is a continuous process in HeartFire's project cycle; it happens before, during and after every project. Operations department will first provide training to new joiners and regular meetings are then held before the projects for preparation. After the projects complete, there will also be sessions and gatherings for team members to offer feedbacks and reflect their learnings from the project. When the next batch of projects approaches, their experience and learning will be shared to the new project participants. This follow up system is now well-established in HeartFire, which can help inherit best practices and ensure continuous improvement in program quality. These are the intangible assets that HeartFire treasures most, and they are also what make HeartFire programs sustainable. For those who participated in twice or more HeartFire's service projects, all of them recognized the importance of teamwork and team-building and stated that the team spirit in HeartFire is the main factor attracting them to join again.

### *3.3.4 Achieving better service learning sustainability through the three pillars*

It is believed that by incorporating the three key elements into service learning projects, they would be more likely to stand out from the crowd and become more sustainable.

First, the service programs themselves are HeartFire's core products. Higher program quality and greater impact would attract more students to join. However, a limitation with the six core projects mentioned before is that they are only carried out in short duration, usually one to two weeks during a trip visit. Therefore, along with these projects, HeartFire is also implementing programs that help to establish long-lasting relationship with the service targets. Among them, there is the scholarship scheme that awards the children who improved their performance significantly per semester and encourages them to provide regular updates to HeartFire committee. Besides, HeartFire also sets plans to re-visit some schools. Among all schools visited, three schools in Shaanxi, Jiangxi and Guizhou provinces have confirmed with HeartFire on executing long-term service plans. With these actions in



place, HeartFire is dedicated to creating a service platform that benefits the served community in the long-term. Figure 3 summarizes HeartFire's footprints up to July 2014.



Figure 3 HeartFire's Service Learning Activities (as of July 2014)

Second, it is also important to retain valuable human resources to better sustain service learning projects. By offering project members more autonomy and providing more team-building opportunities, HeartFire seeks to give its members as much credit as possible, allow them to optimize their potentials and realize their personal values. Meanwhile, HeartFire benefits by retaining these valuable experience and resources. Under this win-win situation, service learning projects are more likely to be sustainable.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Looking forward, service learning will continue to play an imperative role in university education. Participation of these services creates a powerful real-life impact on young people's horizon, mindset, life attitude, and even their purpose of life. Through the dynamic service process, students' personal and social growth is tightly interwoven into their academic and cognitive development. Therefore, it is extremely important to ensure that service learning projects are well designed so that students can maximize their involvement and motivation to join. From the community's perspective, service learning programs needs to be more sustainable and long-term for them to create real impacts.

Taking HeartFire as an example for sharing purpose, we are delighted to propose and share a possible service-learning model that betters involves and sustains students' participation. First, the program quality should be good enough to meet the specific needs of the served community, and they should be able to deliver positive value and long-term influence. Second, university students should take more autonomy and initiative in organizing and executing the program. They should work as a team of organizers, instead of merely participants. Lastly, the continuity and sustainability of participants are essential. This can be achieved through team-building and bonding of members. All these elements share a common core factor: mutual sharing and exchange. It happens among project members, and between university students and the served community. It is the factor that cultivates mutual understanding, creates synergy and fosters development of all parties involved in service learning programs. With these elements incorporated, service learning programs should be able to attract more passionate young people to accomplish their desired outcomes - to create memorable experience, to inspire minds, and to stimulate positive long-lasting changes. These are also the values that HeartFire believes in.

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## APPENDIX SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRES

### 1. Questionnaires for project participants (translated from original Chinese version)

This questionnaire is targeted at members who have participated in HeartFire's inspiring projects from 2009 to 2004. It aims at collecting feedbacks and suggestions from past members to discover most important factors that continuously keep HeartFire attractive and sustainable. It also attempts to seek any room for improvement in future organization of projects.

#### PART ONE: PROJECT FEEDBACK

1. From which channel did you hear about HeartFire?  
Classmates/Friends Teachers Recruitment Emails Classroom promotion  
Social Network Posters Others (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
2. Please choose three most important factors for you to decide joining our inspiring projects:  
Experience rural life, broaden horizons Contribute to study/life of children living in rural areas  
High program autonomy, ability to design/execute projects on my own, optimize my capabilities  
Improve my all-round skills (leadership, communication, teamwork, etc.)  
Availability of funding support To meet new friends  
Strong bonding and sustainability of team members
3. If you have joined inspiring projects more than once, what are the three most important factors that attract you?  
Experience rural life, broaden horizons Contribute to study/life of children living in rural areas  
High program autonomy, ability to design/execute projects on my own, optimize my capabilities  
Improve my all-round skills (leadership, communication, teamwork, etc.)  
Availability of funding support To meet new friends  
Strong bonding and sustainability of team members
4. Which experience or function(s) impressed you most during the whole inspiring project? (Can pick 3)  
Interaction with HeartFire past members and committee Interaction among project members  
Interaction with the served schools and students Preparation of projects and itinerary  
Experience of local culture and scenery Cultural exchange activities (if any)  
Process of problem-solving together with project mates
5. In which area do you suggest HeartFire inspiring trips can improve? Please share your suggestion.  
Selection of project members (suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Program quality (suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Means of organization (suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Schools to cooperate with (suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Sources of funding (suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Others (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
6. In all projects you participated, which can meet expected outcomes most? (Please briefly explain)  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Was the served school satisfied with this project's service? (7 standing for very satisfied and 1 for very unsatisfied; if unsatisfied, please briefly state reason)  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Will you participate in HeartFire's future inspiring projects?  
Yes No (please state reason: \_\_\_\_\_.)
9. Will your recommend HeartFire's inspiring projects to your friends?  
Yes (please specify channel: \_\_\_\_\_) No (please state reason: \_\_\_\_\_)

#### PART II: PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. How many times have your participated in HeartFire's inspiring trips in total?  
Once Twice Three times More than three times
2. Please specify which project(s) you participated: (please specify time and place)  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Questionnaire for service recipients (translated from original Chinese version)

This questionnaire is targeted at students from the served schools who have participated in any one of HeartFire’s projects. It aims to collect their feedback and learn about their experience and feelings of our projects.

**PART I PROJECT FEEDBACK**

Please give your rating for each of following statements from your experience in this class/function. (1 stands for strongly disagree and 7 stands for strongly agree)

Statement	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly disagree	4 Neutral	5 Slightly agree	6 Agree	7 Strongly agree
I think the course is fun and interesting.							
I learned new knowledge and broadened my horizon from this class.							
I think this class improved my motivation to study.							
I like the way that project members deliver the class.							
I feel this class have a positive impact on my attitude towards life.							
I will share and recommend HeartFire to my friends.							

Open questions:

1. What are your learnings/take-aways from this class? How will it impact or change your life and studies?

\_\_\_\_\_.

2. In which aspect(s) do you think this class or program can improve?

\_\_\_\_\_.

**PART II: PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Your current grade is:

\_\_\_\_\_.

The project that you participated in is:

\_\_\_\_\_.