A Personal Reflection

On

The Development of
the Service Learning Requirement at PolyU

By

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Table of Content

Preface:

Getting "Service Learning" to be an academic requirement for all undergraduates at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) is a major achievement under my tenure as Vice President of Academic Development (VPAD) at PolyU from 2010 to 2012. Since the requirement was officially adopted for the first cohort of undergraduates entering the 4-yr undergraduate degree programs at PolyU in the Fall of 2012, I have received many inquiries about how that was done. For people who are familiar with the complex, highly political and generally conservative nature of academic administration in a major university, this is indeed a remarkable accomplishment.

After much deliberation and soul searching, I decided to write this article not to give myself credit and "a pat in the back" on what was achieved. On the contrary, I write to acknowledge, first and foremost, that this achievement was the effort by many people at PolyU. More importantly, I believe that our effort also demonstrated how circumstances, politics and personal efforts can work together to push through worthwhile educational/curriculum agenda in the complex political climate within the academia. I also want to provide some clarification (at least from my own perspective) on how my efforts on Service Learning contributed to my unexpected forced resignation from the VPAD position, shortly after the beginning of the 2012-13 academic year. I hope that my experience will be helpful to many of our academic colleagues who want to promote meaningful changes in the curriculum in a university (particularly research university), both in the US and Hong Kong. In retrospect, the journey was complex and, at times, difficult and painful. But at the end, it turns out to be one of the most rewarding experience of my academic career. I am grateful for the opportunity and I have no regret for my decision to pursue this journey. As a Christian, I have no doubt that God's provision and His timely intervention are very much factors of the success of our efforts.

Introduction:

When I took the job as Vice President of Academic Development (VPAD) at PolyU in April 2010, I was not even aware of the term "Service Learning". I have just spent the prior 33 years as a Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). At UCSB, I was your typical tenured professor in a major research university. My primary focus was on research. On teaching, I follow the "unwritten rule" of not to do too much to cut into my research. I was a "reasonably good" teacher, doing enough just to get "decent" (say, slightly above average) teaching evaluation so that it won't affect my tenure and promotion. I was excited to assume the VPAD position at PolyU because one of my primary responsibility will be to develop the additional one-year undergraduate curriculum for our students. At that time, all universities in Hong Kong were making plan for a transition from a three-year undergraduate curriculum (the UK style) to a 4-year undergraduate curriculum (US/North American style). The transition was scheduled to occur at the Fall of 2012. The HK government was putting in a great deal of resources into the transition. In addition to the expected overall operating budget increase to account for the 33% increase in the overall size of the undergraduate population, the government supported the construction of new academic buildings for all Hong Kong universities (two at PolyU) and provided a great deal of additional funding to support the transition. These additional funding were largely

discretionary and under the control of the senior management. I was excited and look forward to the opportunity to shape the educational experience of Hong Kong undergraduates.

In the remainder of this paper, I will give a personal perspective on my "Service Learning" journey in three parts, the vision, the effort and the politics. In the first section, I will describe how I got my vision on "Service Learning".   Where did I get the inspiration and on what basis did I make the rationalization that "Service Learning" should be an academic requirement in the 4-yr curriculum for all undergraduates at PolyU.   In the second section, I will summarize the steps and processes (both formal and informal) my colleagues and I took to navigate through the academic bureaucracy of PolyU to adopt the requirement.   These processes were lengthy and time consuming. For example, a task force was first formed to assess the feasibility. Endless meetings were held with individual faculty members and appropriate Senate Committees to address various academic and budgetary concerns. Since I have only two years to move "Service Learning" from a vision to an academic requirement, timing is the key on the implementation process. Finally, I will devote a section to discuss the politics of the process.   What were the oppositions to our effort politically, and how did we overcome them? What were the key factors which led to our political success? What were the political backlashes from the opponents? What were the consequences of those political backlashes?

The Vision

My journey on "Service Learning" started on a hot summer day in May of 2010, shortly after I took my position of VPAD at PolyU on April, 2010. I attended a "Community Service Fair" at the campus podium in which various departments and student organizations were presenting their community service projects completed in the previous academic year. The podium was packed with enthusiastic students and faculty, explaining their efforts to the visitors. As the new Vice President, I was given extensive briefing about their efforts. The enthusiasm is genuine and I was extremely impressed.

I have learned subsequently that PolyU has had a long history to community service by its student, staff and faculty. As shown in Table 1, over 900 faculty/staff and students participated in community project every year from 2007/2008 to 2009/2010 and the number of service users grew to over 180,000 in 2009/2010. As an administrator, I was surprised to find that there were no formal institutional support/funding for these efforts. All these projects were supported by "soft money" (i.e. one-time funding such as student grants, community service fund, etc. which are not part of the university permanent budget) and external funding from good-will philanthropists. Because of student's interest, there were a group of administrative staffs in the Student Affair Office who provided limited level of administrative support to students for community service. But these staffs are members of the counselling section and providing support to students for community service was not in their job description (a curious phenomenon in many academic and non-academic departments at PolyU at that time and is still true today, many non-academic staffs have the discretion to spend a great deal of time doing jobs outside of their job description.).   The efforts by students and faculty are basically voluntary as they got no formal academic credits for participating in the community service. In short, at 2010, I found that there was a "visible" culture of community service at PolyU, developed entirely from the good-will of some students, faculty and staff, without any formal support from the University administration.

I was particularly impressed by the enthusiasm of the students and faculty participating in Service Learning at PolyU. From the perspective of the students, the percentage of participation was about 30% (the undergraduate population at PolyU is about 25,000). Students are drawn from all disciplines across the university (e.g. engineering, business, sciences, physical therapy and occupational therapy, nursing and hotel management). The participation from students was therefore broad and significant. From the perspective of the faculty, it is interesting to note that the participating faculty members were largely not from disciplines related to education and social sciences. Few of them, if any, can generate any research output (e.g. a paper) based on their participation in the activities. As shown in the interview with some of the faculty in reference [1], they were motivated largely by their conviction that service is an important part of the student's learning experience. They had earned my respect as educators, committed to developing good citizens and future leaders for the society.

As a newly appointed Vice President with the responsibility of developing the 4-yr undergraduate curriculum, I also had the opportunity to meet and interact with many leading educators on undergraduate education, both in Hong Kong and around the world. Consistently, I have heard from their speeches and read from their writing that university must rethink its undergraduate curriculum, particularly in shaping the students' view of the world and to help them to become better citizens of the society. I was impressed particularly by a speech given at the Hong Kong Baptist University in 2010, by Rev. Stephen A Privett, S.J., the current Chancellor at the University of San Francisco. He said, "*We are too quick to urge a sharper focus on writing or speaking skills and eager to engage the debate of "how many" science courses or "how much" Philosophy or whittling down the history requirement. We are quite reluctant to engage one another on the more basic issue of the underlying purpose of a college education at this moment in history. What is the goal of undergraduate education in a globalized world? What body of knowledge, what set of skills and which sensitivities should all of our students cultivate to achieve the purpose of undergraduate education? Only after we have answered those basic questions are we in a position to begin discussing the number and sequence of courses and experiences that are most likely to help students realize our hopes for them.*" Many well-known educators, both in the US and abroad, also expressed the same sentiment. For example, Anthony Kronman, the former Dean of the Yale Law School and author of the book "Education's End", suggested that there needs to be a "*higher purpose for the undergraduate curriculum*", not simply to prepare the students for a well-paid career in their chosen major/discipline, but also "*...to shape its students' souls ...a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together [formed] the basis for living the best life one can.*" These words (plus similar sentiments expressed for many, many other educators) convinced me that Service Learning has a place in the undergraduate curriculum.

My vision for developing Service Learning at PolyU was further strengthen by the timing of the curriculum transition. With the transition from a 3-year curriculum to a 4-year curriculum, the university was at a unique "window of opportunity" to introduce a new and innovative subjects/requirements to the undergraduate curriculum such as Service Learning. In summary, I can identify following specific factors which are favorable for the development:

1. The availability of curriculum space to implement the requirement (we are developing one additional year of curriculum)

2. The availability of resources to facilitate planning and pilot testing of Service Learning courses prior to its formal implementation (the discretionary money for curriculum transition is available)
3. The availability of time to facilitate planning and pilot testing of Service Learning courses (one full academic year to go through the approval process prior to Fall 2012, if the decision to go ahead is made immediately)
4. The availability of a reasonably sized (~10) core group of enthusiastic faculty who can help with the planning and pilot testing of courses
5. The support of a sizable fraction of the student body (~30%) who would welcome the recognition of Service Learning as an academic activity and requirement

As one may say, "the stars are aligned", and I am fully convinced that we were at a moment of PolyU's history which offered the best opportunity to implement Service Learning as an undergraduate requirement. I decided to go for it.

As I began to share my vision with colleagues at PolyU, there was still one point of disagreement, even among people who were supportive of Service Learning. While they supported the idea of legitimizing Service Learning as an academic subject with appropriate credit, they were skeptical academic departments would support its adoption as a graduation requirement. They were not confident that we can win the political battle. While I understand their concerns (which is a pragmatic and realistic assessment of the politics involved), I maintained my vision of a graduation requirement for Service Learning. My decision is based on the following two factors:

1. Because of the implementation of the additional one-year of curriculum, we have the curriculum space to add Service Learning to the graduation requirements without the need to eliminate another subject or reducing another part of the student's academic work load. This is a rare opportunity at PolyU which will not happen again in many years. By making Service Learning a requirement, it also allows the subject to be funded by the university regular "line" budget which is critical for the survival of the subjects in the curriculum. If Service Learning is not a requirement in the curriculum, the decision on whether to offer Service Learning courses will be left to the department as an elective subject. For a research university which PolyU is aspired to become, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Service Learning courses to compete with other interests in the department, where the focus is generally on research and most faculty has little or no interest in Service Learning. In Science and Engineering departments, for example, Service Learning subjects will definitely not survive.

2. I believe strongly that in order for the Service Learning curriculum to be developed and sustained within the university, it needs a supporting office to provide the unique institutional support which Service Learning subjects require (e.g. staff and material support for faculty/students to do projects away from campus, liaison support with community organization and NGO, etc.). It will be difficult, if not impossible, to argue for the creation of such an office if Service Learning is not considered a permanent and required part of the curriculum.

The Efforts

The efforts to get the necessary approval for the implementation of Service Learning as an academic requirement were straight forward. As a one-subject requirement for the additional one-year curriculum, Service Learning was part of a proposed 30 credit General University Requirement (GUR) as shown in Figure 1. Similar to most major universities, PolyU has a Senate structure set up for the formal approval of all major academic decisions (e.g. creation of an academic degree programs, major curriculum revision such as the GUR). Much of the efforts, therefore, were focused on developing the appropriate proposal and supporting documents for the Senate's approval. For Service Learning courses to be available for offering in Fall 2012, it is important to begin pilot testing of courses in Fall of 2011. Even with the availability of discretionary fund to support pilot-testing of new courses, the planning for such courses need to occur at the beginning of 2011 calendar year (the academic year began in September 2011). The planning needs to include, for example, the solicitation of proposals from faculty and the setting up of the appropriate reviewing process, evaluation criteria and funding procedure to support the course development. The GUR with the Service Learning requirement must therefore get its approval from the Senate in its second meeting of Fall 2010, scheduled at Dec. 2010 (The PolyU Senate meets two times each semester). Since all academic proposals have to be pre-approved by the Academic Planning Committee prior to submission for formal approval by the Senate, the proposal for the GUR requirement and all the necessary supporting documents must be completed and ready for review by Nov. 2010. In short, I have only 7 months from the time I formally assumed the Office of VPAD and 6 months from my initial exposure to Service Learning at PolyU at the "Community Service Fair" to get Service Learning requirement approved by the PolyU Senate.

The formal process of consultation with the faculty began on July 2010, when I convened a "brainstorming" meeting with a small group of faculty/administrator (who have experience with the community service efforts at PolyU) to seek their inputs on the feasibility on making Service Learning an academic requirement in the curriculum. The list of attendees and the minutes of the brainstorming session are shown in reference [2]. In general, there were no serious objections and the attendees to the brainstorming session were supportive of the vision. There were concerns about whether Service Learning should be a mandatory requirement. Some members noted the importance of articulating clearly the academic aspect of a Service Learning subject (e.g. learning outcome, assessment, etc.) and a quality assurance process to maintain the academic standard. There were genuine enthusiasms for the idea and an agreement was reached to establish a formal taskforce to work on the Senate proposal and the appropriate supporting papers. It was also recognized that the taskforce must work out the appropriate academic criteria and the vetting process for the approval of Service Learning courses for possible pilot testing in 2011/12, if the Senate approves the requirement.

Due to the summer break, the Service Learning taskforce was formally established and had its first meeting after the summer at Oct. 21, 2010. Chaired by Dr. Stephen Chan of Computing, the memberships of the workgroup consisted of one academic staff (faculty member) from the nine faculty/schools at PolyU and the Director of the Student Affair Office. With much of the preparatory work done over the summer, the workgroup worked intensely and quickly produced a powerful document (see reference [3]) as part of the Senate paper on GUR for consideration by the Academic Planning Committee on Nov. 8, 2010. The paper addressed three important questions relevant to the adoption of a Service Learning academic requirement. They are:

1. Rationale for making credit bearing Service Learning mandatory for undergraduate students admitted in 2012/13 or after

2. Definition of Service Learning
3. Qualifying criteria for Service Learning subjects

In addition, the paper also recommended:

1. the setting up of a central office for support and administration (of Service Learning subjects)
2. pilot run (of Service Learning subjects starting in the summer of 2010/11)

The GUR proposal (with the Service Learning requirement) was approved by the Academic Planning Committee in its meeting at Nov. 8, 2010. The Senate adopted the GUR for the 4-yr curriculum on Dec. 2, 2010 by a substantial majority (more than 2/3 of the voting members approved the proposal). There were little discussions (less than 5 comments) and no strong objection was formally raised on the proposal.

To assure that the university is ready to offer Service Learning courses for students entering in Fall 2012, the taskforce continued to work until its last meeting on June 8, 2011. Thanks to the hard work by the taskforce and funding provided by my office, five pilot Service Learning course proposals (from five separate departments) were approved to be offered in Fall 2011/12. They are listed in Table 3. These courses marked the beginning of the Service Learning requirement at PolyU.

The Politics

Politics is a way of life at every level of decision making processes at a university. In an environment where the "perceived excellence" of an institution (e.g. ranking) depends almost entirely on the individual achievement of its faculty members (e.g. number of publications, research grants, awards, membership to the national academy, Nobel Prize), the priority of most, if not all, academic administrators (department chairs and deans) is to maximize the department/college resources (budget and space) to protect and enhance its research profile. Collaborative agenda, particularly in a teaching-focused area like Service Learning which bring no obvious benefit in research for most departments/colleges, generally get little political support.

The passage of the Service Learning requirement, therefore, is somewhat of a political miracle. How did it happen? Of course, the hard work by myself and my supporting colleagues to prepare the Senate proposal, answering questions in the various committee and senate meetings, contribute greatly to our political success and I don't want to minimize that.

In my original version of this reflection, I have given a complete analysis on what happened politically from my personal perspective. After some additional reflection and also some good advice from a few close personal friends, I decide to take that section out in this version of the reflection. If you want to read my personal analysis of the politics, send me a email (yuen@engr.ucsb.edu) and I will share that with you privately. For me personally, the political journey turned out to be quite painful, marked by betrayal and back-stabbing by an individual whom you trusted and considered as closed personal friend for thirty years, leading to my forced resignation from the position of VP(AD) on October, 2012.

Epilogue

We are now at the 2016-17 academic year, a year at which the Service Learning will need to be fully implemented at PolyU as all four classes of the undergraduate would be registering under the 4-year curriculum. By all indicators, Service Learning at PolyU is a stunning success.

The number of Service Learning classes offered and student enrolment figures for the six years (starting with the piloting year of 2011) are shown in Figure 1. More than 70 Service Learning courses are now offered at PolyU, serving more than 4000 undergraduates. Consistent with our vision that Service Learning is an academic activity, a parallel administrative structure is created to support Service Learning as shown in Figure 2. Indeed, the Office of Service Learning (OSL) as grown from its original mission as a supporting unit for the planning and execution of Service Learning subjects. Its staffs are now conducting research on Service Learning, based on the large amount of student's enrolment data, as well as the many student reflection data collected from the subjects. The OSL staffs are publishing papers in archival journal on Service Learning. On Dec. 1-2, 2016, OSL will be hosting the Second International Conference on Service Learning at PolyU. The statue of the OSL, as a center of Service Learning teaching and research, is growing internationally.

Spiritually, I have come to understand and accept that everything happened for a reason and ultimately, God is in control. In spite of the personal disappointments associated with my forced resignation, I am thankful that I can be a part of this amazing experience to develop the Service Learning requirement at PolyU. I still believe very strongly that good things can happen at the university level to benefit student's education if we are committed to sound academic principles and sufficient number of people are willing to work hard to make it happen.

References

1. "Good Teaching Practice – Service Learning", video produced by the Educational Development Center (EDC) of Hong Kong Polytechniv University, 2012.
2. "Note on the first brainstorming session on Service Learning", July 29, 2010.
3. "Service Learning Requirement under Revised General University Requirements", Appendix II to Senate Decision Paper SEN/68/A8, Nov. 29, 2010.
4. "Report on the GUR requirements of the PolyU 4-yr Curriculum", Hedley Freake, Chi-Chiang Huang and Thomas P. Kasulis, 2011.

Community Service Activities at PolyU

➢ **Number of Students and Staffs Participated**

2007/2008	2008/09	2009/10
800	900	905

➢ **Number and Types of Service User**

Types of Service Users	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Children & youth	60536	11506	102024
Elderly people	1309	290	2225
Ethnic minority group	594	42	174
General public	89400	21256	81211
People with special needs	1001	1924	548
Total no. of service users	152840	35018	186182

Table 1: Community Service Activities at PolyU from 2007/08 to 2009/10.

Language and Communication
[9 credits plus **"R" and "W" requirements in English and Chinese**]

Freshman Seminar
[3 credits]

Leadership & Intra-Personal Development
[3 credits]

Service-Learning
[3 credits]

Healthy Lifestyle
[non-credit-bearing]

Broadening subjects chosen from the following **4 clusters**:

- **Human nature, relations and development**
- **Community, organisation and globalisation**
- **History, culture and world views**
- **Science, technology and environment**

[12 credits, 3 credits in each cluster; min. 6 credits of which should be in subjects designated as **"China-related"**]

Table 2:   The General University Requirement (GUR) approved for the 4-yr undergraduate curriculum at PolyU.

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Approved Pilot Proposals – First Round (2011-12)

Subject	Host Dept	Subject type	Proposer(s)
Service Learning and Civic Engagement in the Information Age	COMP	GUR	Stephen Chan, Grace Ngai & Vincent Ng
Community Psychology	APSS	GUR	Charles Chan & Kevin Chan
Biomedical Engineering Services to Under-privileged People with Physical Disabilities	HTI	BD	M.S. Wong, Aaron Leung & Raymond Tong
Teaching English as a Service Learning Experience	ENGL	DSR	Cathy Wong
L2-Chinese in Local Schools	CBS	DSR	John Wakefield

Table 3: The first group of pilot service learning course approved for offering in Fall 2011/12 at PolyU.
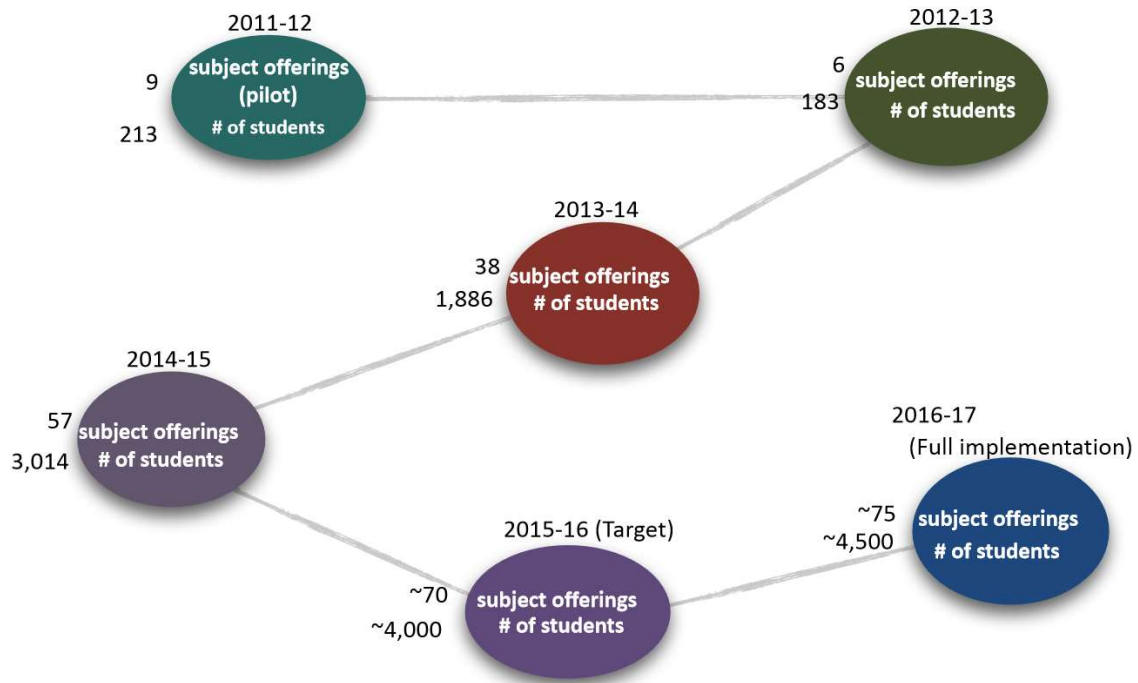
Figure 1: The number of Service Learning subjects offered and the corresponding student enrolment in the subjects from 2011-12 to 2016-17.

A PARALLEL STRUCTURE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SUPPORT

Planning and Execution Support	Vetting and Quality Assurance
➤ An Office of Service Learning (OSL) provides administrative and implementation support ➤ Liaison and "matchmaking" with interested NGOs ➤ Training of students and staff ➤ Assistance in student supervision and assessment ➤ Organizes overseas projects to key locations ➤ Performs risk management for projects ➤ Supports students on follow-up work	➤ A subcommittee on service learning subjects is responsible for overseeing the operation of service learning subjects ➤ Calls for new subjects twice a year ➤ Vets new subject proposals for adherence to service learning objectives ➤ Receives the assessment results of service learning subjects and ensures quality control

Figure 2: A parallel structure of quality assurance and support for Service Learning subjects at PolyU.