

## **Global Service Learning for Social Responsibility to the World's Poor: Towards a Dialogic**

### **Capabilities Pedagogy**

**Xiuying Cai & Hong Zheng, Xiamen University, China**

Every Monday 5-8pm throughout the entire academic year at the U Land, a large midwestern land-grant university, graduate and advanced undergraduate students from multiple disciplines, including business, engineering, design, agriculture, social sciences and liberal arts, were busy working together in their interdisciplinary groups in a product and business design class, the Subsistence-to-Sustainable Education Course (SSME). In fall semester, they learn about the life circumstances of the poor around the world, using poverty simulations, videos, and qualitative interviews about the lives of the poor, most of whom are women. Further, during the winter break, they take a field trip to India in order to conduct research and interact with people living in low-income and low-literacy communities. Lastly, in the spring semester, the students learn to design sustainable solutions and prototypes for subsistence marketplaces, such as products, services, and business plans. The SSME Course is part of an international Subsistence-to-Sustainable-Marketplaces Initiative which was built upon synergies between research, education, and social initiatives in low-income, low-literacy communities in the U.S, India, Argentina, Uganda, and Tanzania.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pedagogical possibilities of global service learning to educate university students to respond to the world's poor in the SSME initiative at the U Land. While global poverty and sustainable development have attracted increasing attention, effective policies, practices, and pedagogies in education to cultivate the next generation of global citizens to respond to these global challenges are still under researched. In

particular, with the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals towards 2030, we are at an important historic moment to explore innovative pedagogies in higher education to promote sustainable development of the world's poor.

Grounded in a yearlong ethnographic case study in the SSME initiative at the U Land, I explore the pedagogical possibilities, processes, and challenges of service learning seeking to educate university students to address global poverty and work towards sustainable development. I engaged in three phases of data collection as the SSME Course unfolded in academic year 2015-2016: 1) Fall 2015 at the university, 2) Winter Break 2015 in India, and 3) Spring 2016 back at the university. I utilized a variety of data collection methods, including (a) participant observation throughout the course both at the university and in impoverished communities in India to illuminate how the experiences of teaching and learning were constructed and negotiated; (b) textual analysis of curricular documents, student writings, and existing literature to examine how the pedagogical practices facilitated the understanding of global poverty; and (c) ongoing in-depth individual and focus group interviews to understand how different constituents in the course made meanings of this experience as it was enacted. Throughout the data collection process, I conducted iterative and ongoing data analysis, identifying codes, categories, and themes. Thematic analysis involves identifying the most provocative experiences and thoughts that were common across interviews (Kvale, 1996).

Drawing from the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1999, 2009) and social justice pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, 2004; Hytten, 2006; Hytten & Bettez, 2011), I show three key findings from the ethnographic case study in relation to the pedagogical processes and learning outcomes of the students in this service learning.

First, I show how the professor used various pedagogical strategies to construct a “bottom-up learning” about the poor and how the pedagogical processes shaped the students’ understanding of poverty and how they relate to the poor. Specifically, I show how the professor used a variety of bottom-up pedagogies to teach about poverty with the poor at the core of his pedagogy, such as immersion learning, experiential learning, project-based learning, international immersion and field research.

Second, I show the pedagogical purpose of the professor to prioritize the students’ wellbeing and their learning experience, while at the same time, to provide credentials for the students to speak about the experience for their own interests. I feature a student’s narrative about his motivation to join the class and his expectations for human capital accumulation which was eventually aimed towards greater justice and equity in the world. The point for him was not to choose an either/or, but to strive for a both-and, which spoke to an expanded conception of the purposes of education and development in the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999, 1997; Nussbaum, 2011). I further discuss the pedagogical challenges, which was to push the students to see possible contradictions existing within these two imperatives, in particular, within the larger neoliberal global capitalist context. This, I argue, may require a broader theoretical and analytical framework, with what the professor called, “the delicate dance between the bottom-up and the top-down.” This dance, I further argue, needs to go beyond the business or economic realms, but extend to the social, historical, and political realms.

Lastly, I show how the students came out of the SSME service learning initiative with transformative experience by broadening knowledge, skills, and perspectives for different contexts; recognizing the poor as agents in their own lives under the conditions of poverty;

reevaluating personal habits, professional aspirations, and social responsibilities; and being confronted with the complexity of the challenges of global poverty and sustainable development.

With the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by its member states, education has a cross-cutting role in realizing global sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015). In this study, I explored the pedagogical strategies and challenges in service learning seeking to address global poverty and sustainable development. In order to do so, higher education pedagogies need to put the poor at the core of our dialogic and experiential pedagogy, with an expanded conception of the purpose of the higher education in the capabilities approach. In conclusion, I suggest a dialogic capabilities pedagogy for global service learning in order to expand the capabilities of the students to work with the poor and ultimately expand the capabilities of the poor to strive for sustainable development for all. Only by doing so, can higher education lead to human development for all and push our global community towards sustainable development.