Valuing student and community voices in the university: Action Research as a Framework for Community Service-learning

Erin O’Connor, Judith Smith, Phil Crane, Dean Brough, Natasha Shaw, Jill Franz & Ingrid Larkin

Abstract

The Community Service-learning Lab (the Lab) was initiated as a university-wide service-learning experience at an Australian university. The Lab engages students, academics, and key community organisations in interdisciplinary action research projects to support student learning and to explore complex and ongoing problems nominated by the community partners. The current study uses feedback from the first offering of the Lab and focuses on exploring student experiences of the service learning project using an action research framework. Student reflections on this experience have revealed some positive outcomes of the Lab such as an appreciation for positive and strengths-based change. These outcomes are corroborated by collected reflections from community partners and academics. The students also identified challenges balancing the requirements for assessment and their goals to serve the community partner’s needs. This feedback has provided vital information for the academic team, highlighting the difficulties in balancing the agenda of the academic framework and the desire to give students authentic experiences.
Keywords: Service-learning, participatory action research, tertiary education, community services

Introduction

The Community Service-learning Lab (Lab) is a university-wide service-learning (SL) initiative at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. Community partners, connected to the Lab, invite students to inquire into real and complex issues facing their communities. To acknowledge the complexity of the issues facing our communities, an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in a Participatory Action Research framework (PAR) has been developed. In the spirit of collaborative inquiry the community partners couch their issues as broad framing questions rather than directives for outcomes. For example: instead of “make a website” a project brief would read “How can we best communicate with the community?” The projects are purposefully designed to allow for student and community input into the project focus, process and outcomes. This more open approach to projects originated from student advice provided in the stakeholder roundtable discussions, which informed the design of the Lab’s curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Each semester student teams contribute a component of an ongoing inquiry. At the end of the semester the student groups reflect on their processes and outcomes and identify areas for future investigation by student teams.

The current paper presents a case study based on one of the projects. The study focuses on student Lab reflections but also incorporates some community and academic input. The focus of the case study is to explore the student experience of the Lab and how students respond to the use of action research within a SL experience.
Action Research and Service-learning

Participatory action research starts ‘where people are at’ and develops through dialogue, as a group of people trial, evaluate and improve strategies aimed at improving the situation of people in some respect. Harking back to the concept of ‘unfreezing’ (Lewin 1946) community partners nominate an issue of challenge that is important to themselves and which they would like a project to focus on.

_A difference is noticed, an ideal is not met, a loss of quality, a foreshadowed change of direction, or perhaps the need for innovation._ (Goff et. al 1998: 65, in Crane and Richardson 2000: 1.7)

Consistent with Bradbury and Reason (2008), the character of PAR has an emergent developmental form, as practical and knowledge producing. The critical pedagogy underpinnings of PAR are manifested as an explicit invitation to students to explore and develop their understandings at the local level about disadvantage and privilege, whilst investigating a particular challenge the agency faced.

The PAR process is presented as cyclical yet dynamic, consisting of interrelated moments of initial observation, reflection and planning - followed by action, observation, reflection and sharing at student, individual project and Lab wide levels. PAR has steadily grown in popularity as a tool for evaluation of education at all levels and across disciplines including tertiary education for psychology students (Lizzio & Wilson 2012), education students (Bloomfield, Taylor, & Maxwell 2004), and as a model to examine academics teaching (Ferguson 2012; Schratz 1992).

In the Lab, students conduct action research within a SL context (while the learning design is evaluated by academic staff through an additional action research project). Service-learning has been described as “the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic
theory of SL is Dewey’s: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning” (Ehrlich 1996: xi). Service-learning aims to encourage students to examine social justice issues such as privilege and disadvantage. While reviews of SL have highlighted the difficulties in empirically measuring impact, there is initial evidence that SL contributes to personally and professionally impactful learning (Felten & Clayton 2011). Service learning addresses many of the key principles of good practice recommended in a current Australian report on work-integrated learning, but particularly relates to the principle of reciprocity or “mutual benefit” (Orrell 2011: 20). It is this focus on reciprocity and the significant emphasis on social justice and citizenship that make SL an exemplary match for PAR.

The combination of PAR and SL is not new and has been reported in a number of cases. For example, models that incorporate the two have been formally proposed in the literature (e.g., Suarex-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis 2005). Practical examples of on-campus simulated action research that incorporates similar values as SL have also shown to enhance professional skills (Lizzio & Wilson 2012). Another outcome from these trials is an increase in the quality of professional reflection (Bloomfield, Taylor, & Maxwell 2004).

While past research has explored how the models progress civic learning (e.g., Parker-Gwin & Mabry 1998), few studies have investigated student reactions to the models themselves. One notable exception found that these approaches also result in deeper learning than traditional approaches, but did not investigate the student uptake of the values and principles of action research values (Lizzio & Wilson 2012). This paper will present a single project from the Lab as a case study. The focus of the case study will be to explore the following questions using student reflections and input from the community partner and academic staff:
1. Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention?)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?
2. What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
3. What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

**The Lab – An overview**

The Lab curriculum has been shared by a number of SL units across the University and focuses on adding value to the established discipline-based curriculum. The Lab aims to:

- Identify and apply engagement strategies which support students as emerging professionals to work sensitively and appropriately with diverse communities and individuals
- Build awareness of the complexity of issues associated with privilege, disadvantage, and social injustice as these issues pertain to questions being explored with community partners
- Developing approaches to inquiry that value diverse perspectives and lead to mutually beneficial outcomes for stakeholders
- Exploring interdisciplinary ways of working when investigating real and complex issues facing communities

Disciplines involved in the Lab include Law, Justice, Business, Psychology, Social Work, Creative Industries and Design disciplines such as Fashion, Interior Design and Interactive Design. Academics collaborate with community partners in the development of the shared curriculum. Academics
and community partners co-facilitate shared SL events which engaged all student teams. Curriculum and assessment resources are also shared across units and projects. Additionally each project employs a range of specific strategies relevant to the nature of the student group and project focus. A community liaison role has been created in the University’s Learning and Teaching Unit to facilitate project connections between community organisations and relevant discipline areas. This role is also responsible for promoting projects to students, managing applications and disseminating resources through community websites.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was selected as the inquiry framework for the two levels at which the Lab operates. First, the Lab as a whole which investigated the big picture questions around how stakeholders work together at a strategic level to support SL and second, the process of collaboration and inquiry for individual projects (Crane, Smith & Shaw 2011). The principles of collaboration and reciprocity underpin both SL pedagogy and PAR. Both SL and PAR acknowledge that there are a range of stakeholders: students, organisations in the community, academia, university administration, and the community at large and that all parties have the potential to learn from, and contribute to the experience (Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009). PAR also supports an inquiry project-based approach to SL. The pedagogy that emerged from the interdisciplinary curriculum team was informed not only by PAR but also discipline-based inquiry approaches such as design thinking.

The Lab can be understood as a form of ‘networked systemic inquiry’ (Burns 2007: 19) into university-community SL comprised of multiple action inquiries. As Burns (2007) suggests, good systemic practice requires a strong network of group-based inquiries which in turn require reflective practice at the individual level. The Lab adopts a method of action researching that involves multiple layers of stakeholders working on different but interlinked aspects of the projects. The Lab-wide mechanism is a project
reference group comprised of project staff, the community partners, each Faculty, the university’s equity unit, and advisors on SL and action research. The Lab aims to adopt action research and SL values including being democratic, participatory and valuing reciprocity (Mills 2011). Reciprocity can be defined as an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise 2008: 305). After community staff nominate their complex and ongoing problems, students are encouraged to nominate macro and micro questions to facilitate their work. The goals and outcomes are not specified by academic staff, but instead directed by the students and based on discussions and collaboration with the community partner.

Regular communication between all stakeholders is integral to the Lab and different meetings and workshops are held at different points in the semester. Workshops for staff are delivered by community representatives and a PAR consultant addressing the key principles of the curriculum design, SL and action learning and action research. Students from the university community are invited to share their perspectives of the model during this development stage. A similar method of sharing concepts with a large group has been previously adopted by Trent (2012: 36). Academic staff are also provided with PAR research handbooks designed to facilitate the research and learning processes. Curriculum meetings focus on the projects that will be offered to students and the assessment (see Table 1). At these meetings, the academic staff in consultation with the community partners refine the learning and assessment focus.

At the beginning of each semester, introductory workshops for students on PAR and SL are co-facilitated by academics and community partners. Community partners are also involved in these workshops and deliver some of the workshop material. The project teams (community, students, and staff) complete a session about power and influence. During this time, the teams are able to discuss the roles and responsibilities of each team member and the
potential influence of power - this includes the power and privilege of each role. During semester, the staff supervising each of the projects are in regular contact with each other and their students. Across the Lab, the staff from different projects meet after the submission of assessment for moderation meetings. There are also agreed reflection and “checking-in” points for students, staff, and their community partner throughout the semester.

Table 1: The student assessment tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment 1</th>
<th>Assessment 2</th>
<th>Assessment 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project proposal description</td>
<td>Reflective Blog or Journal</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight: 20%</td>
<td>Weight: 40%</td>
<td>Weight: 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due: Week 5</td>
<td>Due: Throughout semester</td>
<td>Due: End of semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) An individual personal statement about their own key strengths and responsibilities and ii) a group plan identifying how the team will address the community partner’s needs</td>
<td>Individual reflections using the 4R model to explore key experiences and personal outcomes</td>
<td>Group presentation to share the project outcomes and process with community partners and academic staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of each semester, students share the outcomes and process of their project to community partners, academics and peers. During these workshops, the student and community responses to the community projects are considered and the next stage of each project (leading from the student responses) is developed for next cohort of students. Feedback and evaluation is
gathered from all stakeholders though a variety of means including questionnaire, group feedback sessions, interviews and email to inform the development of the subsequent cycle of projects. In this way, after each semester, the cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and sharing continues into the new cycle of projects (see Figure 1). A rich variety of projects are conducted within the lab (see Table 2). This paper will focus on the outcomes of the first cycle of the Kyabra project.
Figure 1: The CSLL Action Research System
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation and role/function¹</th>
<th>Framing questions</th>
<th>Students’ discipline areas</th>
<th>Data collection and outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation with a range of services including housing, family, financial, refugee and disability support (1)</td>
<td>How can the organisation communicate with clarity to its stakeholders and service users around its identity and provide evidence of innovative practice?</td>
<td>Psychology Business Fashion Design Interior Design Creative Industries CI/Human Services</td>
<td>Conducted a survey into the identity of the organisation Researched other NFP organisations public interface (i.e Annual report) and made recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation with a range of services including housing, family, financial, refugee and disability support (1)</td>
<td>How do you communicate complex legal information to people around their tenancy rights and responsibilities?</td>
<td>Law Film and TV</td>
<td>Researched relevant legislation and translated complex legal jargon into a script for a series of scenarios to be made into a DVD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic support for disabled adults (2)</td>
<td>How to support the support workers to complete their demanding and complex role</td>
<td>Psychology Education</td>
<td>Qualitative and quantitative research conducted with support workers including intense periods of participation in the organisation’s service centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation and role/function&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Framing questions</td>
<td>Students’ discipline areas</td>
<td>Data collection and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Service for migrants and refugees (3)</td>
<td>How will a recent high court decision affect clients of the service and how can we identify the clients who will benefit from this decision?</td>
<td>Law/Law/CI</td>
<td>Analysis of client records to identify suitable candidates. Research and report on the implications of the High Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice and Advocacy Group of the Anglican Diocese (4)</td>
<td>How do you raise awareness of the importance of the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution?</td>
<td>Psychology/Law/Justice Studies</td>
<td>Surveyed the attitudes and opinions of a particular target audience around the issue. Reviewed recommendations from an expert panel and identified key themes to communicate to a wider audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support service for prisoners and their families (5)</td>
<td>What can be done to improve the pathways for people serving life sentences?</td>
<td>Justice Studies</td>
<td>Extensive research into comparative penal systems which was incorporated into the organisations report to government.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup>The numbers listed reflect the organisation ID
Case study

Kyabra, located in Brisbane, Australia, is a multi-service community-based organisation working with individuals and families to enhance community life. Core programs offered at Kyabra include disability support, foster and kinship care programs, housing support, community finance and recovery services, and other broader community programs. The centre staff endorse a person-centred and strength appreciative model in all approaches to their work.

Kyabra’s complex and ongoing problem was one of identity. Kyabra staff wished to find creative solutions and deliver tangible outcomes to complex problems around the organisation’s identity, including how they interface with stakeholders and how they evidence their practice.

Participants

Academics
The academic team included 7 staff from a range of study areas including Design, Creative Industries, Fashion, Business, Psychology. The team also had contact with the Lab Community Liaison Officer and a PAR consultant from human services. These staff had varying levels of previous experience with PAR models and completed the workshop training and regular meetings.

Students
Seven students were involved in the case study project. The participant identification numbers and broad discipline area are presented in Table 3 with information about multi-discipline double degrees and programs of study with one or two majors within the same discipline (e.g., two majors within the creative industries may include dance and drama or art and art history). These identification numbers are also reported alongside the quotes in the later sections of this paper.
Table 3: The student ‘home’ disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant IDs</th>
<th>Disciplinary training (and cross-disciplinary studies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creative industries (two majors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Multi discipline degree (creative industries and human services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Business (single major)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creative industries (two majors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Design (two majors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Design (with previous multi-discipline degree experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Psychology (single major)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research methodology: Evaluation through case study

The project was approved by the institutional ethics board and, to help address ethical issues around unequal power roles in assessment, the students were given the opportunity to opt out of the research after grades were finalised and confirmed at the university level. The data collected as part of this project has come from a variety of sources. First, the students are encouraged to keep reflective journals and are required to submit up to five reflections for assessment purposes. These reflections were guided by the 4R model (adapted from the 5R model; Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester 2002). The 4R model (Ryan 2011: 8), guides students through four basic steps to assist in the composition of written reflections. Students are first encouraged to report all details of the experience or event, then relate this experience to their own personal context by comparing and contrasting the current experience to other aspects in their life such as past events. Reasoning involves interconnecting
the reflection to models, theories, professional ethics, or other relevant frameworks, and reconstructing involves a summary of the learnings that can be gained from this reflection and planning for the future. The model was adopted across the university prior to the development of the Lab and has been used by a number of academic staff in their previous teaching. Training was provided to students about this style of professional reflection. The focus in this paper will be to explore how action research has informed student experiences and learning in the first offering of this class. A small number of staff and community responses to these reflections have also been incorporated.

As the Lab was being trialled for the first time, the students were encouraged to reflect on any experiences, insights or themes they decided were suitable for reflection. This also allowed analysis to move beyond the development of ‘themes’ which simply reflect interview prompts (see Bazeley, 2009 p. 9). Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the teams involved in this subject, and of this case study team in particular, it was considered important to determine if different disciplines experienced aspects of the subject in different ways. As discussed by Bazeley (2009: 10), this also assisted in analysis searching for discrepancies or similarities between the experiences reported by students coming from different disciplines.

**Method of analysis**

Coding consistency checks were undertaken by an academic not familiar with the student reflections or the project but involved in similar methods of teaching (see Thomas 2006: 7). Further, as the analysis was largely undertaken by one of the authors, the co-authors were provided with the coding several times during the analysis phase for parallel checks. The consistency coder was provided with eight pages of sample student reflections, containing reflections from all students, and the identified themes. The coder was also given a rationale of the research and was asked to use the
codes provided and identify material from the reflections that matched these codes. The coder was also invited to nominate new codes.

The consistency coding was evaluated for points of agreement, disagreement (where the coders both identified a theme but disagreed) and coding by either coder that did not correspond with text that was coded by the other coder. Overall, the coders agreed 74% of the time. There were 4 points of disagreement. The most common disagreement in coding was between multi-disciplinary learning and professional growth, accounting for all but one disagreement. This indicated that there was some further analysis required to explore how students saw learning to work within a multidisciplinary team. This analysis is reflected in the outcomes of analysis presented below.

Using Mill’s (2001: 126) method of qualitative data analysis, the reflections were interrogated for any underlying common themes and any particular points of diversion between student experiences. We declare here that this was not an open unstructured analysis searching for purely emergent themes but of particular interest were the students’ responses to the PAR and SL frameworks and what they believed they gained professionally from this experience. No a priori codes were nominated; instead, the analysis was conducted using these questions as listed in the introduction:

Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention)?
Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?

What do students feel they learnt from the experience?
Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the
reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

Results

The analysis of the reflections resulted in four super-ordinate themes: congruence with PAR and SL values, incongruence with PAR values, team work, learning and the education environment. Each of these themes and the underlying sub-themes are discussed in the following section.

Congruence with PAR and SL values

The super-ordinante theme “congruence with PAR and SL values” explored the values and principles of PAR and SL that were reflected in the students’ writing. These values were discussed by almost all of the students, indicating that the frameworks for the project had been reasonably well adopted by the students.

Valuing organisation’s involvement. The theme valuing the organisation’s involvement related to the students’ acknowledgement of the role that the community organisation could play in their project. Some students commented about the value of the organisation’s contributions and how they would involve the organisation in the development of outcomes. These comments also recognised a shift from viewing the organisation as passive participants or worse, ‘subjects’ as those to be ‘studied’ instead to powerful and valued co-collaborators.

By acknowledging different clients’ needs and how we could be unintentionally discriminating we may define a more inclusive “identity”. For example, excluding clients’ perceptions on a “home” could be unintentionally discriminating and lead to an incorrect interface that represents Kyabra. But also excluding Kyabra staff and their definitions on identity can be oppressive too. – 2
PAR has encouraged the team to exercise lateral thinking and develop a dialogue with Kyabra and relevant stakeholders, where all parties subsequently adopted a participatory role and engaged in the fulfilling act of collaboration.

I feel through this stage of the project I have gained a new appreciation for the importance of my skills within this project when trying to determine the interests of the stakeholders.

The students were also eager to involve stakeholders from the community organisation and developed a survey to assist the team in identifying areas of need. This effort was the student’s method of engaging stakeholders; however, all analysis was done within the team and so this survey tool could be seen as a step towards PAR, rather than a motion to fully embrace the model.

To do this the team has decided to survey as many stakeholders as we can in order to finalise the direction of the project. Furthermore the analysis of this information needs to be done as quickly as possible so that the other team members are able to base their arguments for the direction of this project on the wants and needs of at least some of Kyabra’s stakeholders.

Valuing reciprocity. The value of reciprocity and partnership was also reflected in some student comments. Interestingly, reciprocity was mentioned in the reflections of students who had more than one discipline represented in their degree structures. These students recognised that the project was being conducted for mutual learning and benefit. These students positioned the organisation as a ‘teacher’ who had valuable knowledge and insights to share.
I am excited to be involved in the project, and pleased to be given the opportunity to work alongside a community partner. I think that it is of great value to gain experience by talking to an organisation.

I refer now to a goal set out in my week 5 personal plan, “It is hoped that this collaborative engagement with community service partner Kyabra, will be reciprocal in nature, in that it will provide the team with opportunities to engage with a multidisciplinary team and apply learnt knowledge and skills in a real-world setting whilst ultimately benefiting the partner organization and its stakeholders”.

Endorsing the strength-based approach. Some students also made statements indicating an endorsement of the strength-based approach. These students, largely informed by the community organisation who also works from a strength-based framework, indicated a willingness to explore the strengths of staff and clients. They also observed this approach in the host organisation. The students most commonly citing this approach in their reflections were each either working towards or had previously enrolled in double degrees. The possible significance is that double degree students maybe more accustomed to valuing two different frameworks (or disciplines) at the same time and seeing the strengths of two different approaches.

By using client self-determination and strengths, staff engage with clients to work collaboratively to achieve change.

I was also really excited to hear David talk about strengths perspective. Strengths perspective acknowledges that everyone has strengths. Given the right support and resources clients are the experts in their own situations and can create positive change.
(McCashen, 2005: 149). We as a team and the Kyabra team want to create a positive change by using the resources, organisation and creative strengths Kyabra possesses. – 6

**Role within a cyclical model.** Approximately half of the students commented on the cyclical model of PAR. One student in particular discussed these cycles with a clear vision to improving the academic process of the subject.

I think we all wanted an outcome from this that would not only affect future students but also affect our group in the immediate future. It is also satisfying to know that our feedback will impact the structure of the unit for future students. – 5

Another student clearly discussed the cycles in terms of action and reflection to support the community partner.

I understand future collaborative work between QUT and Kyabra will extend this goal beyond the current scope of work, however I feel confident that the current semester’s collaborative efforts have uniquely positioned QUT and the Kyabra community to continue to build relational ties and solve complex community based problems. – 6

The adopted community service based learning approach has enabled the multidisciplinary team to collaborate with Kyabra through a process of engagement, application and reflection. I believe this approach has been successful for both Kyabra and the student team due to its cyclical nature, whereby changes in project direction were easily accommodated and integrated into the working project process. - 6
**Working towards action and change.** Students also seemed to grasp the value of working with a PAR methodology for positive change and life enhancing results for the community members. They also saw PAR as a model that would emancipate students and encourage leadership qualities.

Change, is ultimately what this project is striving for.
A positive change which still encompasses Kyabra’s mission and reflects their identity. - 1

The team’s work with Kyabra is a step forward in defending the notion of community and empowering students, our potential leaders of the future, to implant the seed of change. – 6

**Incongruence with PAR and SL values**

The student reflections also contained some conceptualisations of the project that implied PAR or SL incongruent thinking. While these comments were subtle and not necessarily representative of the students’ overall intentions for the project, the reflections indicate how difficult it is to adopt a PAR framework when coming from disciplines less involved in the PAR tradition. Overall, these comments came from students from the Creative Industries and Business faculties. Given the nature of these disciplines, it is possible that these students brought in a conceptualisation of “client” and “delivery of product” partnerships and it may have, understandably, taken more effort for these students to move to the collaborative framework of PAR and SL.

**Delivery of a product rather than collaborative creation.** In these comments, students conceptualised the project as a series of goals to be achieved by the student team and a product to be ‘delivered’ to or ‘solved’ for the organisation, rather than something to be collaboratively worked through with the organisation or its stakeholders.
Maybe I was lead to believe or foolishly thought that we would have finished these massive projects for Kyabra, and have presented and almost solved their identity crisis. - 4

I think it is important for any business to have a reception that is welcoming to the client. - 1

**Student directed goals rather than Kyabra directed goals.** Some students also used their own goals as the frame for the project and prioritised goals derived from their own experiences of the organisation, rather than working with the stakeholders to uncover goals.

After a lot of discussion it came down to what we wanted to get out of this project, not only for ourselves, but for Kyabra. - 4

We agreed to focus more on the aspects of Kyabra’s Identity, given that after visiting the site, our group had identified this as being an opportunity for a project direction. - 3

It sort of felt as though Kyabra had no room, which is certainly not the case. I definitely think this could be improved upon. Aesthetic is lacking within the office space and also needs to be addressed. - 1

**Teamwork**

The superordinate theme of teamwork was strongly linked to student growth and development. Students discussed the roles that naturally emerged and that were later negotiated against the tasks and goals of the team. In many cases, the students were supportive of the negotiated roles; however some found that this added even more confusion regarding their personal contribution and purpose.
The reflections also included students’ comments about the benefits and challenges of multidisciplinary work. This aspect of the team received significant attention from the students and most reported positive experiences. Some added that there were additional challenges or questions that arose because of the multidisciplinary nature of the projects. A small number of students also reflected on the nature of the multidisciplinary work and their quest to experience a transdisciplinary team.

**Development of negotiated roles.** There was some discrepancy between team member’s experiences of natural and negotiated roles within the group. Initially, the group began with naturally emerging, flexible roles but as they learnt more about each other’s disciplines, roles were structured and agreed on. Some team members felt that the agreed goals and roles were useful.

> By establishing our individual strengths and weaknesses and establishing what our goals were earlier in the semester, the decision to have sub-groups gave group members with similar strengths the opportunity to work closely together to achieve our team goals - 1.

However, other team members reported feeling some confusion or lack of a strong purpose within the group.

> I’m struggling to feel like I have a necessary solid need or reason to be in the group. - 4

> Team members in our situation seemed to lack a ‘coherent, defensible sense of purpose’ within the project. - 3

**Multidisciplinary practice.** Overall students were positive about the opportunities provided in a multi-disciplinary team context.
After undertaking the CSLL, and working with this team, I feel much more confident in my ability to work within a team from many different disciplines. I understand a lot more about the differences between the disciplines, and what to expect (to an extent), from individuals from each discipline. - 3

This project has really taught me the crucial aspects of a successful team. The biggest difference about the team would be the fact that we all come from a diverse range of disciplines. I can now understand the importance of being able to recognise your group members thought processes and approaches to work as it will affect the outcome of you work. - 1

I have learnt a lot through this process not only about my strengths within this project but my limitations. Furthermore, I have learnt where the skills of other team members compensate for my deficits, which in turn allows for a more effective team dynamic - 7

However, some students did report some challenges related to working in this type of team. These comments were not explicitly negative, instead the students indicated that they learnt from these challenges and could identify ways that they would respond differently in the future.

I need to question “How can I balance my work style with my fellow members?” - 2

Some students also reported that multidisciplinary work was helping them to see beyond their own discipline. These students also indicated a willingness to explore other perspectives beyond those endorsed within their own discipline’s training.
As my degree comes to a close, I find I am less and less bound to the roots that were so strictly driven into me in the first two years of my studies. I feel it is the natural shift from being a student/academic towards being a creative or account manager. - 3

One student discussed their desire to experience truly transdisciplinary work; however, commented that the current team did not achieve this state. It is interesting to note that this was the student who had studied across three different disciplines.

I feel that we have fallen short of reaching the elusive transdisciplinary level of thought. I consider the movement between discipline knowledge, unlike PAR to be linear in nature. In order to progress from operating within your own discipline to a transdisciplinary state, you must first move through the multi and transdisciplinary phases. - 6

Learning and the education environment

Beyond teamwork, the students also reflected on their own development and growth throughout the project. The superordinate theme of learning and the education environment refers to the insights students shared about their learning and how the formal academic setting interacted with the project. Themes emerging here were student personal growth, student identity as a professional, and the tension between PAR and assessment agendas.

Personal growth. Some students identified broad areas of personal growth.

This unit has facilitated my understanding of metacognitive processes and has encouraged me to actively think about the way in which I think. – 6
I have been enrolled in other units in the past where I have been unhappy with the structure of the course but have never actually had the courage to approach the teaching staff in the way that we had this week. - 5

Assumptions are not always negative. They can tell me a lot about how I’m feeling and assist me to assess situations. But, assumptions can influence my work unknowingly. I need to start training myself to recognise how I act on assumption. So in future I can stop, reflect and take action without pushing my beliefs on others. -2

**Student identity as a professional.** Most students discussed their own developing professional identity in some way. Many reported that their own professional identity had been clarified or enhanced in some way through the experience.

This unit has facilitated my understanding of metacognitive process and has encouraged me to actively think about the way in which I think. – 6

I feel through this stage of the project have gained a new appreciation for the importance of my skills within this project when trying to determine the interests of the stakeholders – 7

As for my own discipline, I certainly felt a stronger connection with my discipline knowledge and how it could be applied to the project as time went by. - 1

Others clearly reported that the experience had highlighted just how formative their own professional frameworks were and that there was still considerable room for growth and development.
I am still an emerging practitioner. I don’t know everything and being open to learn from your mistakes will make your framework stronger. - 2

I guess I’m having my own personal identity crisis at the moment just doing this project, but it’s honestly making me think more and more about what my actual course can bring me in the real world. - 4

**Tension between the PAR and assessment agendas.** After an experience in which their assessment was reviewed and they were asked to resubmit work, students became keenly aware of the different agendas aligned with PAR and assessment practices. Although academic staff aimed to minimise this impact and to be supportive of the two agendas, most students reflected on this dissonance.

I feel this subject has massively detoured, because it started off about a goal for the community that just so happened to be graded at the end of the semester. Sitting on the final weeks of the term, the focus has slipped greatly from the organization to the assessment – 4

All our excitement about the project had been drained and we all felt helpless as to finding a balance between the project needs and the discipline coordinators needs. - 1

**PAR model allowing feedback to staff for next offering/stage of the subject**

After the revision of the proposal, staff engaged with students in a discussion about how the perceived discrepancies had emerged and what could be done to balance the academic requirements and need to genuinely honour the wishes of the community partner. Some students discussed this event in their reflections and
suggested that this had been a positive aspect of the project. They also each mentioned the fact that they were able to influence future offerings of the subject.

<Academic’s name> explained that unfortunately due to ethical reasons the assessment weighting would remain the same. However, there would be weighting adjustments made for future projects like this one. It was such a relief to hear that <academic> understood where we were coming from and it really meant a lot to the team. – 1

Even though we did not get a response that will change the current course of the unit I am still very appreciative towards the tutors for understanding where we are coming from, and taking our opinions on board to potentially implement them into next semester’s course structure... It is also satisfying to know that our feedback will impact the structure of the unit for future students. – 5

Community and University perspectives of outcomes

Representatives from the organisation (c) and the university (a) were asked to respond to the analysis of student reflections and share their reflections on the student experience. The analysis of these responses focused on points of similarity and difference both between the community partner and academic staff. Four main themes of similarity were identified: student outcomes, PAR and disciplinary frameworks, balance between education and serving the community, and uncertainty in the workplace. There was also one theme highlighted by the community that wasn’t shared in the academic reflection (Learning for the community) and one theme highlighted by the academic staff member that was not shared in the community reflection (Balance between education and serving the community). As these aspects were observed at the individual
level only, their status as ‘themes’ is loosely assigned. However, they are shared here as points of deviation between the reflections.

**Student outcomes**

What comes through the student feedback is the beginnings of a professional identity and how this interacts and can be applied to different settings, frameworks and understandings. – c

*The students have spoken to developing team and professional skills throughout the process…That the students were well aware of the team setting and their professional skills is a great testament to the Learning Lab process. –c*

*Anecdotal evidence (talking to students’ involved in Kyabra project after the final presentation) suggested a genuine enthusiasm for the project…and there was an appreciation of the complexities of educational constraints vs. real world problems. – a*

**PAR and disciplinary frameworks**

Both parties reflected on the difference that disciplinary background can have on the student experience of PAR.

*Understandably, students from other disciplines may have found this framework (PAR) challenging when they are not familiar with it and when they are more connected to empiricist frameworks. – c*

*In creative disciplines, this degree of muddled uncertainty as to how a project unfolds is a relatively common situation and many designers/practitioners thrive on the improvisation required for project fruition. - a*
Uncertainty in the workplace

Both the community partner and the academic staff member reflected on the frustrations that students had expressed in the face of changes to the project goals throughout the semester. Both parties reflected that this aspect of the project was highly relevant to ‘real’ work contexts and could be a learning opportunity.

Some of the frustrations have been around the shifting goal posts. Shifting goal posts can be a reality of work ‘in the real world’ and developing strategies and ways to deal with this are part of the ongoing learning process. To have this present in a supported learning environment can be viewed as an opportunity for students – c

In authentic real world contexts, complex activities and projects often become muddled as a result of unforeseen issues that arise in project directions. Critical decisions are often made ‘on the fly’ to move the task forward and the team involved in the project negotiate the shifting sands of complexity. – a

Learning for community

While the staff reflection did not highlight any individual level learning, the community partner reflected on how student involvement had changed the thinking of the staff within their organisation.

The contribution of the students involved in the Learning Lab gave us the ability to think about and consider different perspectives and ways of doing. We would not have had this opportunity otherwise. - c

Balance between education and serving the community

The academic staff member commented on the balance between reaching educational goals and upholding the
values of serving the community partner as a particularly important challenge related to the student experience.

when complex and ongoing real world projects with limited pre-determined outcomes, such as Kyabra project, are embedded in educational contexts there is a possibility of a highly charged tension – on one side there is the need for spontaneity to align to industry/partner needs and on the other is the strict behozen requirement for clear and definable assessment outcomes. – a

Discussion

The student reflections, with feedback from the community partner and academic team, provide a unique opportunity to learn from the first offering of the lab and to re-design the classes based on our stakeholders and partners. These reflections also offer an understanding of how students respond to PAR and SL models.

1. Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention?)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?
2. What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
3. What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?
Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?

The student reflections indicate that while the student project could not be described as a pure PAR process, the students to varying degrees embraced the values of PAR. This outcome has not been widely explored in the literature and adds to past findings that show improvements in civic responsibility, professional skills (Lizzio & Watson 2004: 482), and reflection (Bourner & Ellerker 1998). Some of the student reflections indicate the difficulty in moving to a PAR method of inquiry when your ‘home discipline’ largely embraces a more empiricist framework. The students (and community and academic staff) also identified difficulties in adopting action research within an assessable unit. All stakeholders identified that there are tensions between these two agendas and these need to be managed by teacher/facilitator adopting this model. This issue is one that is rarely discussed in the literature and warrants further examination.

What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?

Much of the student feedback about learning focused on the development of team skills and professional skills. While some students struggled to find a place in the team, the group did engage in negotiations about tasks and skills. The multidisciplinary nature of this experience also meant that many of the students formed an identity that was based on the discipline of their training. From this reinforcing of identity, some students appeared to first find the experience helpful in understanding the strengths and application of their ‘home’ discipline. A small number of students also indicated a strong interest in learning how to use multidisciplinary work to their benefit and one student spoke of a desire to reach transdisciplinarity. Further, it was noted that double degree (two degrees from different faculties) students seemed to have been more comfortable with acknowledging and working with different
frameworks and perspectives. At the very least, these multiple-discipline students recognised these issues in their reflective writing more than single degree students. A recent review of a sample of 30 work placements in Australia reveal that most programs focus on single discipline area placements (Orrell 2011); further exploration of these issues could encourage more multi-disciplinary ventures and support the existing programs.

**What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?**

The student reflections have provided valuable feedback to the community and academic team and sparked a number of shared and unique reflections from the community and staff representatives.

Consistent with PAR principles (Burns 2007: 19), the future stages of this project are underway and the academic team is working with community partners and students on a number of aims including 1) ensuring meaningful progress is made towards the complex and ongoing problems proposed by the community partners, including developing staged progressive projects to be worked on by different students, 2) the academic and assessment features of the unit are developed in a way that facilitates meaningful synergy between action research values and learner assessment and evaluation, 3) the contributions of community and learners are valued within academic processes and that these partnerships with academic staff are based on PAR and SL principles (e.g., Bringle, Clayton, & Price 2009).

**Conclusion**

This case study of the Lab provides insight for other service focused universities and learning centres aiming to provide authentic collaboration and learning between students and their local communities. The Lab is a continuing venture at the host university
and the partnership with the community organisation involved in the case study is continuing. While student evaluations of their experience were generally positive, the reflections also highlight areas for improvement and design refinement. In particular, the students have raised an important issue about the conflicting agendas held by the university and the community partner. This action research project facilitated the development of a new multi-disciplinary subject that embraces values and principles from action research and SL. Reflections by the community partner and academic staff, generated during the data analysis process indicate willingness to contribute to continual improvement of the student experience. Through utilising an action research framework for both the academic development of the unit and the student projects, the university has been able to collaborate with and learn from community partners and to raise questions regarding the expectations and practices of the academic environment.

‘We were introduced to different perspectives and ways of thinking and it appeared the students were too.’ - Community partner

References


Crane, P & Richardson, L 2000, ‘Reconnect action research kit’. Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.


Mills, GE 2011, Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher, 4th edn, Pearson, Boston, MA.


Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank our community partner Kyabra Community Association, Brisbane, Australia for working with us on the student learning project described in this paper. Specifically, we thank David O’Toole and Jean Griffin for their patience, guidance, and enthusiasm. We would also like to thank our students who took on each new stage of their project with energy and commitment.

Author information

Dr Erin O’Connor is a Lecturer in the School of Psychology & Counselling at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and teaches two work integrated learning (WIL) units. Erin completed a multidisciplinary teaching and learning post doc at the University of Minnesota. Her recent research has focused on the use of reflection in professional training of psychologists.

Judith Smith is Associate Director, Academic -Real World Learning at Queensland University of Technology. In this role she is responsible for providing university-wide leadership to Real World Learning and Work Integrated Learning in strategy, policy, curriculum and pedagogy. She is currently leading a number of cross-institutional initiatives including in WIL curriculum design, service-learning and WIL risk management.

Phil Crane is a Senior Lecturer with the School of Public Health and Social Work at QUT teaching and writing in youth services, homelessness, law and ethics in human services and social work, and participatory action research. His recent research is centred on the use of action research as a process tool for human service delivery, network and strategy development.
Dean Brough is Study Area Coordinator for Fashion and lectures in studio practice and fashion technology in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT. Dean has also investigated threshold positions for design innovation - the creative practice that evolved from this investigation was awarded a Design Institute of Australia Award.

Natasha Shaw has worked on the Community Service-learning Lab since its inception and has a central role in the projects development and implementation as the Lab Liaison Officer. Natasha’s background is in Education and Community Cultural Development, with experience working in a range of community settings including disability services; youth support services and remote indigenous communities.

Dr Jill Franz is a Professor and Head of Discipline (Interior Design) in the School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty, QUT. Jill has approximately thirty years in design, design education, and design research.

Ingrid Larkin is a lecturer in public relations in the Business School at QUT. Ingrid leads a number of WIL initiatives. Ingrid’s research interests include work integrated learning and community engagement for business students, professional identity of business graduates, and the professionalisation of public relations.