

Sustaining community networks for learning and serving: A web portal as a third space

Author:

[Kelsey, Halbert](#)

Year: 2014

Type of paper: Abstract refereed

Abstract: The compartmentalisation of university study means students do not engage with the learning community beyond the completion of the subject. This dominant practice is counter to the aims of service learning and the benefits of wider professional experiences, hence the need for a third learning space that is not owned by the university but is co-constructed. As learning tool this third space can complement and disseminate the rich face-to face experiences to other cohorts in order to use peer experiences as learning resources. As service tool a third space can facilitate information sharing, coordination of service learning, research projects and other authentic learning opportunities. Over successive offerings of Service Learning for Sustainable Futures an increasing network of community organisations have become involved with service learning. The use of service learning in higher education implies shifts from more traditional transmission pedagogies and exhibits sustainability pedagogies identified by Sterling (2004): learning through discovery, learner-centred, collaborative, praxis oriented, focus on self-regulation and real issues, cognitive, affective and skills objectives, learning with staff and with and from outsiders. Sustainability frameworks underpin the curriculum aims. Sustainability brings together multidisciplinary organizations that may be working with the same groups of people to educate them and provide access to more sustainable environmental, social, political or economic outcomes. However these community networks could be sustained beyond the experience in order to strengthen the capacities of organisations and the capacities of graduates as engaged civic professionals. Particularly for education students, wider professional experiences are crucial in developing professionals who are engaged with the communities in which they will teach (Salter, Hill, Navin & Knight, 2013). This paper discusses the development, communicative practices and outcomes of an online forum involving community organisations, university students and staff. The project used an action research methodology to involve teacher educators, pre-service and practicing teachers and community organisation representatives. Surveys and focus groups were used to capture participant perceptions and feedback in the development of a web portal as a third learning space. The paper uses civic engagement literature and spatial theory to critically reflect on the web portal and the experiential learning and serving it supports. In a policy context that increasingly positions higher education as a private good, such bridging spaces and sustainability aims work towards the public good.