PARTICIPATORY LEARNING: THE CASE OF PING CHE IN CITY DEVELOPMENT IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

Substantial efforts and resources have been put to encourage creative teaching and learning in recent years in many places in the world. Various kinds of funding have been allocated to projects promoting or studying experiential learning, participatory learning, internship and service programmes, etc. These projects not only aim at complementing formal curriculums but also broadening students' horizons. However, the effectiveness of such experiential learning is not easy to measure. Various evaluation methods have to be applied to fully assess the achievements and difficulties of these learning experience.

This study examines the effectiveness and challenges of a participatory community learning project at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Twenty-one university students took part in a Teaching Development and Language Enhancement Grant (TDLEG) project "CUHK in Communities" in September 2018. They spent nine months in Ping Che (坪輋), a rural area in the New Territories in Hong Kong, doing field visits in every two weeks and participating festive activities with locals to understand the intertwined facets of the people's living under the threats of city development.

Ping Che was first included in the North East New Territories New Development Areas Planning which involved clearance of village houses and land resumption. The plan met strong resistance from non-indigenous inhabitants. Later in 2015, the government reviewed and replanned Ping Che into the New Territories North Study, but the threat of land redemption remains. Since then, the locals and social activists have been organising community engagement activities such as community tours, art festivals, and running Ping Che Mural Village. These efforts not only revived rural cultures and empowered villagers with strong identity, but also united participants as a growing resistance to the development plan.

The Ping Che community is an exemplary case to rethink the legitimacy of the global trend of urbanisation under developmentalism. Through on-site participatory learning at Ping Che, students gained first-hand observation and opportunities to test the concepts learnt in class: the pursuit of good life, land justice, community-initiated development, and equal participation in a civil society, some of the core components of university general education.

In order to effectively evaluate the achievements of and the difficulties faced by students, participatory observation, questionnaires, reflective journals and focus groups were used.

Keywords: Experiential learning, informal education, community engagement, community studies, qualitative research

1   INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, experiential learning has been widely adopted in educational programmes. Many educational innovations have included experiential learning as one of their major components. More and more educators are experimenting with experiential learning practices such as service learning, problem based learning, action learning, adventure education, and simulation and gaming (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). All these practices emphasise learning engagement which can be traced back to the education philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey (1939/1986) notes that traditional education which emphasises imposition from above and from external hinders students from understanding the real forces in society. He therefore proposes a combination of formal teaching with direct learning experiences in selected environments. "His philosophy of 'learning-by-doing' not only allowed learning to become more immediate, it also allowed students to test their theories and symbols learned in school. (DeGiacomo 2002, p. 245)

Given the nature of experiential learning, it is understandably more an integral part of informal learning. In response to the keen interest in creative teaching and learning gradually developed in recent years, substantial resources have been put to encourage learning experiences outside the classroom and off-campus. It is believed that these learning experiences will complement to classroom learning and beneficial to students in the long run.

"CUHK in Communities" is one of the many projects funded against this background. It is a non-credit bearing participatory community learning project supported by the Teaching Development and Language Enhancement Grant (TDLEG 2016-19) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Students' participation is solely voluntary. The project focuses on facilitating a group of twenty to thirty students each year in the two-year project to cultivate a deeper understanding of Hong Kong communities through engaging community research. This paper examines the second year engagement at Ping Che (坪輋) where students spent nine months doing field visits and community participations.

Ping Che is a rural area in the New Territories in Hong Kong which has been under severe threat of city development in recent years (Kwan et al., 2018). The government's development plans there met strong resistance from non-indigenous inhabitants (Civil Engineering and Development Department, 2013). The locals and social activists have been organising community engagement activities to reunite the villagers (*iMoney*, 2015; Tsang, 2019). In so doing they revitalise a Ping Che identity that empower them to resist the destruction of their homes.

Nowadays, social justice—including land use justice, community-initiated development, participatory democracy, etc. have become important components of university education. The Ping Che community is an exemplary case for students to examine the notions they have learned in classroom. From September 2018 to June 2019, twenty-one students have undertaken field visits regularly and participated in festive activities with locals to understand the intertwined facets of the people's living under the threats of city development. Their understanding of community and community participation were also tested.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to fully evaluate the accomplishments of students and understand the difficulties they face, participatory observation, questionnaires, reflective journals and focus groups have been employed in this study.

Twenty-one students from the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences were recruited in September 2019. They were led by Dr Sampson Wong, an urban studies scholar and independent art curator, to do field work every two weeks at Ping Che during term times. A total of sixteen meetings were held. Activities included thematic tours, sharing talks by villagers and activists, discussions and cultural events, etc. Debriefings were organised as far as possible after each meeting to review what the students have gained and to keep track of the changes and development of their perceptions towards community building, city development and resistance.

One reflective journal was collected after the tour on agriculture development at Ping Che held in October 2018, an early stage of the project. Students were asked to write brief reflections on that particular tour. The reflections were used as reference for the analysis of the two focus groups held in September 2019 after the project has finished. The authors participated in the whole process and fine-tuned the project goals and direction when necessary.

Two focus groups, each consisted of four students, were conducted in September 2019 to review comprehensively the Ping Che project. Discussion was divided into three parts: 1) students' overall reflection of the project and their accomplishment; 2) in what ways the project affected/not affected their understanding of community building in general and of Ping Che in particular; 3) the impact of the project on the local community and the linkage between their community engagement and the knowledge they have learnt in class. An online survey was launched in July 2019 before the focus groups to solicit feedback. It is tabled in the part 3.

Table 1. Focus Groups Participants' Information.

Student	Major & Minor Study	Year of Study	Gender
A	Cultural Studies, Bachelor of Arts	3	M

B	Geography and Resource Management, Bachelor of Social Science	2	M
C	Anthropology, Bachelor of Arts	1	F
D	Earth System Science, Bachelor of Science	1	F
E	Anthropology, Master of Arts	N/A	F
F	Cultural Studies, Bachelor of Arts	3	F
G	Major: Chinese Language and Literature, Bachelor of Arts	4	M
	Minor: Cultural Studies, Bachelor of Arts		
H	Urban Studies, Bachelor of Social Science	3	M

3 RESULTS

The discussion of the focus groups and data collected by means mentioned above are analysed in four parts: 1. understanding concepts; 2. taking actions: participating in community; 3. impacts on studies, internships and abilities; 4. difficulties and limitations.

3.1 Understanding Concepts

3.1.1 Land Justice

Both in the reflective journals collected in the early stage of the project and in the focus groups conducted after the project has finished, students affirm a deeper understanding and their conviction of some major concepts, such as land justice, that have been discussed thoroughly in the project. After the field visit to various kinds of Ping Che agricultural land, a majority of them state that they understand more about the problems of land destruction in urban encroachment, and the difficulties local agriculture faces, including the loss of farmland and the relocation of inhabitants and farmers which are highly related to urban development.

Storytelling plays an important role in their understanding of reality. Seven out of eight students in the focus groups bring up the impact of the Government's Northeast New Territories Development Plan (NENTD) on the natural environment and the livelihood of residents. The stories they heard from villagers are depicted vividly. Student B comments, "We often hear how development and construction of infrastructure affect villagers, but all are like hearsay and very remote. Now I have real conversations with villagers whose living are seriously disrupted. They are real people, not just 'stories' I hear." Student F feels sympathetic for the villager when she saw her crying over the destruction of the natural environment. They are more convinced of the injustice of development and the disruption of lives by the real life stories told by first-hand villagers they encounter in the field.

Their feeling and understanding are further consolidated and elaborated in the publication of *Ping Che Seven Years* (坪輋七年), a collective effort of students to record their observations and understanding of the community. Through research and data analysis, they dig even deeper and wider into the problems discussed in the field visits. One obvious example is that they not only trace the history of NENTD in Chapter One, they even discover the linkage between the construction of Liantang Port / Heung Yuen Wai Boundary Control Point (蓮塘口岸 / 香園圍邊境管制站) to the New Territories North Study in which Ping Che was replanned in 2015. The linkage has never been explicitly mentioned by the government.

3.1.2 Relationship between Urban/Rural

Half of the students reflected that the project enables them to rethink the relationship between urban and rural, and their own relationship with nature. Student A, an urban dweller, profoundly sensed his linkage with the rural during his internship in a Taiwan rural community centre right after the Ping Che project ended. The Ping Che experience for him is "a flashback", "a nostalgia of village".

The deep connection between urban and rural they see in activists also impresses them. Student C states she was quite impressed by the sharing of an architect who was in charge of the stage design of an art performance. She has never thought of a "high-class" architect would participate in down-to-earth work in rural areas.

More research are done on the local agriculture in Ping Che in *Ping Che Seven Years*. Students recommend the general public to purchase more local farm products to support local farmers and agriculture.

3.1.3 Community Building

Before joining the project, students imagined community in a rather traditional and static way, considering it a place where people gather, forming a communal and thus constructing a unifying identity. Yet, after the first-hand experience and engagement in the Ping Che community, they realise that community building is of high complexity.

The differences among villagers are seen when the students participate in community events. Student C witnessed the conflicts between villagers regarding the selling of the same snacks in a Ping Che music performance in December 2018. Student F thinks that she will never be able to realise the different views in a community, especially a community of common goal, if not for this project. Negative image of a resistant community becomes more acceptable as more conflicts were revealed later. Student H who studies urban studies reviews the concepts he learned in his major and concludes that differences as well as similarities are what define a community. Most of the students apply this realisation of community dynamics to the understanding of society.

The empowerment of positive memories of the community is as impactful as the negative experience. Students are all impressed by the Fire Dragon Dance in Mid-Autumn Festival 2018. They witnessed a free and joyful atmosphere shared by villagers and outsiders. These firsthand on-site experiences further enhance their understanding of social dynamics and facilitate them to participate in different communities.

3.1.4 Civic Participation, Social Movement and Resistance

The notions of civic participation and resistance are critically examined throughout the project. The larger social context is crucial for understanding the community building movement in Ping Che, not only because it is directly related to the threats of urban development in recent years, but the activists involved also participate in other social movements. In the discussion, students reflected much on three crucial time: the suspension of the development plan in 2013, the failure of Umbrella Movement in 2014, and the District Council election in 2015.

In autumn 2014, the Umbrella Movement pursued universal suffrage overwhelmed Hong Kong. The 79-day movement eventually failed in fighting for a democratic election. Afterwards, the society entered a state of disappointment, laceration and even hostility. "Community building" and "civic participation" were two much advocated concepts after the movement for personal and social resilience. The resistance of urban development and community building at Ping Che should be examined under this bigger picture. Student A sees the relation and adds, "The purpose of our project is not only to reunite villagers here, but also to serve as a way to heal people's wounds after the failure of Umbrella Movement because they could voice out their grievances during the interviews we did." Student F further relates the Ping Che story to the current social movement in Hong Kong, "When I recall villager Choi Gor's comments of those inactive villagers, I immediately think of my participation in social movement. Am I one of those he criticises, who are passive or even indifferent toward civic responsibilities?"

3.1.5 Empowerment and Agency

Students become more aware of the agency the locals and activists exercise in community building. This further encourages them to be more proactive in other community participations. One prominent example of agency they observe is the locals and activists' participation in the District Council election in autumn 2015. Villager Choi Gor was one of the candidates in Sha Tau Kok-Ta Kwu Ling Zone (沙頭角打鼓嶺選區). He was backed up by the Ta Kwu Ling/Ping Che Alliance for Saving Our Home (打鼓嶺坪輋保衛家園聯盟) to fight against the pro-China political parties. Student E appreciates the integrated and effective social network in the election campaign. "They did not rely on authorities because they were already the people possessing power," she notes. The exercise of empowerment and agency boost her confidence in participating or even initiating campaigns in other communities. Student H adds, "WE should think about what we can do for the community." He finds that he is motivated to take action

after learning various abstract concepts and understanding the real situations in a community. "Perhaps there will be more surprises and unexpected outcomes after the doings," he says.

3.2   Taking Actions: Participating in Community

3.2.1 Relationship between outsiders, insiders and the community

Nearly all of the students in focus groups consider themselves as outsiders relative to the Ping Che locals. "Why should we enter a community that we are not familiar with?" asks Student E. Later she resolves this question by interacting with Ping Che villagers during interviews done for the publication. She finds that she enjoys doing oral history in which she understands people and establishes relationships with them. Student G finds it exciting when making friends with a social activist during interview, as they also have intellectual exchanges and chit-chat on other topics not related to the interview.

It was not surprising that students pay considerable attention to the power relations between the locals and the researchers, and the influence of the outsiders over the insiders and the community. Almost all students agree that the project reminds them to deeply understand the community and the people living there before they decide to participate in or to conduct research. "I used to think that informants are obliged to provide information for researchers. But I realise that no one is obliged to provide answers to my questions." Student H shares similar experience. He later figures out that as an outsider, he should first understand the background of informants, build up trust and establish a less-hierarchical relationship.

Students also review their involvement in Ping Che community. Most of the students consider keeping a long-term relationship with Ping Che. Student E particularly points out that she wants to keep contact with Ping Che as she has already done so much there. Inspired by the project, student B would like to explore more the rural villages in Hong Kong, while student C and G both decided to participate in the community in Kwai Chung, southwest New Territories, where a cluster of southeast Asians reside. Student A, with a greater determination, is convinced to take community work as his career in the near future.

3.3   Impacts on Studies, Internships and Abilities

The discussion above has already touched upon the impacts of the project on the students' studies, internship as well as the enhancement of their abilities. We will further examine some of the impacts in detail below.

First and foremost, students confirm that the project facilitates them to understand the theoretical frameworks and concepts taught in their majors. "I incorporate Ping Che's story in my term paper, and it helps me understand more about power and resistance," said student G in Cultural Studies. "I'm not a very down-to-earth person. This project helps me get out of the ivory tower and be more practical."

Ping Che is considered a case study par excellence for different disciplines. For Urban Studies and Geography, Ping Che is a good example to examine the community building process and villages as one housing type, according to student H and B. Cultural Studies undergraduates student A and F analyse the appropriation and transformation of space there.

Regarding the influences on internship, student D and E both agree that the project experience reminds them to consider environment and development issues at work. Student D will add more discussion about environmental protection when she guides tour for the climate change museum. Student E has engaged in an oral history project in another district in northeast New Territories in which she rethink human connection with nature.

It is worth noting that half of them take affection as one key element of the outcomes of the project. Student A doubts the research work in university in which "researcher and the research subjects keep a distance from each other" will actually hinder students' learning progress and outcomes. Student E adds that any emotional attachment to the research subjects will be regarded as unprofessional and biased in their studies. However, personal feelings and emotional attachment are not prohibited in this project, which made them feel more comfortable. Because of the emotions attached to Ping Che, their community participation became more intense as well.

There are several abilities that students find improved after joining the project. While most of them are satisfied with the publication as it allows them to practice their writing skills and boost their creativity, some find the collaboration with others, especially those with different academic backgrounds, more

fruitful. "We learn from each other. I did not know how to ask interview questions properly. My teammates from faculty of social sciences help me by adding precise follow-up questions," said student H. Some students confirm that the intense training and participation in the project help develop their sense of responsibility and punctuality.

3.4 Difficulties and Limitations

The recruitment of students was done in a careful and strict manner to ensure their commitment and true interest in community studies. The students recruited are highly motivated and enthusiastic towards community participation. However, like many of the informal, voluntary learning activities, the project faces typical challenges of student commitment.

As students have tight study schedules during the semesters, weekends, in which our learning activities take place, are usually reserved for revision or assignments. In the nine-month participation, low attendance appeared more frequently in late semester when exams and assignments increased. Partial participation cannot guarantee every student will have thorough understanding of the whole learning process. We have to follow up individual cases and coach those who are behind schedule. Considerable amount of administrative work and individual coaching are inevitable. This is the reason why we insisted to hire a full-time RA in the beginning.

Another difficulty, though in similar nature but is of different impact, is that students are shouldered with all kinds of responsibilities. Other than their major studies, their schedules are filled with internships, part-time jobs and extracurricular activities. As a result, efforts could be put in the project are limited, and some students even quit. The problem becomes obvious and critical in the preparation of the publication and the community day. Work meetings are difficult to arrange to fit for everyone's schedule. Although division of work has been discussed and agreed, deadlines sometimes cannot be met, or the quality of work is not satisfactory. Our intervention and assistance become crucial. In some cases, the objectivity of this kind of participatory studies is questionable. As for this study, the limitation of students is one of the key aspects to look into.

3.5 Outcomes of Each Kind of Activity

There are four kinds of learning activities in the project, namely thematic tours, on-site sharing talks, cultural events and publication. The following tables reveals the general outcomes and the particular feedback students give in the questionnaire (Q) (n=6) and the focus groups (FG) (n=8).

Table 2. Outcome of the Thematic Tours.

	Outcome	Average Score (5 = Most agreed; 1= Least agreed)
Q	The tours deepen my understanding towards various villages in Ping Che.	4.67
FG	Student B, C, D, E, F: The tours allow us to keep inline with the reality in the community, revising our imagination of it.	

Table 3. Outcome of the Sharing Talks.

	Outcome	Average Score (5 = Most agreed; 1= Least agreed)
Q	The sharing talks deepen my understanding of the ups and downs in community building.	4.83
	Student A, G: The guest speakers deepen our understanding of the historical development of Ping Che in the last seven years.	

FG	Student B, D: The guests' life stories allow us to understand their entrenched relationship with Ping Che community.	
	Student G: I am able to get non-mainstream information from the guests, which impresses me a lot.	

Table 4. Outcome of the Cultural Events.

	Outcome	Average Score (5 = Most agreed; 1= Least agreed)
Q	The cultural events boost my confidence in entering Ping Che community.	4.33
FG	Student A, F, G: The cultural events enhance my sense of belonging to Ping Che community.	
	Student F: The Mid-autumn Fire Dragon Dance allows me to meet other inhabitants who were not in our sharing talks.	
	Student E: The events let me understand the real practice of community events, which I've never experienced.	

Table 5. Outcome of the Publication Ping Che Seven Years.

	Outcome	Average Score (5 = Most agreed; 1= Least agreed)
Q	Desk research helps me clarify the history of the NE New Territories Development.	4.33
FG	Student B, E, G: The preparation of the publication deepens my understanding of various aspects in Ping Che, including the development plan, local agriculture and other economic activities, community art and cultural traditions.	

4   CONCLUSIONS

Experiential learning has become a major component in many educational innovations. Educators are convinced that engagement and participation in real life situations not only allows learning to be more immediate, it also allows students to test the knowledge they learned in school. The Ping Che community project confirms the education philosophy.

The project provides an opportunity for the students to examine the concepts and theories they learned in class. Students revisit their preconceptions and misunderstandings about various facets of communities. Knowledge and perceptions are contested and revised against real-life experience. Impacts and consequences of developmentalism are also critically examined against the endangered Ping Che community.

Students' interaction with villagers and social activists allow them to realise the complexity of community building. After studying the civic participation and resistance there, some students are motivated to participate more in other communities. Because of the increasing contact between students and inhabitants, most of them recognise the power relations between outsiders and the locals. The rethink of research ethics is one unintended consequence.

Students' experience in informal learning in return benefits their studies, internships and work. The Ping Che experience becomes a reference point of their studies and work. On the other hand, the publication of *Ping Che Seven Years* enables them to practice desk research and writing skills, and also facilitates the cooperation among students from various disciplines.

In conclusion, the long-term participatory learning impresses students in many ways as these on-site sharing talks, thematic tours and cultural events are often absent in their studies. They not only gain unexpected experiences and establish social network in Ping Che, but also build up an emotional attachment to the community as well as the place. Despite the limitations and difficulties encountered, engaging research, participatory learning, and emotional attachment are appreciated and endorsed by students.

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