# Cross Institutional Interchanges: Student-Teacher Perspectives on an Irish Service Learning Partnership

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**Introduction:** The research partners in this action research study are the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterfrack (GMITL) and QDS, Cope Foundation, Cork. GMITL is a provider of undergraduate initial teacher education (ITE) for second level teachers in the technical subjects Construction Studies and Design and Communication Graphics. QDS is service provider for adults with intellectual and physical challenges, specialising in wood technology and manufacture. GMITL student teachers engage in a civic engagement placement with QDS using the model of service learning (SL). This study investigates student teacher perspectives on participation in the SL experience with QDS. The study aims to identify benefits and challenges arising out of this partnership.

**Literature Review:** The relationship between Civic Engagement (CE) and the academic institution is widely explored in the literature (Bourner, 2010; Bringle and Clayton, 2012; McIlrath, Lyons & Munck, 2012; Singh, 2014). Ann Lyons and Lorraine McIlrath (2011, p. 6) define CE as: "(a) mutually beneficial knowledge-based collaboration between the higher education institution, its staff and students, with the wider community, through community-campus partnerships." One model of CE is Service Learning (SL), which, in the Irish context, is commonly referred to as 'community based learning' (CBL). SL is defined as "a complex educational approach involving communities, students and institutions with the aspiration that partnerships are equally beneficial and reciprocal" (Mc Menamin et al. 2014, 291). As with the definition of CE, above, core elements highlighted in this definition are: 1) community, 2) the academic institution and 3) reciprocity. A wider investigation of the literature demonstrates further elements, including: focus on experience (Goldberg et al., 2006), structured learning (Meili et al, 2011, p. 660), reflection or metacognition (Oakes, 2008) and experiential education (Hatcher and Bringle, 1997); all of which define the GMITL-QDS partnership approach

SL incorporates experiential learning, metacognition, and enhanced civic awareness. The experiential dimension is highlighted by Mc Menamin et al. (2010) who locate the origin of SL in the theories of experiential learning of John Dewey and David Kolb. These authors argue that "learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in gaining knowledge through experiential problem-solving and decision-making (Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984)" (p. 499). In SL there are benefits, in terms of academic impact. Contemporary models of CE enable Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to "enhance the impact of their work in and with communities" (Bringle and Clayton, 2012, pp. 101). In SP the experiential learning is aligned with explicit academic goals; the service being performed by the students "must provide reinforcement and connection with the subject material of the academic course" and students ought to be "given credit for mastery of course content, not simply for the service they perform" Oakes (2008).There are distinctions between SL models. Some more 'transactional' and others more 'transformative', where a deeper critical reflection is facilitated; one that explicitly addresses power differentials and reciprocity in greater depth; an aspiration of the GMITL/QDS partnership.

Brid Connolly, in an article entitled Critical Pedagogy and Higher Education: 'Really Useful Civil Engagement' argues for "a truly emancipator civic engagement, particularly engaged pedagogy as put forward by bell hooks, as a process of intellectual, emotional and cultural teaching and learning, for a new kind of society" (Connolly, 2014, p. 12.). She presents a strong critique of models of SL which generally fail to promote either mutual exchange or critical reflection on power differentials

(p.8). In a similar vein Dan Butin writing on service learning in Higher Education highlights the need for deep inquiry and transformative education, are central to a critical pedagogy (Butin, 2010).

**Research Question Examined:** This action research case study addresses the primary question: What are the benefits for, and challenges presented to, GMITL student teachers participating in the QDS Cope Foundation SL placement experience?

**Research Methodology:** The research paradigm is qualitative research and the research methodology is action research. Regarding the research profile, participants include initial teachers (n=16) in the 2013-2014 cohort, GMITL. Primary research data sources include Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Learnonline forum posts (n=14) and one focus group discussion. The VLE posts consisted of personal reflections based on key learnings from the COPE SL experience. The focus group discussion, was a whole-class focus group (n=16) on the SL experience. A thematic analysis was conducted, involving the manual letter coding of dominant and sub themes.

**Findings, Discussion and Implications for Action and Future Research:** The research findings are collated according to dominant and related sub themes. Dominant themes include: Initial Engagement (n=11), Teaching & Learning (n=47), Communication Skills (n=7) and Values (n=12)

*Initial Engagement:*
This study indicated the need for more structured preparation for the SL engagement for GMITL students. Student A commented that students "were fed bits of information, but we were not sure" and student B indicated that the students "did not get help on how to manage … adult learners in a learning/classroom situation". It is recommended that prior training in relation to adult education, Special Education Needs (SEN) education, QDS Cope Foundation, and group management be incorporated into the GMITL programme, in a timely manner.

*Teaching & Learning:*
This SL experience provoked profound reflection and demonstrated significant learning relating to T&L, and multiple student teacher commentaries in the data relate specifically to T&L themes (n=47). Sub themes isolated from the data included: training in a variety of T&L strategies, teaching as facilitation, caution against stereotyping, pride in learning, professional suitability for adult Sen education, management of learning and groups, ensuring learning standards, adaptability in teaching, planning requirements, teamwork, fun learning, creating a positive learning environment, and professional development. T&L benefits were significant. More advanced training in T&L strategies with adult SEN learners would strengthen the partnership.

*Communication Skills:*
Seven students (n=7) commented on communications, Suggestions included that communication must be "really clear and not overloaded" and incorporate "(s)imple clear instructions. One student reflected that the

> client was deaf and could not speak.., when he explained to us about upholstery you could see it in his face when he knew we understood… he kept trying to help us understand... he never gave up trying to explain...infinite patience...enthusiastic...he loved communicating..."

Others students commented on the challenge of "knowing how to talk to a group" and "how to pitch your voice" and "the standard of language you use with people who have special needs" which is described as very different to how we would normally communicate with a class. One participant linking communication skills with the value of 'kindness' quoted Mark Twain: "Kindness is the language the deaf can hear and the blind can see". The study recommends further advanced training in communications in the context of adult SEN needs.

*Values*: A majority of student teachers alluded to values at the heart of the partnership (n=12); values such as: inclusion, mutuality, worthwhile learning, inspiration, and appropriate power relations. One student, highlighting power relations, proposed that QDS participants could teach the student teachers in their return visit to GMITL: "maybe, a 'sugan chair' workshop?". The requirements of mutuality and reciprocity were recognised and affirmed.

Overall, the study finds that GMITL learners are significantly positive in regard to, and benefit significantly from this SL placement. With respect to benefits, there are indicators of increased awareness regarding context-appropriate teaching methodologies and socio-political aspects of learning. Challenges identified point to the need for more structured and advance training in preparation for the SL experience. Recommendations arising from this study include: increased research and communications prior to placement and further action research to incorporate the perspectives of QDS Cope Foundation in the next action research cycle (2016-2017).

## Summary:

This study investigates GMITL ITE perspectives on an SL experience with QDS Cope Foundation, Cork. Research participants are comprised of GMITL student teachers (n=17). The methodological framework employed is a qualitative action research case study. Methods include VLE (Learnonline) reflection posts and one focus group. The study finds that GMITL learners benefit significantly, at personal and professional levels, from this SL placement. There are indicators of increased awareness regarding context-appropriate teaching methodologies and socio-political aspects of learning Recommendations include: increased training prior to placement and further action research to incorporate the perspectives of QDS Cope Foundation. The study challenges GMITL to progress further towards a more reciprocal model of partnership and model of critical pedagogy.

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