

# Chapter 19

## Practices and Reflections on Pioneer Service Learning in Higher Education of China

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Service learning, as one form of experiential education derived from David Kolb's experiential learning model, integrates service with classroom instruction. It can be applied in primary, secondary and higher education setting. According to its broad definition from National Society of Experiential Education in the United States (1994): service learning is "any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experiences". Under the rapid urbanization and economic development in China, higher education is experiencing great challenges in terms of its mission and pedagogy. I share my pioneer teaching experiences of service learning among undergraduate students at a teaching college in Guangdong, China with insufficient institutional support and community partnership. With the details of my course design, practice, and reflections on students' learning, I conclude that students benefit from service learning in their personal growth, civic learning and academic enhancement.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As in many other countries in the world, higher education in China is facing challenges regarding its mission and pedagogy due to the rapid technological changes along with the economic development and globalization in the past three decades (Douglass, 2012; Xi, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). As outlined in UNESCO report: "Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?" (UNESCO, 2015), higher education is challenged by its internationalized provision, development of online and distance education, workplace demanding skills, and lifelong learning for individuals. In sum, the traditional information dissemination model of teaching in higher education is challenged by the global growing demand for professionals.

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The challenge of higher education in China has its unique feature embedded in its historical and social context. Under the economic development and the open-door policy since 1978, China is experiencing industrialization and urbanization in the past three decades. The ratio of rural versus urban population was 74% vs.26% in 1990, and 49% vs. 51% in 2012 with 1.3 billion population in total (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China).

Along with the fast urbanization and industrialization, China's higher education has undergone a series of reforms initiated by the government since 1998 (Zhang & Zhu, 2010). According to the National Outline for Medium- and Long-term Educational Reform and Development 2010-2020 set by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, higher education should play a significant role in economic growth and social development of China "by bringing up large scale of advanced talents and experts for the construction of socialist modernization" (Ministry of Education in China, 2009). China's college enrollment rate among 18 to 22 years old was 1.55% in 1978; and 9.8% in 1998 (China Education and Research Network, 2016). By the end of 2015, it was approximately 40% (China Teaching Assessment Center of Higher Education, 2016). More than 90% of Chinese universities and colleges are state owned.

China's fast growth of college enrollment is also facing great challenges. On the one hand, an increasing number of Chinese young people pursue a quality education in the Western countries (such as US, England, Canada, Australia, etc.) especially from the middle and upper class families (Yang, 2016). On the other hand, a decreasing enrollment rate is occurring among young people from low income families because parents do not see the benefits paying tuition for their sons or daughters to qualify a suitable profession in a technology and service-based economy (OECD, 2013). The practical challenges of China's higher education emerge, and the following questions need to be answered: How to improve the quality of teaching and learning and how to cultivate creativity to prepare young people for the global competition in a technology and service-based economy? etc. (Xi, 2016; Li, 2015; Douglass, 2012).

This chapter is the reflection of my pioneer practice under service learning pedagogy (SL). Although SL has been established, discussed and practiced in higher education in the Western societies for more than three decades, it is rarely known in China. The objectives of my chapter include: First, the importance of pedagogy innovation to China's higher education; second, a brief introduction of SL pedagogy origin, its theoretical foundation, the historical context and the challenges; third, how I initiated SL pedagogy under one specific educational setting in China; and fourth, my reflection on students' outcomes and the implementation issues with SL pedagogy.

## **BACKGROUND**

About one century ago during the semi-colonization era, China's higher education system was established by missionaries, international charity organizations, foreign educators, and Qing dynasty of China (Gu, 2016). After being interrupted by decades of wars (1937-1949) and political movements (1957-1978), it has been restored along with the open-door policy and economic development since 1978. According to Maoyuan Pan (2005), an education professor in Xiamen University of China, the development of China's higher education can be divided into two stages. The first stage is from 1978 to 1998 when college enrollment rate increased from 2% to 10%. Its mission was "elite education", aiming at fostering social responsibility of graduates and training future government officials in the discipline of law, medicine, agriculture, engineering, and traditional culture to function at the important position in state's bureaucracies, courts, agriculture and state-owned industry for an agriculture society. The second

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