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Measuring and documenting graduate learning outcomes in the co-curricular space

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Abstract

Co-curricular experiences provide valuable out-of-classroom learning experiences that are platforms for students to critically reflect upon and expand their perspectives. This is crucial in developing the future-ready graduate. Due to the unique nature of out-of-classroom learning, co-curricular experiences often provide learning opportunities that may be quite distinct from academic learning experiences. We contend that co-curricular experiences warrant a fair amount of attention, particularly for their ability to help students develop real-world employability skills (Peck, 2017). This paper seeks to uncover how Transformative Learning can be applied in the co-curricular sphere, and its implications in designing, curating and implementing co-curricular activities. SMU's approach to measuring and documenting students' learning in the co-curricular space, including its unique co-curricular learning cycle, will also be shared.

1 Introduction

Established in the year 2000, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has consistently placed a strong emphasis on students' character building and holistic development. The University has developed structured programmes in both career development and community service, and a vibrant student life environment including more than 150 meaningful co-curricular activities in the diverse areas of arts, sports and others, for students to engage in learning and development beyond the classroom. These co-curricular components of SMU education complement the University's academic mission, providing a valuable platform for students to apply their classroom learning, prepare for their futures, broaden their passions and contribute to making a meaningful difference in society.

In order to achieve SMU's vision of delivering transformative education for a new generation of graduates (Vision 2025), it is necessary to be clear, as a University, what the desired graduate learning outcomes are. Graduate Learning Outcomes refer to the university-wide highest learning goals that are important to the University for all undergraduates, regardless of their discipline areas. The SMU Graduate Learning Outcomes seen in Figure 1 were established as a result of the work of the SMU Blue Ribbon Commission on Undergraduate Education, which was formed in April 2017. As a result of the work of the Commission, the following set of SMU Graduate Learning Outcomes was established: Disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge; Intellectual and creative skills; Interpersonal skills; Global citizenship; and Personal mastery. In short, SMU seeks to develop broadly educated individuals with in-depth knowledge in selected domains and the workplace capabilities required for them to thrive in the 21st century.

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Figure 1: SMU Graduate Learning Outcomes

In order for SMU to nurture graduates who are independent in mind and able to think both deeply as well as broadly, graduates will need to have developed intellectual skills of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as creative skills of innovative and entrepreneurial thinking. They will also require personal mastery, and must be self-directed and meta-learners with resilience and positivity. Graduates who are dependable in their deeds will need to have nurtured interpersonal skills of collaboration, leadership and communication. SMU graduates' strong disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge are the bases for deep and broad thinking. Lastly, graduates who create value at home and abroad are those who are able to combine their intellectual skills with a strong sense of ethics and social responsibility, and who appreciate their roles as citizens, locally and globally.

2 Co-curriculum: Towards a holistic education

A distinctive feature of SMU education is the development of well-rounded students through experiential learning via its diverse co-curricular platforms (including student clubs and societies, mandatory internships and community service projects). All SMU undergraduates are required to complete a minimum of 80 hours of community service and a minimum 10-week internship at a partner company prior to graduation. A large proportion of SMU students are also involved in at least one other co-curricular activity. As propounded by Peck (2017), students gain important employability skills such as critical thinking as well as personal and social skills through co-curricular experiences.

As part of SMU's vision of providing a transformative education, concerted efforts have been made to enhance the experiential learning experience and to align learning outcomes from the various co-curricular platforms to the University's Graduate Learning Outcomes and career competencies desired by employers.

2.1 Re-framing co-curricular involvement

Traditionally, participation in co-curricular activities at universities is generally optional. Students who choose to be involved in co-curricular activities are usually driven by one or more of the following factors: personal interest, peer influence and the need for group affiliation. As such, many students may go from one activity to another without understanding what they can actually be getting out of these activities, and how each activity connects to life after university.

This is a pity, given that co-curricular activities provide unique and valuable out-of-classroom learning experiences, including the development of skills valued by employers. As such, co-curricular involvement ought to be re-framed, with learning outcomes, skill development and professional goals as key considerations (See Figure 2).

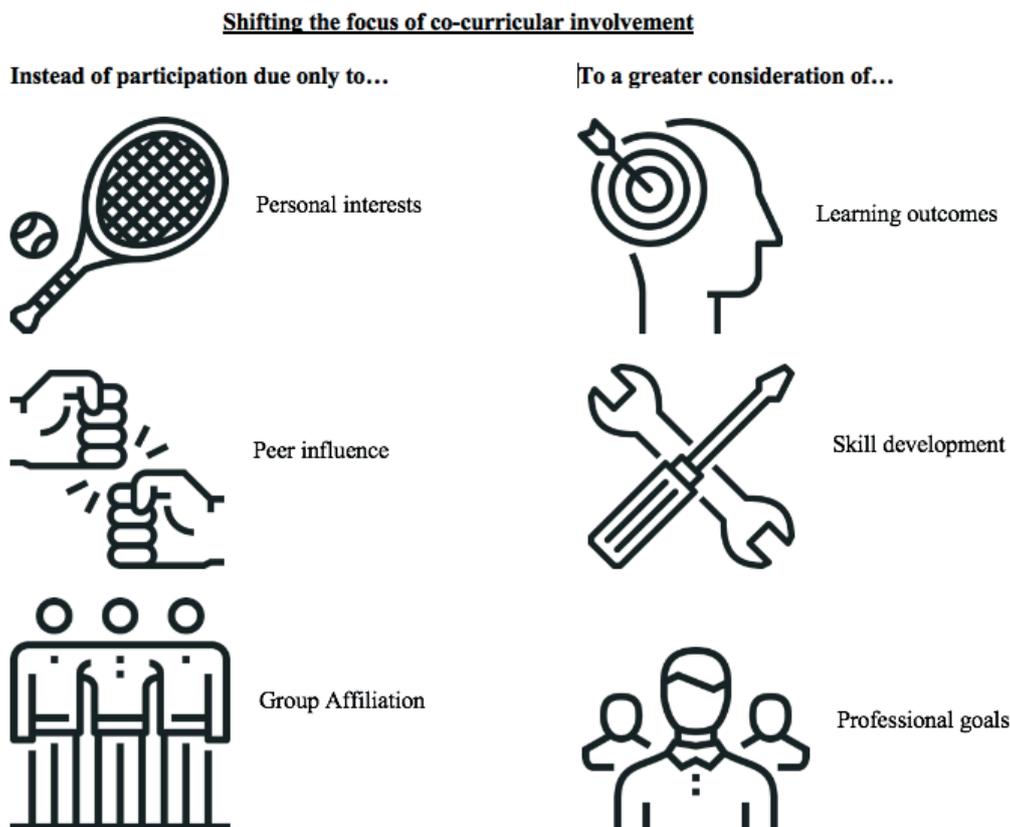


Figure 2: Shifting the focus of co-curricular involvement

At SMU we recognize that learning from co-curricular involvement does not occur automatically; neither should learning be left to chance. Instead, learning has to be carefully and intentionally designed. As such, we strive to render visible learning outcomes from co-curricular activities through the deliberate curation and design of learning experiences that translate into established learning outcomes. For example, all co-curricular activities – from student clubs to internships and community service projects – have explicit learning objectives, which are in turn aligned to the Graduate Learning Outcomes of the University. The goal is such that each co-curricular experience becomes a purposeful journey for students.

2.2 Co-curricular learning as a purposeful journey

With the aim of making each co-curricular experience a purposeful one for students, the four-stage co-curricular learning cycle (as depicted in Figure 3) has been introduced and adopted at SMU.

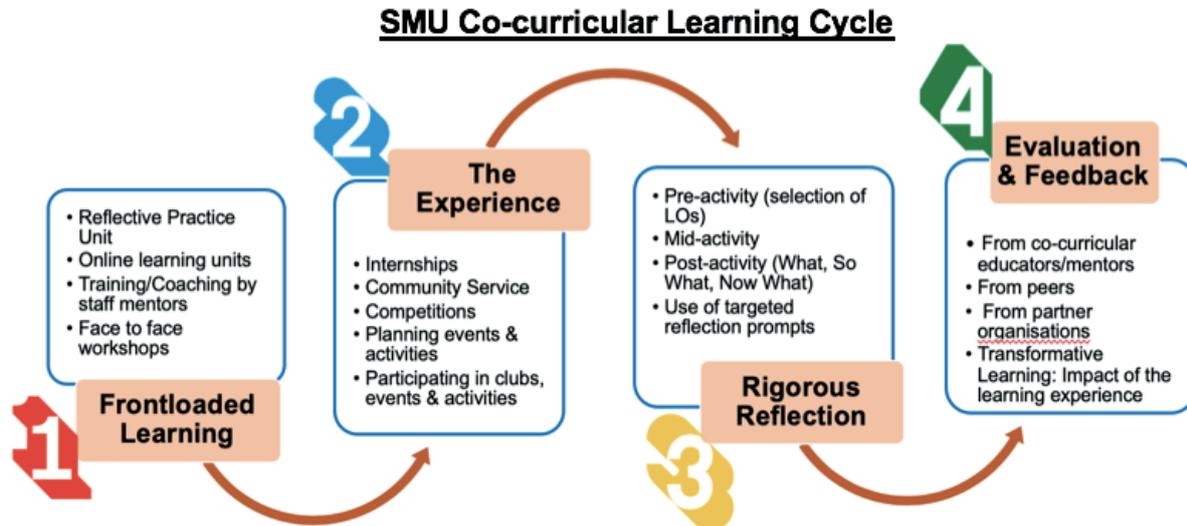


Figure 3: Co-curricular learning cycle at SMU

2.2.1 Frontloaded learning

The learning objectives for each co-curricular activity are set out at the start so that students know what skills and competencies they will potentially be exposed to through their participation in the activity. All learning objectives are aligned to at least one of SMU's Graduate Learning Outcomes. This ensures that learning from co-curricular activities is not incidental or left to chance. Rather, it is intentional and carefully curated.

With the learning objectives in mind, the co-curricular educator in charge of the activity then designs and curates suitable learning opportunities for the students. Front-loaded learning can take various forms, including online modules (e.g. Community Service Units², Internship Readiness Modules³), face-to-face workshops (e.g. communication skills workshop) and mentoring or coaching sessions. At SMU, all incoming freshmen have to complete an online Reflective Practice Unit as part of the University's efforts to nurture self-directed life-long learners and future-proof our graduates' skills.

2.2.2 The experience

In this phase, students go through the experiential learning process itself – be it the actual internship, planning and executing the event or community service project, managing the weekly student club activities, or preparing for and taking part in a competition. Depending on the nature and type of co-curricular activity, the experience phase can span anything from a few weeks to a year. Frontloaded learning can still be taking place at any time during the experience phase.

² These units cover service learning knowledge such as critical needs analysis and asset mapping.

³ These modules cover topics such as resume and cover letter writing, job search strategies and interview skills.

2.2.3 Rigorous reflection

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) make the important link between learning and reflection when they state “While experience is the basis for learning, learning cannot take place without reflection” (p. 24). At SMU, we believe that without reflection, learning from direct experience cannot be assumed.

Each co-curricular experience is a self-directed, and potentially transformative, journey. Every student’s co-curricular experience is unique and what he/she takes away from it is also highly individualised. SMU promotes the culture of meaningful reflection to generate, deepen and document learning, so that students hone their ability to discern and articulate their areas of personal growth.

This type of pedagogy draws from Mezirow’s (2009) Transformative Learning theory, in that students will encounter “disorienting dilemmas” throughout their co-curricular learning journey. The reflection process in Stage 3 of the SMU Co-Curricular Learning Cycle is designed to give students the opportunity to critically question their own assumptions, beliefs and/or perspectives.

2.2.4 Evaluation and feedback

As part of the learning process, it is also important that students receive timely feedback from anyone who is involved in their co-curricular experience – co-curricular educators, employer mentors, beneficiaries, project partners and even peers. Feedback can be solicited and shared with students through a variety of means, including one-to-one / small group mentoring sessions and eventually through an integrated online platform.

Rather than solely assessing the competencies demonstrated by students through their involvement in each co-curricular activity, SMU also strives to evaluate the impact that the learning experience has on the student in relation to the specific predetermined Graduate Learning Outcomes. This reinforces the notion of self-directedness in the experiential learning journey, and also clears away the challenges of competency-only assessment, given the wide range and nature of co-curricular activities that take place at SMU.

Hence, the evaluation of students’ learning outcomes in co-curricular activities at SMU is based on two distinct dimensions: (A) **External demonstration** of behaviours, competencies and/or attitudes; and (B) **Internal demonstration** of values, attitudes and/or motivations through critical reflection as students encounter “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 2009).

3 Conclusion

Given the importance of co-curricular participation in equipping students with career-ready competencies, it behoves university administrators to pay some attention not just to ensuring that a vibrant student life exists on campus, but more importantly to the value of purposeful co-curricular learning experiences that render learning outcomes visible. Ultimately it is the students who will benefit from such a shift in approach, as they will not only be better equipped to move through university into the workplace, but will also have a higher likelihood of success in their future workplaces.

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