

SLLO NEWSLETTER

MAR 2023

Highlights



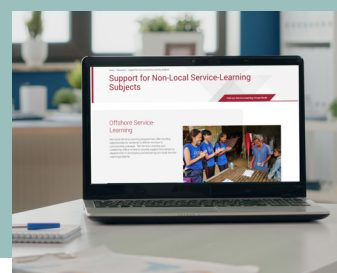
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10 Questions with DR ZHANG YOUQIAN



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an alumnus who has recently joined the Department of Computing at PolyU shared his experience on service-learning (SL) in Rwanda and Cambodia, what kept him committed to supporting SL projects as a student leader, and how he would like to carry on his SL endeavour in his new role.

Q1

Can you tell us something about yourself?

As a student coming from Sichuan in Mainland China, I joined PolyU in 2012 as an undergraduate majoring in Electronic and Information Engineering (EIE). Following my academic interest in electrical and electronic engineering, I then went on to pursue further studies in the UK. After getting my doctoral degree from the University of Oxford with my research in

cyber-physical systems, I was glad to be offered an opportunity to join a research project involving a collaboration between the Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO) and the Department of Computing as a postdoctoral fellow, where I can put my enhanced knowledge in computing, engineering, and my passion for community service into a meaningful mix.

Q2

Can you tell us something about your SL experience at PolyU?

The year I was enrolled in PolyU, 2012, was the first year when SL was made a compulsory graduation requirement for all undergraduate students. Like a typical freshman, I had absolutely no idea what it (SL) was and what it entailed. But things had started to shape up since I set foot into my first SL subject.

Youqian (Centre) teaching Python programming at the Centre for Champions in Rwanda



It was 2013. In the subject COMP2S01 Technology Beyond Borders: Service Learning across Cultural, Ethnic and Community Lines, I was assigned to transfer IT knowledge to primary school students in rural Cambodia in the

form of building a “Lab in a Suitcase”. The experience of serving the socially deprived kids on a foreign soil under intense heat, risk of insect-borne diseases, and a physically challenging living environment had caught my attention to the needs of my service recipients that were way beyond IT training. I and a number of like-minded classmates, therefore, were inspired to develop our own SL project that seek to bring more positive changes to the community.

Naming our project “Connect Beyond Dream” (築夢·東愛), we returned to the same service site in Cambodia with a series of service initiatives in the following summer. With an aim to raise the quality of living there in general, we taught the local villagers to build their own mosquito trap. We delivered English workshops for the children and organised painting workshops for the elderly.

Upon gaining more experience from the self-initiated project, I also joined SLLO (formerly known as Office of Service-Learning) as a student leader to support the delivery of some other offshore SL projects. I remembered, for example, I was there supporting students bringing the “Lab in a Suitcase” project to children in East Africa and facilitating students to complete a project about installing solar panels in rural villages of Rwanda. I was also part of PolyU’s first solar panel installation team, where I had the opportunity to work with Professor HC Man, the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering.



Professor Man (right) and Youqian (left) on parallel ladders moving a set of solar panels onto the roof in Rwanda

Q3

How was delivering a SL project as a student different from delivering one as a student leader?

They were both challenging in their own ways. Based on my experience, I think outstanding student leaders in SL projects were always those who could effectively bridge the communication between the subject teachers and the students in addition to making sure that the needs of the service recipients were well attended to.

Q4

Would you like to share some of your memorable or transformative encounters in SL?



Youqian building a mounting for solar panels in Rwanda

When I was a student, the shock of witnessing the unimaginable living conditions in rural Cambodia hit me so hard that it motivated me to start our own SL project to make a difference for their future.

When I was delivering the self-initiated project, there was this incident where our team seek to build a unique mosquito trapping system for the local villagers. Armed with passion and the system's blueprint in our mind, we brought all the materials to assemble the system onsite, only to find out almost immediately how ineffective the system was due to our superficial understanding of the physical environment there. The incident taught me a lesson on the importance of conducting thorough research on the targeted community and rigorous prototyping for any service deliverables.

When I was supporting another SL project in Rwanda as a student leader, we met service recipients who generously shared with us their home-grown fruits even though they were barely able to feed their own family. This kind of heartfelt relationship with the locals always drives me back to the community. The greatest motivation for me to keep revisiting the service site voluntarily was that I am eager to track the impact of our service in the long run, if not also to find new solutions to improve their livelihood continuously.



Q5

What do you think is/are the key(s) to making SL experience meaningful to your life at PolyU?

The cultural shock that one may encounter from a non-local SL project is really incomparable to any other learning experience. More serious thinking on how I would like to apply what I have learnt started to take shape when I was being put into the field to interact with the service recipients face-to-face and when I was able to see the changes that I have made on their everyday life.

Q6

Apart from the credit-bearing and co-curricular SL projects at PolyU that we have discussed so far, you have also engaged yourself in different kinds of community service outside campus? What do the services look like and what makes you so passionate about them?

In the early years of my undergraduate study, I volunteered at a local organisation supporting people with visual impairment to participate in music or film appreciation activities. When I was pursuing my postgraduate studies in the UK, I also volunteered occasionally in various organisations. I believe the driving force behind that is always the eagerness to apply my strengths in making positive changes for the community, no matter where I am.

Q7

Do you have any personal goals in community service?

The only goal is to keep making positive changes using what I have learnt, no matter how small the changes might be.



Q8

What would be the three most important things you have learnt from SL that still matter to you post-graduation?

The first would be the ability to facilitate two-way communication. It is a competence that, I believe, one cannot acquire from simply attending lectures and sitting through exams. It was the setting of an international SL project, where we students were entrusted to serve strangers in a foreign territory with a team of classmates having different academic strengths and cultural backgrounds that really pushed one's limits to make interaction effective and constructive. It is not just about speaking better English but also articulating the right message to the right teammate at the right time to get the job done and paying attention to your choice of words to be considerate of others.

Youqian connecting cables on the roof of a house in rural Rwanda using the ladder that he built with his team from scratch.

The second thing I have learnt from the service sites is that there is always more than one solution to a problem. You will be surprised by yourself if you were willing to improvise at times of crisis. There was a case when we needed to wire the solar panels on the rooftop without a ladder. Our team started to craft one from the bushes nearby using our pocket knives...and it works haha!

The third would be teamwork. Supporting SL subjects as a student leader and organising SL activities for the self-initiated projects helped me understand tasks could always be better accomplished when everyone was given the chance to contribute their best. It, of course, needed to be facilitated by good two-way communication among team members.



Q9***If you had a time machine, what would you do to make a difference in your SL experience at PolyU?***

Haha I guess won't need one as I am happy with my SL journey at PolyU! Even there were times when our services were not so successfully implemented, learning how to reflect on the failure had helped me make better decisions now when I am developing another SL project on connecting villagers in Rwanda to the Internet in my new position.

Q10***Do you want to say something to PolyU students who are going to take part in SL, those who are taking part in SL, and those who have taken part in SL?***

For students who are going to participate in SL, you are most welcome to this journey full of surprises. You will learn a lot of things that you have never imagined before.

If you were delivering your SL projects, don't be afraid of making mistakes! Think through what went wrong and it would only make you wiser the next time.

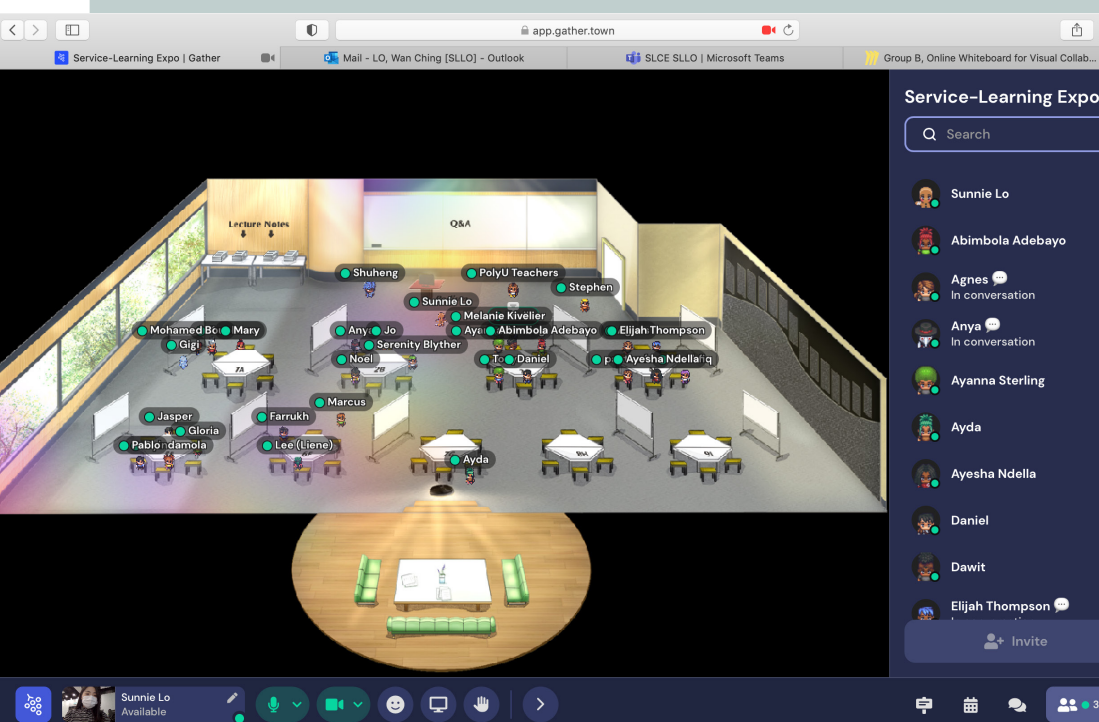
Congratulations to those who have completed your SL project! Although you may not have the time to return to the service site, do try to apply what you have learnt to your home community.

02

Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Exchange Programme sets off

Funded by the Lee Hysan Foundation (LHF), the Service-Learning and Civic Engagement (SLCE) Exchange Programme aims to develop students' global citizenship and social responsibility beyond the service-learning (SL) requirement through an immersive overseas exchange. The programme is carefully designed to facilitate knowledge exchange among students, community and NGO leaders in order to contribute to SL development of PolyU and Hong Kong, and through the process of it, deepen participants' civic mindedness through community engagement. Between 2016-2019, 24 students have been awarded the scholarship and continued to be active in community service in their own professional capacities.

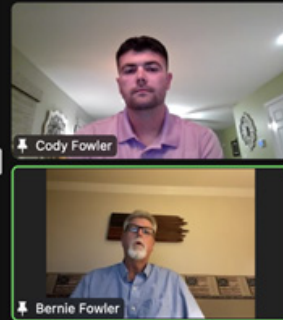
After a two-year pause due to the pandemic, SLLO is thrilled to resume the programme in 2022/23 with two collaborators: University of Southern California and University of Maryland. This year, 12 PolyU students from four faculties and eight departments are selected via a highly competitive pool of applicants. The theme of this year's exchange is food justice, a topic that consists of humanitarian and environmental issues and problems that are further exposed and exacerbated due to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. There are altogether four phases in the programme: preparation, inbound exchange, outbound exchange, and giving back. In each phase, PolyU students will work with U.S. students to explore the root causes of food-related problems, how these problems affect different marginalised communities, and try to address them through by applying their academic knowledge to serve the needy. Finally, LHF scholars will be mentored to deliver post-exchange SL projects in Hong Kong.



PolyU and U.S. students used Gather Town to discuss on their project during Global Classroom

The preparation phase is currently in session, where the LHF scholars collaborate with U.S. students in small teams to explore the issues around food justice and innovative solutions in our virtual Global Classroom. Different virtual tools are employed to help students track, document, discuss, and gain a nuanced understanding of food justice. The teams are studying diverse communities such as children from low-income families, elderly, refugees to understand the many factors that underlie the food security. Noteworthy, a good number of PolyU students were surprised to discover the seriousness of homelessness and the concept of food deserts in the U.S. There was also one group of students who investigate the possibility of providing a sustainable winter meal for Ukrainian refugees.

Founders of Farming-4-Hunger, a non-profit organisation that serves those in need of fresh food in Southern Maryland, were invited to tell students about their work during the Global Classroom



Apart from learning about the social issue, the Global Classroom also facilitates students of different cultural backgrounds to collaborate in virtual teams. From our observation, students gained a broad perspective and developed skills that will be useful for the next phase of the programme, where they will be taken to the communities to get the theories tested and interact directly with potential service recipients. Stay tuned for updates!

Students reflecting on the movie "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind" which highlights the importance of education and determination in overcoming adversity

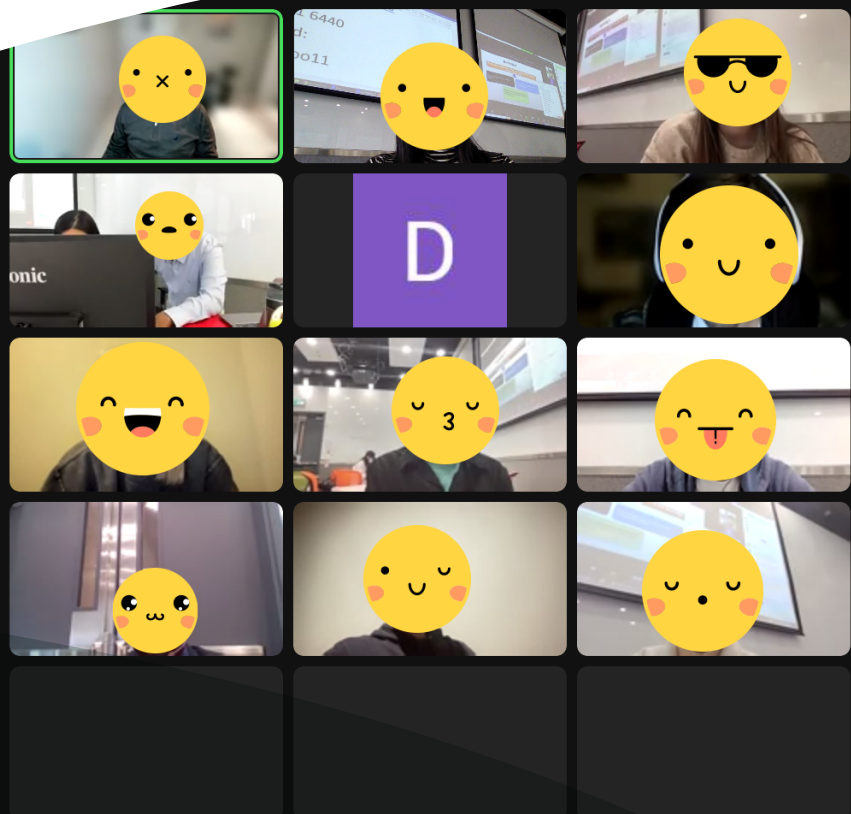
Activity-1

Go to your groups and reflect on the movie the boy who harnessed the wind

What were the root causes of hunger in Malawi?

What inspired you the most from the movie/book/ted-talk?

What take away and practical life message does the movie "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind" convey?



Join a breakout room



Cross-Strait, Hong Kong and Macau Service-Learning Education Network takes off

Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO) held the Opening Ceremony cum Inauguration of the Board of Directors for the Cross-Strait, Hong Kong and Macau Service-Learning Education Network on 3 February 2023 (Friday).

The Ceremony was organised online. The Deputy President and Provost of PolyU, Professor Wing-tak Wong, and Mr David Day, the Chief Executive of Tin Ka Ping Foundation delivered opening speeches at the Ceremony. Prof Wong shared with audience the achievements of service-learning (SL) at PolyU over the last decade and his vision for SL development in mainland China. Mr Day expressed his gratitude on behalf of the Foundation to support SL as a pedagogy that benefits the society a great deal.



Nearly 100 service-learning practitioners from 24 tertiary institutions from mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as representatives from Tin Ka Ping Foundation and Yangjing Community Foundation participated in the Ceremony virtually to share the excitement in kicking off the promotion of service-learning education across the region. The Ceremony also marked the inauguration of the Network's Board of Directors, which consists of representatives from PolyU, Beijing Normal University, Sichuan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, and Yunnan University.

The active sharing amongst the participants at the Ceremony enabled a fruitful exchange of ideas on how to advance quality service-learning education in the region. At the end of the Ceremony, the Network also announced that the Third Conference on Service-Learning in China will be co-organised between Fudan University and PolyU in Shanghai on 2 December 2023.

04

Teachers' one stop guide for non-local Service-Learning on our website launches

As international travel is progressively getting back on track amid the better controlled pandemic situation, SLLO supports the University in restarting non-local service-learning (ISL) in full swing which brings much benefit to students. At the same time, we are also well aware of the challenges that faculty members might face in pulling off an intensive and fruitful offshore SL project, especially when it comes to the complexities associated with logistics and trip planning. To this end, we have a new webpage which serves as the single focal point for colleagues to reach the necessary information and tools when executing their non-local SL projects.

Home / Resources / Support for Non-Local Service-Learning Subjects

Support for Non-Local Service-Learning Subjects

Visit our Service-Learning Virtual World

Offshore Service-Learning

Non-local Service-Learning programmes offer exciting opportunities for students to deliver services to communities overseas. The Service-Learning and Leadership Office is here to provide support and advice to departments in developing and delivering non-local Service-Learning subjects.



On the webpage, colleagues can:

- read guidelines related to Funding Application, Travel Health, Insurance, Post-trip Reimbursement;
- download forms to collect students' information on Passport and Emergency Contact;
- access templates to facilitate local logistics arrangement with NGOs and collection of programme fee from students.

CHECK IT OUT NOW:

<https://www.polyu.edu.hk/sllo/resources/support-for-non-local-service-learning-subjects/>

