

Post-project Reflective Essay

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After returning from Sri Lanka, I realised that this course was much more than an experiential learning project or a service trip. Before departure, I mainly expected that we would design ESD workshops, teach local students, complete some service work, and learn about sustainability in a different cultural context. However, after actually living, teaching, working, and interacting with the local community, I found that the most important learning did not only happen when everything went smoothly. It happened in moments of uncertainty, awkwardness, misunderstanding, discomfort, and surprise. These moments forced me to reflect not only on what I did, but also on who I am, what kind of teacher I want to become, and what assumptions I have carried with me as a Hong Kong student and prospective education professional.

One critical incident that stayed with me was our visit to a local student's home. The family welcomed us very warmly. The students were extremely passionate and excited to meet us. They danced with us, invited us to follow their traditional dance, prepared tea and a lot of food for us, and brought us to their farm. I still remember climbing a tree with them and eating mango directly from the tree. It was one of the happiest and most natural moments of the whole trip. At one point, I slipped and my shoes almost sank into the soil. I felt embarrassed and helpless, but the local students immediately helped me take my shoes out and made sure I was fine. Their kindness was so direct and genuine that I felt deeply touched.

At first, I only interpreted this experience as "local hospitality". However, after reflecting more critically, I realised that there was also an ethical issue behind this kind of cultural immersion. We were visitors from Hong Kong, and we entered their home and community for a short period of time. They offered us food, time, performance, and care. I started to question whether I had unconsciously treated the experience as something "interesting" or "special" for my own learning, without fully considering the emotional labour and resources contributed by the local family. Although the interaction was joyful and respectful, I became more aware of the power imbalance behind international service learning. We were the ones who could come, observe, learn, take photos, reflect, and leave. They were the ones who continued living there after our project ended. This made me realise that ethical service learning is not only about "not doing harm". It is also about humility, reciprocity, and constantly asking myself whether I am seeing people as partners rather than as objects of learning.

Another communication issue happened during our teaching. Before the trip, I already knew that the students might have limited English, so our group prepared simple instructions, gestures, drawings, demonstrations, and repeated keywords. However, when I actually stood in front of the students, I realised that "simple English" was still not simple enough. Sometimes I thought I had explained clearly, but the students' facial expressions showed confusion. Sometimes they smiled and nodded, but they might not truly understand the instruction. I had to stop relying on language and use my body, facial expression, tone, objects, and peer demonstration. For example, in activities such as seed planting, students understood much better when they could see us holding the cup, touching the soil, putting in the seed, and watering it step by step. In the red cabbage indicator activity, the colour change itself became the strongest language. In

those moments, I learned that communication is not about how much I can say, but about how much the students can receive.

This experience challenged one of my prior assumptions about teaching. As a university student in Hong Kong, I often associated good teaching with clear explanation, subject knowledge, and well-structured content. I used to believe that if a teacher explained something in detail, students would learn more. However, in Sri Lanka, I realised that too much explanation can become a barrier, especially for young learners and students from different language backgrounds. Good teaching sometimes means saying less, showing more, slowing down, and creating space for students to try. It also means observing carefully whether students are really following, rather than assuming they understand because they are quiet or polite. This is an important lesson for me as a future teacher. In Hong Kong classrooms, I may also meet students with different learning needs, language abilities, confidence levels, and family backgrounds. I should not assume that silence means understanding, or that participation must look the same for every child.

My most significant learning is that I discovered I am more anxious about control than I previously knew. During lesson planning and implementation, I often wanted everything to be organised, smooth, and successful. I worried about timing, materials, classroom management, and whether students would understand our message. This mindset made me focus on the product of the lesson rather than the process of learning. However, the actual teaching environment was full of unexpected changes. Students' reactions could not be fully predicted. Some activities took longer than expected. Sometimes the classroom energy was higher than we planned. At first, this made me nervous. But gradually, I realised that teaching is not about controlling every detail. It is about responding to what is happening in front of me.

This was an “ah-ha” moment for me. I finally understood that flexibility is not a weakness or a backup plan; it is a core professional quality of teaching. A teacher cannot simply bring a perfect lesson plan into a classroom and expect real children to follow it exactly. Real teaching involves adjustment, improvisation, emotional sensitivity, and communication with students. This connects strongly with my previous experience in Hong Kong. In many university assignments, I tend to focus on whether my work meets the requirements and whether the final product looks complete. But in this project, the “answer” was not fixed. The lesson could only become meaningful through the students' actual engagement. This helped me move from a performance-oriented mindset to a more learner-centred mindset.

My understanding of ESD also changed significantly. Before this course, I mainly thought sustainability was about environmental protection, recycling, climate change, and scientific knowledge. Through the project, I learned that ESD is much broader and more human-centred. Sustainability is connected to education, community, culture, responsibility, dignity, and relationships. When we built the playground slide, moved soil, worked with bricks and cement, helped with water-related facilities, painted, and supported the school environment, I realised that sustainable development is not an abstract concept. It is connected to whether children have a safe and joyful place to play, whether the school environment can support learning, and whether a community has the capacity to continue improving its own conditions.

At the same time, I also became more critical of the word “help”. Before joining the project, I might have described our work as “helping the school” or “serving the local students”. After the trip, I feel more cautious about this language. Of course, we did contribute effort, time, materials, and teaching activities. But I also received much more than I expected. The local students taught me joy, openness, courage, and appreciation of simple moments. The local teachers and community showed me resilience and commitment. My teammates taught me cooperation and patience. Therefore, this project was not a one-way act of giving. It was a mutual learning process. If I only describe myself as a helper, I may unintentionally place myself in a superior position. A more honest description is that I was a learner, a temporary partner, and a prospective educator trying to understand what education means in a globalised society.

One moment that surprised me was how strongly the students responded to simple activities and human interaction. In Hong Kong, we often assume that good learning requires advanced technology, colourful materials, or highly polished teaching resources. However, in Sri Lanka, some of the most meaningful moments came from simple materials: soil, seeds, cups, water, drawings, gestures, colour changes, and games. The students’ curiosity and excitement reminded me that learning does not begin from expensive resources. It begins from attention, relationship, relevance, and participation. This does not mean resources are unimportant. Inequality in educational resources is real and should not be romanticised. However, the experience helped me question my hidden assumption that more developed places must have “better” education. I now think that every educational context has strengths and limitations. Hong Kong may have more resources, but students may be distant from nature and community. Sri Lanka may face material constraints, but students may have closer connections with land, family, and daily sustainability practices.

As a prospective education professional, I think I have changed in three ways. First, I have become more humble. I used to think of teaching mainly as preparing knowledge and delivering it clearly. Now I see teaching as listening, observing, adapting, and co-constructing meaning with students. Second, I have become more aware of power and ethics in education. Especially in cross-cultural projects, good intentions are not enough. I need to think about representation, respect, reciprocity, and the long-term impact of my actions. Third, I have become more willing to accept uncertainty. I used to fear mistakes, but this project showed me that mistakes can become the beginning of reflection if I am honest enough to examine them.

Planning and engaging in ESD workshops influenced my understanding of teaching and learning deeply. I learned that ESD should not be taught only as knowledge about the SDGs. If students only remember the names of goals but do not feel any connection with their own lives, the learning may remain superficial. ESD should create experiences that allow students to feel responsibility, care, and possibility. In the Seed Planting Cup activity, the important part was not only that students learned how to plant seeds. The deeper learning was that they had something living to care for. In this sense, teaching sustainability is also teaching relationships: relationships with nature, with others, with the future, and with oneself.

Looking forward, I hope to bring these lessons into my future learning and teaching. I want to become a teacher who does not rush to judge students based on their language ability, confidence, or outward behaviour. I want to use more visual, hands-on, and

emotionally engaging strategies, especially when teaching students with diverse needs. I also want to continue exploring how sustainability education can be connected to Chinese language education, values education, and everyday life in Hong Kong. For example, instead of only asking students to write essays about environmental protection, I can design learning experiences where they observe their community, interview family members, reflect on consumption habits, or create small actions for school improvement.

When navigating this world, I hope I will behave differently. I want to travel, serve, and learn with more humility. I want to ask more questions before assuming I understand a place. I want to be more careful when taking photos, telling stories, or describing other communities. I want to remember that people are not “cases” for my reflection, but human beings with dignity, agency, and their own knowledge. I also want to remind myself that education in a globalised society should not mean exporting one model of “good education” from a developed place to another context. Instead, it should mean learning across differences, recognising unequal conditions, and building relationships that allow mutual growth.

There are still many things I want to explore. I want to know more about how local teachers in rural Sri Lanka understand sustainability and what challenges they face after volunteers leave. I also want to understand whether short-term experiential learning projects can create sustainable impact, or whether they mainly benefit university students like me. This question is uncomfortable, but I think it is necessary. If the project is truly about ESD, then reflection should not stop at my personal growth. It should also ask whether our actions contribute to long-term community needs and whether the partnership can continue in a respectful and meaningful way.

Overall, this course changed my understanding of education, sustainability, and myself. I entered the project hoping to teach something meaningful to Sri Lankan students. I left realising that I was also being taught by them, by the school, by the community, by my teammates, and by the uncertainty of the experience itself. My biggest learning is that education is not only about knowledge transmission. It is about human connection, ethical awareness, humility, and the courage to keep learning and unlearning. As I continue my journey as a prospective teacher, I hope I can carry these lessons with me and become an educator who teaches not only with knowledge, but also with empathy, respect, and responsibility.