

Reflection on an Experiential Learning in Vietnam

A rapid influx of civil engineering knowledge, a fusion volunteer services, an impact of ways of thinking and beyond...

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Thanks to the support of the Department of Civil Engineering and the Faculty of Social Science, Project Mingde has managed for the first time to extend its scale of service from China to Vietnam. I have the honour to be one of the members in it.

Our team is to act as an assistant residential engineer to monitor and to build a toilet besides a school in a rural village. It aims to provide a hygienic environment for the students of the area. As this is also a joint faculty program, it allows us to have a chance to conduct survey and investigation for analyzing the needs for further development of the commune.

The enlightening of our knowledge

During the fifty days of working, we not just only monitor the progress of the site, but also have many chances to participate in the real construction work. With the guide of the local workers, we have many chances to do hands-on construction work, it helps us to gain valuable experience on the workout of the construction. I realize that there are many skills we can acquire on site, which cannot be learnt from books. We start to gain a lot of mini skills that we do not know but indeed very important, for example skills like how to mix concrete thoroughly and effectively, how to dig soil safely and how to place the cement paste to the bricks etc. Although these jobs seem very simple and minor, I can really learn knowledge from every small puzzle of work, say the safety issue in the construction site, some specific techniques on mixing concrete, steel structure etc.

Moreover, this internship helps me to recall the knowledge I have learnt in lecture and apply it here. Once we encounter unexpected soil condition during construction, normal building method of the foundation cannot be applied. This forces us to apply our knowledge about soil mechanics to come up with alternative building method instantly. By this, I start to realize the reason of learning so many specific knowledge on soil, rocks and structural support. It really motivates me to work harder to study these subjects.

A reflection on construction safety in Hong Kong

Furthermore, this trip also reminds me the importance of working safely and taking enough safety measures. This is because of an accident happened during the construction. In fact, the

accident should not have happened, but just because a school keeper was careless and did not take any safety measure, resulting in this accident. Nevertheless, although there is no other accident happened during the construction, the working conditions and the workers' sense of safety are poor. First, the workers do not even wear slippers to work on the site but in bare foot, not to mention working at height without taking any safety precautions. Second, there are numbers of iron nails exposed on the top of the wood, the workers may accidentally get hurt if they step on the nails without protection shoes. Third, the workers do not wear safety belt when they work at height. Fatal accident may occur. The above show that the workers' sense of safety is very weak, it may be due to the lack of safety education.

Looking back to Hong Kong, there are also accidents involving workers with the lack of protection tools. Some of them are reluctant to wear protection gear for convenience sake, while others just want to speed up the construction process. They often refuse to follow all the safety precautions, such as using a badly established platform or failing to check a machine before using it. I think all these can be avoided by simply raising the safety awareness of the workers through education, together with the monitoring from the contractor and the site engineers. Therefore, it not only reminds me on paying attention to the safety issues, but also tells me that I am responsible to remind workers on paying attention to their safety.

The perfect match of volunteer education to local students

As our project aims to improve the hygienic level of one of the remote villages in Vietnam, this requires both hardware and software. The combined supports from both civil engineering students and social science students make a perfect picture for the whole voluntary programme.

As for the civil engineering students, our work is to provide hardware support for the students and the local people to use. This is done by building a toilet with a proper designed sanitary system which meets the hygienic standard. However, past experience tells us that local people may not know how to use a latrine properly, or even they do not have the habit of using a latrine. In the past, some toilets being built in remote villages in other countries are just abandoned right after the completion of them. It illustrates that the support of the software measures also matters.

Hereby, the social science students provide the software measures to educate the students and the local people to change their habit of cleanliness, especially defecation. Through campaigns, teachings and games playing with the local people, they start to know how to use the toilet properly, develop habit of using the toilet and learn how to wash their hands

properly. All of the above can improve their personal hygiene and decrease the large scale outspread of diseases. On the contrary, without the help of civil engineering students to build the toilet, even though the local people know the above knowledge, they still cannot apply it. Therefore, this is how a fusion of two disciplines of students make the voluntary programme more powerful and workable.

The inspiration on new ways of thinking

Working with the students from the Faculty of social science makes me start to think of paying more attention on “know why and know how” thinking model. As a civil engineering student, we often get used to jump to a solution directly. Through calculations, theories or laboratories data, we are trained to provide methods and conclusions of tackling problems. But social science students think in a totally different way.

By doing survey and interviewing the local stakeholders of the commune, we are required to assess the current situation of the commune. Trying to find out the linkage between each problems that we or the locals point out is our main task. Our job does not require us to jump to a solution instantly, what is more important is to explain the relationship of each outcome which we observe with a logical flow. This kind of analytical power focuses very much on the linkage between every piece of information we have collected and the flow of the problem we discovered, based on the supporting evidence and arguments. By discussing and working with the social science students, I start to familiarize on how they interpret and process a piece of information, i.e. finding interconnections among problems which they have figured out and tracing back to the root cause.

I appreciate and feel being enriched on this new way of depicting an incident. It makes me realize that sometimes focusing on the result of one thing may not be that important, but the process of working out the solution and the understanding of hidden problems is more crucial.

To Conclude...

The meaningful voluntary work done by our own hands, the bunch of civil engineering knowledge that we have learnt and the new inspirations that bring about by other disciplines of students make this experiential learning program an exceptional and extraordinary learning experience. I must say that it not only helps to equip myself in my future career, but also polishing my personal values as well as broadening my horizon. This will certainly be one of the most important clues for the puzzles picturing my career path and my life values.