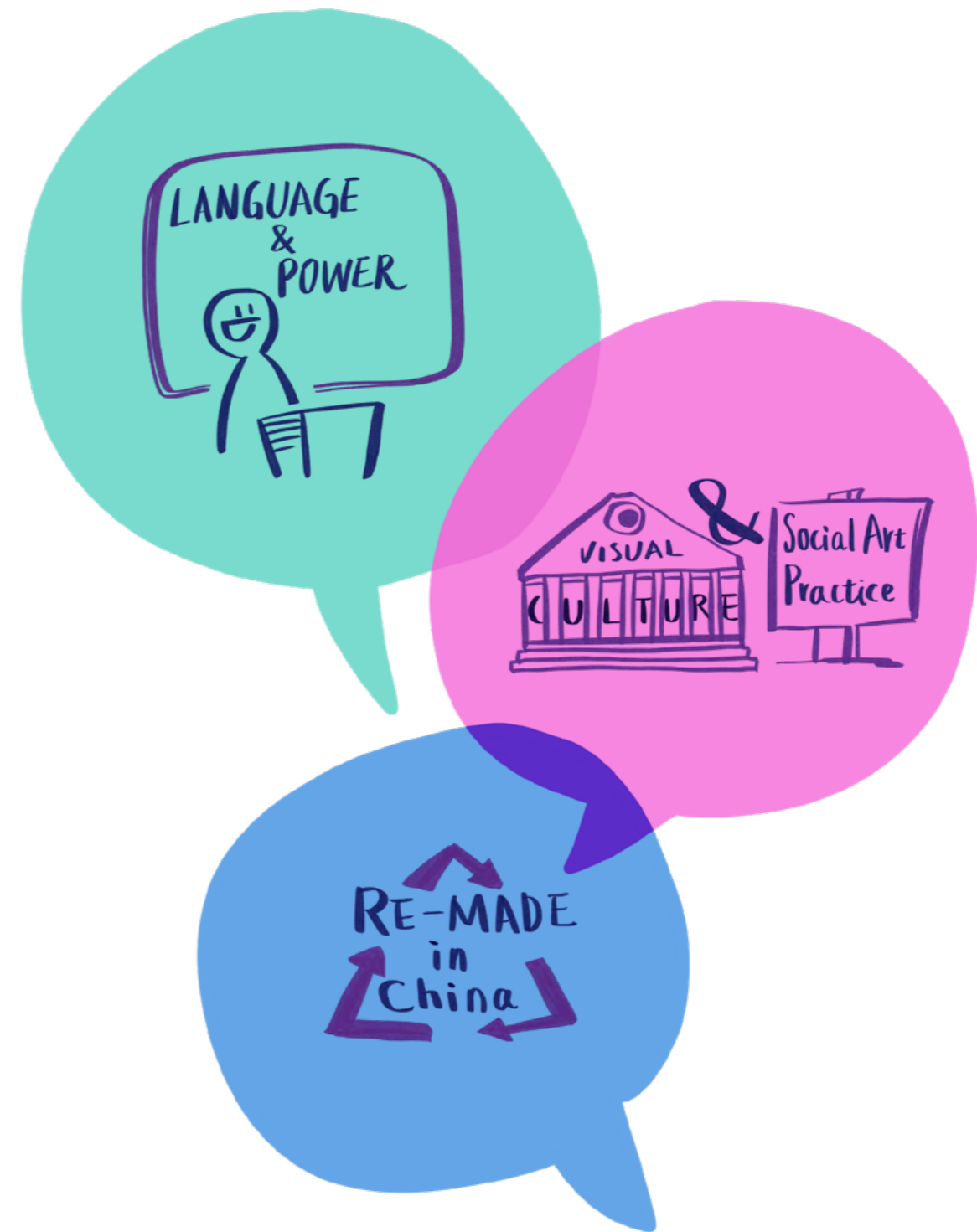


Academic Service-Learning at NYU Shanghai

Voices from Course-Community Partnerships



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Introduction



Diane Geng
Founding Director, CEL Office
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
NYU Shanghai

NYU Shanghai aspires to be “in and of the city” in the spirit of NYU campuses around the world. The motto reflects our campus location in a hub of a vibrant metropolis and also the potential that exists to engage ever more deeply with our surrounding environment. Universities, with their prodigious intellectual, human, and material resources, should contribute to the betterment of local communities of which they are a part. Equally, the knowledge and experiences of community members offer much to teach and inspire students and scholars. In thoughtfully designed university-community partnerships, diverse perspectives, ideas, and resources have the potential to converge, address needs, and enrich lives in the communities that we share.

This booklet focuses on a particular kind of university-community partnership: academic service-learning courses. Academic service-learning courses carry academic credit and reside within the university curriculum. Designed around projects or services that students carry out with or for a community partner, they enhance students’ understanding of academic theories and skills by infusing real-world experiences and observations into the learning process.

Challenges of academic service-learning

While the potential benefits of mounting academic service-learning courses can be significant, good intentions are only a start. Indeed, it is often easier to envision students going beyond the classroom walls to serve the broader community than it is to implement in practice. Rigorous workloads and tight academic calendars place demands and constraints on instructors’ and students’ time. Instructors may not be aware of specific community needs or groups that could connect well with their courses and teaching goals. Local residents and organizations interested in working with the university might feel unsure about what is feasible or whom to approach in a university about a potential partnership.

Genesis of the CEL Office

These realities inspired the founding of the Office for Community Engaged Learning (CEL) within the Academic Affairs department to serve in a bridge-building and advisory role between interested course instructors and community-based needs and organizations in and around Shanghai. Our small team provides information, guidance, and resources to help partnerships between academic courses and community partners to take root and grow. We get to know community members and organizations, learn about their perspectives and needs, and introduce interested and motivated faculty whose courses and goals may align for the mutual benefit of all parties involved.

The Dean’s Service Scholars Program

The Dean’s Service Scholars (DSS) program run by the CEL Office embodies these efforts in the form of academic service-learning courses. DSS courses can be based in any academic discipline. They are distinguished by their integration of meaningful community service with academic learning goals and intentional student reflection. Examples of course-integrated service can range from direct provision of a volunteer service for a population in a community, to creating a product that

fulfills a community-based need, to conducting research that benefits a community cause.

Students apply to join DSS courses. Working with the instructor, the CEL Office runs a selection process that evaluates students’ preparation, motivation, and commitment. Since service projects require substantial out-of-class work and visits to community partner sites, the application process is designed to select students who are prepared to commit to the expectations of the course and the associated community service work.

Purpose of this Booklet

This compilation is aimed at practitioners of academic service-learning courses, and anyone interested in the model. To glean insights and lessons learned from academic service-learning courses at NYU Shanghai over the past few years, interviews were conducted with key participants: instructors, students, community partners, and CEL staff. Rather than simply asking the interviewees to recount what was accomplished in the courses, I wanted to examine the “how” and “why” behind the decisions they made in teaching, or participating in the courses, and their reflections on their experiences. Three courses are spotlighted:

- *Language & Power*, a World Languages course
- *Re-Made in China*, an Interactive Media Arts course
- *Visual Culture and Social Art Practice*, a Humanities course

Each course is illuminated from multiple points of view and provide:

- Behind-the-scenes knowledge of instructors’ teaching design and challenges;
- Insight into how CEL staff help develop and facilitate university-community partnerships;
- The motivations of community partners in working with the university; and
- Student reflections on their learning process and what they gained from the courses.

It is my hope that the insights contained in these rich accounts may be of use to readers in thinking about the nuances and complexities of academic service-learning course design and implementation in university-community partnerships.



Above: CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian leads a group of students to explore a rural community on the outskirts of Shanghai.

ENGD-SHU 101

Language & Power

Faculty Voice

CEL Staff Voice

Community Partner Voice

Student Voice

Course Overview



The fourth-grade students in the Pudong New Citizen Life Center are playing a guessing game. Their teacher, Isabel Brack '22, writes the clues on a white board:

“MOUSE”

“WEBSITE”

“SOFTWARE”

A boy in a black jacket rings the bell on the desk. “COMPUTER!” he says.

His classmates applaud excitedly.

English word games are one way Isabel brought the English language to life for her students at this community learning center some 13 kilometers from the NYU Shanghai campus. As part of the academic service-learning course *Language & Power*, Isabel spent a semester teaching English to the children of migrant workers. Taught by Clinical Associate Professor of English for Academic Purposes Steven Iams, *Language & Power* is a collaboration with the Shanghai nonprofit organization Stepping Stones China. Over two semesters, students in the *Language & Power* course studied linguistic and pedagogical theories and applied them to their classes with the children at the Pudong center.

“The opportunity to learn about language pedagogy through course readings and seminar discussions and then to put theory into practice was invaluable,” said Isabel. “Many nuances to both the experience as a volunteer and a learner would go unnoticed if it was not for the combination [of service and academic instruction], and many important learning experiences would be lost.”

A cornerstone of students’ coursework is “dialogue journals,” a weekly reflective writing assignment that allows students to collaborate in small groups. Within these journals, one student each week is assigned to post first, sharing her or his description of what was observed in the classroom that week. The other students in the group then respond to what their peers have written and further contribute their own observations and thoughts. The dialogue journal is kept from the first week of teaching through the end of the semester and becomes a valuable resource for students’ final reflection paper.




Student A

Before we actually taught the class on the Zoom, xx and I certainly did some preparation for the unexpected problems. However, we still have met a lot of issues.

But with the class going on, things started to get better. I heard some of the students' parents were sitting beside them and helping.

But still I think I should prepare some games for them to play in order to keep their interest and attention.



Steve

My sense from reading all the dialogue journals is that chaos was the norm for the first week. I think it will be helpful to share any feedback you have with the coordinators, so that problems can be avoided for the coming weeks.

Do you think the parents' presence was helpful?

That's a good strategy. The game could relate to the words you've practiced, or sometimes it is nice just to do something fun with the kids to build a classroom culture and connect with them.

Above: Excerpts from a student’s dialogue journal written after a volunteer session, with feedback and comments from the professor.

“The experience that students are having as teachers and the theories that we’re talking about in the classroom overlap,” said Professor Iams. “Students begin to see concepts such as translanguaging and linguistic imperialism in practice, and this awareness influences the decisions they make as language teachers. It is always very rewarding to see them put these pieces together.”

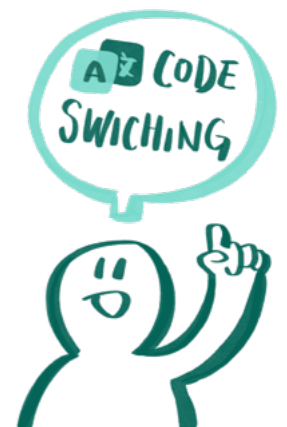
Social Science major Genevieve Hendler '22 found that the teaching experience not only helped her identify “diverse nuances and unnoticed needs in the community,” but also changed her attitude toward her own language divergences.

“As a trilingual, I was constantly frustrated by my ‘inadequacies’ in all three languages, and I never feel that I have conveyed my thoughts fully or that I have selected the best word,” Genevieve said. While teaching, she noticed her students running into the same trouble in learning English as well, which made her realize that what she may think of as “mistakes,” “barriers,” or “holes” in language are arbitrary and unimportant if they don’t truly hinder communication.

Every week, when she taught English classes at the Pudong New Citizen Life Center, Genevieve made it a point to talk and joke with her students in both English and Chinese.

“Most people may have misunderstood the power of translanguaging and code-switching. After taking the course, I learned that allowing students to vocalize comfortably their needs and concerns helps the teacher understand what lesson topics to review or to emphasize.”

Humanities major Zhang Yihang '24 said that “the usefulness of switching between two languages during the teaching” was his biggest takeaway. The *Language & Power* course was Zhang’s first opportunity to interact with migrant students, and he found that even in one classroom, there was a huge gap between students’ English levels.



“Some students spoke very fluent English, while others could not recognize any English words at all,” Yihang said. The situation made him think constantly about how to make students feel comfortable in the classroom by using the languages they know to solve problems, ask questions, and ultimately learn new English words and phrases. “I never thought about such questions, but now, I realized that theories and practices are not universal, and you should always be prepared to be adaptable.”



Besides thinking critically about the relationship between theory and practice, Professor Iams also encourages his students to ask themselves critical questions about the social and cultural context of language learning, comparing and contrasting their own language learning experiences and motivations with those of their young local students.

“My students need to go a step further and ask: Who is benefiting from learning English? Who can be an English teacher and why? What is the identity of their students? And why are these questions important to the way a class is designed and taught?” Professor Iams said. “They have to dig deeply into the relationship between language and power.”

For Shanghai native Hua Yuxin '24, this opened a new door for her. “Growing up in Shanghai, I’m used to taking language and language education for granted. However, this course makes me realize how the English language and its instruction are connected with socioeconomic status, geopolitical factors, and colonizing power,” she said.

Yuxin said she was shocked when she learned about the unequal distribution of education resources in her own city, especially when she realized that her brother is about the same age as the children she teaches, but he is at a much more advanced level in English. She realized that financially advantaged people who reside in more developed regions have far better access to English education resources. Furthermore, when people think of a global language, they always first think of English, instead of Chinese and thousands of other existing languages. Yuxin said she could not help asking herself, “Why is it English?”



As Yuxin described in one of her weekly dialogue journal entries, the relationship between language and power is “intricate and complicated, in that power determines who has access to what language, and who speaks the so-called ‘inferior’ language. Language serves as a social ladder to some and a stumbling block to others in the globalizing job market.”

After the fall semester’s training and practice, students have a chance to delve into the area that most interests them through the spring semester’s service project and independent research project. Some students helped to create and revise teaching materials, while others taught online via the Home Classroom Program linking teachers to classrooms in rural areas. Still others served as administrative coordinators for online teaching programs.

Students’ research projects examined a number of different applied linguistics and sociocultural language issues. Yuxin chose to use language as a lens to reflect on privilege. Isabel studied how the language level power dynamic changes across the age spectrum - from early childhood learning to geriatric memory care. Yihang dug into the linguistic implications of *danmu* online video comment systems.

Most participants said they believed the course was more than worthwhile as they watched their young students become more confident speaking English, and they themselves gained a more nuanced understanding of the limits and power of language learning. “You come out of the experience with more questions than answers, yet still a better understanding of the situation than before,” Genevieve said.

Course Structure

In discussion between Professor Iams and the CEL Office, *Language & Power* was designed as a two-semester course. It starts in the second 7 weeks of the 14-week fall semester and then continues in the first 7 weeks of the spring semester. Each half carries two credits, for a total of four credits over the two semesters.

Although the course doesn’t start until halfway into the fall semester, students begin their volunteer teaching service at Stepping Stones around the start of the fall semester to conform to Stepping Stones’ volunteering schedule and to gain more service experience to bring to the *Language & Power* course and their own learning. Students must agree to the volunteering time commitment when they apply to join the course.

The two-semester, 2-credit course model makes it easier and more affordable for students to enroll. Students at NYU Shanghai usually take at least 16 credits a semester, but they can take up to 18 credits without incurring additional tuition fees. Splitting a four credit course into two 2-credit courses also means that students can more easily fit it into their semester schedules. The two-semester arc of this course also allows students to deepen and expand the breadth of their learning and accumulate volunteer experience over a full academic year.

Following are in-depth perspectives from interviews with key stakeholders in this course.



Faculty Voice:

Steve Iams, Clinical Associate Professor of English for Academic Purposes (EAP)



CEL Staff Voice:

Chunhao Qian, Community Engaged Learning Coordinator



Community Partner Voice:

Ann Zhao, Stepping Stones Shanghai English Teaching Program Manager



Student Voice:

Zhenyu Ma, Class of 2023

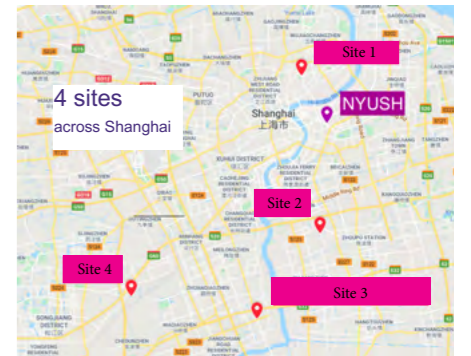


Student Voice:

Mahder Takele Teshome, Class of 2022



Cynthia Deng '25 and Genevieve Hendler '22 teaching elementary school students.



Students are assigned to different volunteer sites throughout Shanghai.

Adapted from:

NYU Shanghai University Communications. (2022, April 8). *Using the Power of Language to Make A Difference: ENGD-SHU 101B Deans’ Service Scholars: Language & Power*. News and Publications In Focus. <https://shanghai.nyu.edu/is/using-power-language-make-difference-engd-shu-101b-deans-service-scholars-language-power>





Steve Iams
Clinical Associate Professor
English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

“For me, learning occurs through interaction with others and reflection on experience. Designing student learning involves creating opportunities for students to do just that.”

My first experiments in community engaged learning pedagogy could not have happened without first being able to articulate my own beliefs about what constitutes effective learning. The educator Caleb Gattegno has argued that teaching is subordinate to learning. In other words, how we teach must be guided by how humans learn. For me learning occurs through interaction with others and reflection on experience and so designing learning for students involves creating opportunities for students to do just that. If on the other hand a teaching philosophy is based on a more traditional notion that students learn what is selected and taught by the teacher, a different approach to course and lesson design naturally follows.

From an early age I struggled with traditional education that centers on extensive reading and study of textbooks. I could digest information to prepare for a test but the information never stuck. For this reason, I do not remember much of what I learned from my undergraduate degree in history, where my backpack was weighed down by 750-page history books. How sad!

However, I also began to recognize that any learning which involved interaction with others has stayed with me. I remember dissecting a cow heart in elementary school. I can see myself in the middle of a carpet with peers listening to my teacher’s explanation of the aorta and ventricles. I remember the word ventricle! I recall learning the basics of economics through a Twinkie business that I was somehow allowed to run out of the 5th grade classroom (it was a unit on entrepreneurship).

Later, in college, while I don’t remember much about history, I spent quite a bit of time volunteering with my university community service programs. I vividly remember organizing after-school programs and coaching a YMCA basketball team. Twenty-five years later, I still remember the names of kids that I coached and the looks on their faces when we lost a game. Without having the word for it, I knew that meaningful and transformative learning could only be achieved experientially.

This formative experiential learning, perhaps subconsciously, influenced my early career decisions to teach English in Japan and then join the Peace Corps as an English Language Teacher Trainer. I needed a career that placed me at the crossroads of experiential learning and teaching, one in which I was always positioned as both learner and teacher. Fortunately both of those early career experiences came without much of a manual. I had to learn on my feet, experiment with course and lesson design, and constantly reflect on what was and was not working in the classroom. Every day was exhilarating and exhausting. I remember all of it.

As an educator, my mission is to provide students with the same kind of interactive,

experiential learning if for no other reason than I strongly believe that they will remember what they did through these interactions. This includes interacting with texts, interacting with peers verbally in class and through written assignments, and interacting with me through conferencing and feedback. In my academic service-learning work, it includes interaction with community organizations and the people engaging with these organizations. Together, this interaction forms the basis of experiential learning and increases the likelihood that learning will stick.

Creating the Language & Power course

When a call went out from the Academic Affairs CEL Office inviting faculty to propose academic service-learning courses, I knew I was prepared to build a course that would provide the type of critical experiential learning that I did not have as an undergraduate student. One of the first steps in establishing this relationship was to place ourselves in the role of learners. Diane Geng, CEL Office Director, introduced me to Stepping Stones, a nonprofit organization in Shanghai that teaches English to underprivileged children from migrant families. CEL organized visits for me to a school and a community center where Stepping Stones volunteers taught. These observations allowed me to observe that Stepping Stones is a well-run organization and this in turn helped me to envision my role in working with my students as future Stepping Stones volunteers.

The Stepping Stones orientation and training for volunteers, for example, showed me that my students would have just enough support to enter their classrooms having some idea of what to teach and how to teach it, which was important given that most of my students had no teaching experience. This is not always the case. Other organizations working with migrant populations, due to a lack of resources, may only be able to provide a space for classes. In either case, it is important to find out what level of support students will have so that I can assess what kind of assistance they will need from me. In the case of Stepping Stones, I was also careful not to insert myself as an expert because, in this context, I would not be.

Instead of providing pedagogical or curricular advice, which Stepping Stones did not need, I provided logistical support to relieve some of the administrative workload inherent to managing and supporting volunteers. I helped with the recruitment, placement, and supervision of our students, which was something that Stepping Stones valued. My visits to observe student teaching also provided a means for me to give individualized feedback and advice on teaching to my students. With Stepping Stones coordinators and trainers stretched thin to provide support to many volunteers, I was able to contribute by helping in this area instead of providing unsolicited expertise in other areas that Stepping Stones clearly had covered.

Preparing students for teaching children

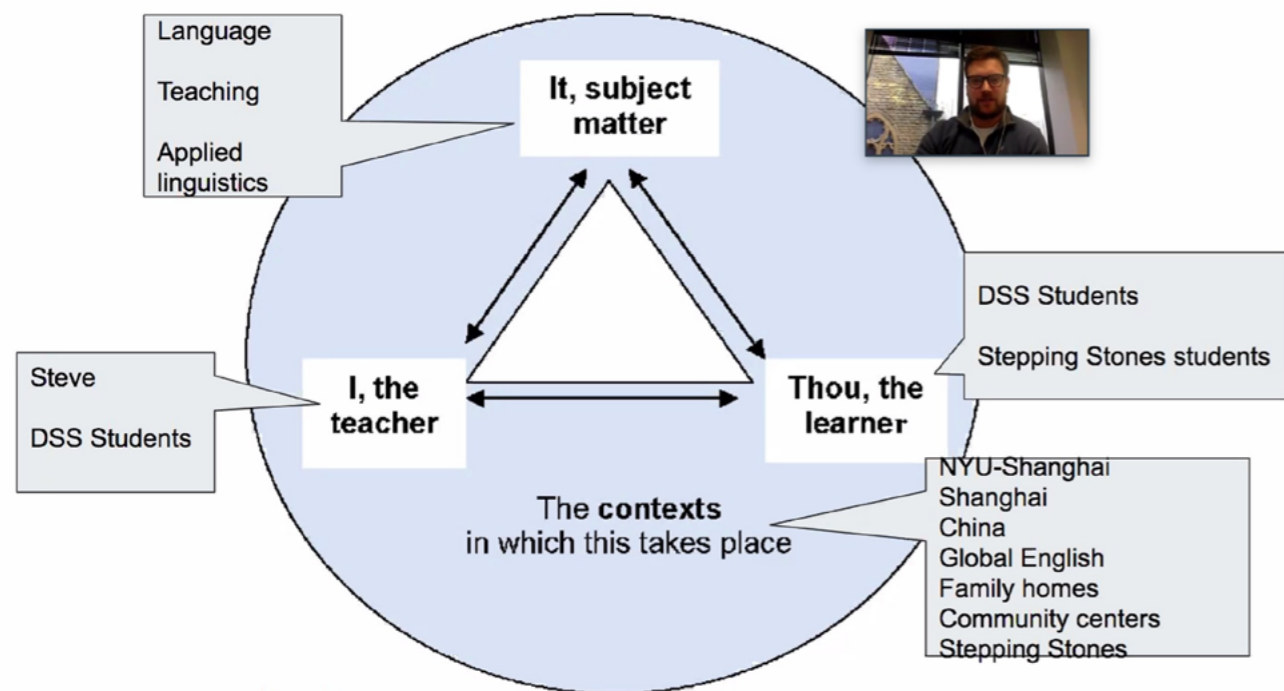
It was helpful to have attended Stepping Stones’ training for volunteers to see how they prepared students for their teaching service. One thing that stood out was that the Stepping Stones trainer problematized the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘disadvantaged’ as labels that may be too broad to be helpful in any way. Instead, the target population for Stepping Stones was children whose families did not have a Shanghai *hukou* (local registration) and attended schools that often had fewer resources. Therefore, the term ‘disadvantaged’ applied to the schools, not children, and the service could be contextualized as supplementing the support that the children received.

On my end, I encouraged students to enter their service contexts with open minds and an attitude of flexibility. I wanted them to understand that, more than teaching English, they were there to form relationships with their students, and that developing these relationships was essential to promoting the type of interactive learning environment necessary for language learning to happen. Given the limited



“It’s important to find out what level of support students will have from the community partner so that I can assess what kind of assistance they will need from me.”





Source: David Hawkins

Professor Iams introduced the course to students at the beginning of the year. This class was held online when campus was closed due to COVID-19.

time that students would spend teaching – approximately an hour per week - I also sought to temper expectations of progress by asking them to reflect on what a successful outcome in this context might look like. Would it be mastery of the content? For some, it would mean children who enjoyed being together and with their instructor for the limited time they were together. To borrow a phrase from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, I encouraged our students to provide an experience “worthy of the students’ time”, and this did not necessarily mean one that was language-outcome driven.



Course structure and assignments

There are seven *Language & Power* class sessions in the fall, one orientation session and six others devoted to *Language & Power* issues that my students may encounter immediately in their teaching contexts. These include sessions on critical service-learning, language stigma, language variation and Global Englishes, code-switching and translanguaging, and identity as it relates to imagined communities. It is important for me that students are introduced to issues related to language variation and identity quite early, so that they can think about how certain ideologies such as monolingualism or ‘English only’ exert heavy influence on most language classrooms.

There are two ongoing assignments in the fall. Students take part in dialogue journals with their co-teachers. Within these journals, one student each week is assigned to post first, sharing their description of what was observed in the classroom that week. The second post (or third, for students in a triad) invites students to further contribute to this description from their own, possibly different, perspective and respond to what their peers have written. The dialogue journal is kept from the first week of teaching through the end of the semester and becomes a valuable resource for students’ final reflection paper.

The second ongoing assignment is responses to weekly topics. Students post their responses to open-ended prompts which ask them to share what caught their attention and make connections to what they are seeing in their classrooms as well as their own experiences as language learners. Several days after these posts, each student is also responsible for responding to an assigned peer. There is a partially

“I encouraged our students to provide an experience ‘worthy of the students’ time’, and this did not necessarily mean one that was language-outcome driven.”

symbiotic relationship between the dialogue journals and forum posts as students often draw connections between what they are reading/viewing and their weekly experiences in the classroom. However, I do not ask that they neatly put things together until the end of the semester when they write a reflection paper about the entirety of their experience in the fall.

The final reflection paper essentially asks students to hold up various aspects of their learning and then to synthesize and problematize it. I also ask them to revisit Barbara Jacoby’s central tenets of service-learning to see how their experiences can be situated in what scholars view as best practices.

In the spring, students explore an applied linguistics topic of their choice and continue working with Stepping Stones in some capacity. This engagement has varied from year to year. The first year was interrupted by the pandemic, so there was not an opportunity to continue teaching. Instead, as part of their research, they carried out a ‘story corps’ type project in which they interviewed someone about their language learning or teaching experience. It did not fulfill a community engagement need, however it did extend their experiential learning both through the opportunity to be involved in a light qualitative research project and to hear stories of other experiences in applied linguistics.

The following year, we were able to partner with Stepping Stones again in the spring semester. I met with Stepping Stones prior to the semester and learned that their greatest need was teachers for their online classes, so our students in effect taught for the entire academic year. Stepping Stones shared a list of additional possibilities for continued student engagement, including teaching, course coordination, curriculum assistants, and internships. My students submitted preferences for these projects and ended up working on a variety of different projects. It has been exciting to see the evolution of involvement, and I suspect that the success of our partnership in the prior several years has led to Stepping Stones gaining confidence in providing expanded roles for our students.

“I ask them to revisit Barbara Jacoby’s central tenets of service-learning to see how their experiences can be situated in what scholars view as best practices.”

Choosing course topics

A key decision for the course was deciding which topics I could or should introduce early on. Some topics such as native speakerism, which examines discrimination in English language teaching, and linguistic imperialism, which explores the hegemony of English, are eye-opening for students but also heavy hitting. These topics force teachers to question whether they want to take part in what could be seen as an unjust, inequitable, and imperialistic system. It is an important question

Above: Examples of students’ chosen research topics in the second semester of the course.

“Any course I teach can integrate elements of community-engaged learning, and in doing so will enhance learning that comes when students interact with content, their classmates, and community partners.”



to ask, but first I wanted students to have their own experience in the classroom, to discover the joys and frustrations that come with the territory of teaching.

For this reason, the course begins with language variation, which is a descriptive look at local and global versions of English. It is an initial means of challenging native speaker ideologies which put a bullseye on the acquisition of ‘standard’ English. We watch a documentary called *Pidgin: The Voice of Hawaii* which brings into sharp focus the consequences of speaking ‘non-standard’ varieties of English in terms of education and professional opportunities for young Hawaiians.

From there we expand our understanding of variety by introducing the concepts of code-switching and translanguaging, which both highlight the agency of speakers as they use their full linguistic repertoire to express meaning and display identity. As students begin teaching with Stepping Stones, they are exploring these topics at the same time, and inevitably they begin to see that teaching English is a political act. It involves choices about what to teach and how to teach it. When students use Chinese in the classroom or pronounce words in a different way, DSS students begin to ask: Should I allow Chinese in the classroom? Should I correct students’ pronunciation? If I do, what message does this carry with it?

In the latter part of the fall semester, the discussion evolves from a description of the variety of language features (phonology, grammar, vocabulary) to how language teaching and learning connects to identity. We read an article by Fan Shen, a Chinese graduate student in the US, who writes about how learning to write in English required him to develop a second, ‘English self’. Although the article was written over 30 years ago, my students connect with it on a personal level. They are thinking about what their own language learning means for their evolving identities. The fall semester ends with students writing what tend to be very thoughtful, engaging reflection papers about how they now view language teaching and language learning through a much different, more complex lens. It trains their eyes to see a bigger picture, one we explore in the spring through applied linguistics topics such as native speakerism and linguistic imperialism. Students are also ready, at that point, to identify and research language related issues that connect to their own experience and interests.

Teaching challenges

After teaching *Language & Power* for almost three years, a recurring challenge is finding the right mix of support for novice teachers while also giving them the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Stepping Stones provides prescriptive lesson plans which serve as excellent resources for new teachers. While they are not meant to be followed exactly, our students sometimes fall into the trap of blaming the lesson plan when things don’t go well. In some ways, as I observed in my own early teaching experiences, I wonder if our students would be better off with no support at all, forcing them to rely on their own and their peers’ resourcefulness to find activities and plan learning for their students. In a trial-by-fire approach, successful lessons are sweeter, and the disasters are felt more acutely (as opposed to blaming the lesson plan).

However, I often need to remind myself that this is not a teacher-training program – my students may not even want to become teachers – and it is not a laboratory. The Stepping Stones children deserve an experience that is based on past lessons learned, not lessons learned from week-to-week successes and failures. In this sense, guiding the students to use the lesson plans and experiment more minimally is a more conservative approach, and also one that prioritizes the community partner over my students.

Another challenge involves students who lack commitment and prioritize some of their many other responsibilities over their service projects or DSS coursework. While this is rare, dealing with students who may have underestimated the level of

commitment required for a DSS course has not been easy. It involves a delicate and timely conversation that acknowledges the heavy loads and pressure that students are under but reminds them of the commitment they made to Stepping Stones and the children in their classroom.

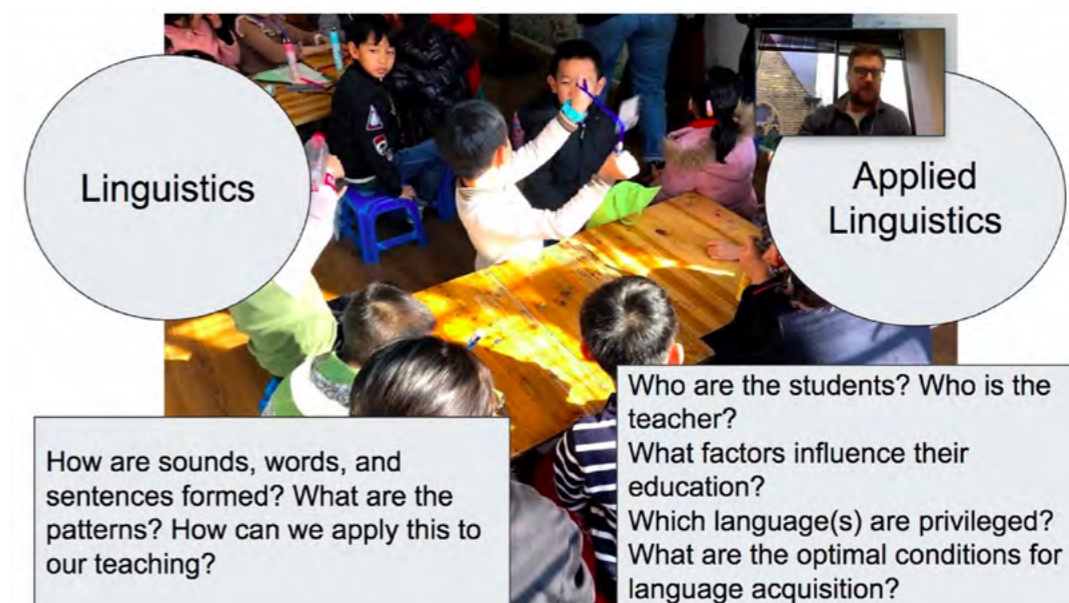
Migrant programs are usually located closer to where the migrant families live, far from the university or more upscale areas of a city. For those students who teach in person, they commute long distances by metro and bus to reach the classroom. This seemed to come as a surprise to many students in my first Language & Power cohort; the time involved in just showing up tested the desire of a few to participate in the course. Students who taught online faced ‘virtual’ transportation issues: a variety of internet issues, students who would not turn on their screen or who lived in a noisy environment. In their journals, students reflected as much about these issues as they did the classroom teaching.

The impact of the course

I see light bulbs go off for students the same way they did for me. This is rewarding because, as I tell students, I taught English for almost 5 years before any light bulbs went off and before I was able to situate myself within the social, cultural, and political aspects of teaching. The light bulbs don’t have to be so heady. They can be exhilarating discoveries of what works in the classroom, and students write about these moments in their journals. The discovery can be as simple as an activity that worked or a lesson where they gained control over a noisy classroom of kids. It can be a moment where they see the value of translanguaging in the classroom. Oftentimes it is the story of a student who had a great day in class or said something surprising. I feel happy for them in these moments because this is how I fell in love with teaching. I also feel their despair when they report on a bombed lesson.

I have to remind myself, again, that they are mostly not aspiring teachers, but it is satisfying that they are truly immersed in experiential learning for themselves and with their students.

For me personally, the course has allowed me to take everything I learned from my past teaching and learning and share it with my students. That it is a 4-credit course, not an entire degree, is tough because in making decisions about what to include or exclude, I have to exclude a lot! But what I do include are highlights from the



Above: Professor Iams held class online during the pandemic.

“I taught English for almost 5 years before any light bulbs went off and before I was able to situate myself within the social, cultural, and political aspects of teaching.”

fields of language teaching, applied linguistics, and service-learning, and so I think students are getting the best of the best in terms of what I have to offer to them.

Beyond the satisfaction that goes along with this, the effect that teaching the course has had on me is that it has affirmed the value – even the necessity – of experiential learning for undergraduate students as an integral part of their academic and professional development. It has shown me how far the field has come from my time in college where community engagement was typically not accompanied by reflection or academic study. Lastly, teaching the course has also opened my eyes to the possibility that any course I teach can integrate elements of community-engaged learning, and in doing so will enhance learning that comes when students interact with content, their classmates, and community partners.



NYU Shanghai volunteers teach children on a weekly basis at different Stepping Stones sites.

CEL Staff Voice



Chunhao Qian
Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Coordinator



My role in this course has been to serve as a bridge between NYU Shanghai students and Stepping Stones in terms of introducing Stepping Stones staff to the students and assisting with communication between the two sides. I also make sure that the students are in compliance with university policies on working with minors. There is an online training required by the university’s Compliance and Risk Management Department for people who work with children, as the students in this course will do during their volunteer teaching. Thus, I make sure that the students in the course have completed the training before they began their volunteer work.

One of my biggest lessons from this partnership has been the importance of respecting the time and resources that staff of the community partner put towards organizing our students’ service work. This came up when drawing up a contract for the partnership with Stepping Stones. I was at first taken aback when Stepping Stones said they would charge us a coordination fee. It seemed counterintuitive to me to be charged for volunteering. In response, I communicated more with the staff at Stepping Stones to find out the organization’s point of view. They shared several points with me. First, our course had specific volunteer placement requirements for students that didn’t exist for their other volunteers, which required extra work to coordinate. Second, Stepping Stones would organize a special training for the students in our course that accommodated their schedules. As a nonprofit organization, income from fees and donations are crucial for sustaining their ability to operate.

After the first few years of this course being developed and taught by Professor Iams, *Language & Power* is now being taught by a new instructor. I have been in the role of introducing the new instructor to Stepping Stones and making introductions to their staff so as to carry on the good relationship that we have built over the years. I have also passed on the institutional knowledge of how we work together, which has been rewarding for me.



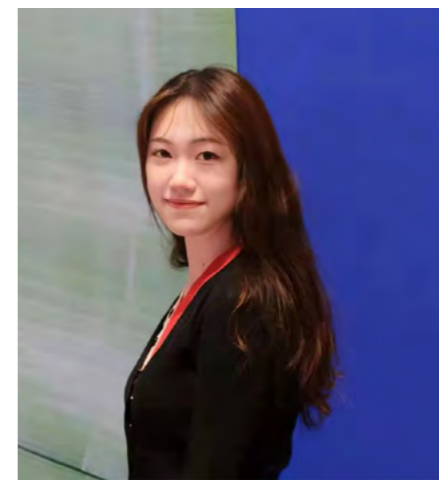
CEL staff and Professor Steve Iams with the new faculty instructor of the course, Professor Marcel Daniels.

Community Partner Voice



Ann Zhao
Shanghai English Teaching Program
Manager, Stepping Stones

Student Voice



Zhenyu Ma
Class of 2023



Stepping Stones is a nonprofit volunteering organization that helps disadvantaged children discover the joy of learning a foreign language. It organizes volunteers to provide fun and interactive oral English lessons in schools and community centers, aiming to improve children’s motivation and confidence in speaking English.

We were motivated to work with the NYU Shanghai Language & Power course because of the accountability, commitment, and English-speaking skills of your students and because of the great support from Professor Steve Iams and CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian.

Your students get the assigned job done, provide creative ideas, and share suggestions for continuous improvement. On the other hand, we hope we can help your students achieve their internship goals, help them learn, grow, and be prepared for their future studies and careers.

I have observed that students in an academic service-learning course are more organized. Their talents are better matched with our children. NYU Shanghai students from this course are very hard working, responsible and capable of doing various assignments. They have good soft skills as well like problem solving and interpersonal skills.

The *Language & Power* course itself is well-organized, which is one of the keys to obtaining a good result. The most valuable thing in my opinion is the bond and the trust among all the involved parties, which makes our ongoing partnership natural.



Initially, I was attracted by the course title *Language & Power*. I was curious about the relationship between language and power since I live and study in a bilingual setting at NYU Shanghai. I also saw the words “service-learning” in the description of the course, which was a new concept to me at the time. I didn’t know exactly what “service-learning” meant but I saw that I would be teaching kids as part of the course. I like kids a lot and thought it would be an interesting experience. I filled in the DSS application, met Professor Iams, and got in.

I had very limited teaching experience prior to this. In high school, I volunteered in a rural summer camp in Guizhou Province. I also ran one class for the English Corner at the Pudong Library. I felt that if I had the chance to teach for a longer period of time, it would be great. *Language & Power* gave me this opportunity.

Professor Iams designed different activities for us and made the theories and the knowledge vivid through the readings and the service component of the course. In particular, I remember the concept of the “imagined community”. The reading that Professor Iams gave us mentioned that the imagined identity of language learners is linked to the level of capital and the economic status available to them. The reading directly reminded me of the rural children in the summer camp in Guizhou. When teaching the migrant children, I realized that sometimes parents would sit next to their child and listen in on the class. Even though the classes were free, the parents appreciated them. They believe that with better English grades, their children can get into a good school, and this is important for enhancing their socioeconomic status. The course readings connected to my past experience in Guizhou Province and also to my Stepping Stones volunteer teaching experience. It felt like connecting the pieces.

Another concept that I remember is linguistic imperialism. Professor Iams mentioned several fallacies such as the earlier that you learn English, the better you’re going to get at the language. Or that if you immerse yourself in a monolingual context, you will learn the target language better. It reminded me of how bilingual kindergartens have been very popular in China. Many parents sent their children to a bilingual kindergarten because they believed that exposing their children to such an environment earlier on will help them learn English quicker. The theories I learned in the readings were phenomena that I saw in reality. That’s what was amazing about the course.

Another topic was the stigma attached to accents. Professor Iams showed us a documentary called *Pidgin*. The people who spoke Pidgin were discriminated against because Pidgin doesn’t conform to standard English pronunciation and usage. People tend to judge others’ competence in language based on their accents. However, accents don’t mean inferior speech. This is embedded in my memory.



Professor Iams gave us various kinds of assignments. Before each class, we needed to do the assigned reading and write a discussion post in the online forum. Classes consisted of discussions rather than pure lectures. Maybe because everyone in the course was very interested in the topics or because everyone had experiences at NYU Shanghai that they could relate to, all the students had something to share. Professor Iams would also call on students, but I think the atmosphere in that class was very good and everyone was willing to speak up.

Collaborations with Classmates

I made several close friends due to this class. We got to know each other well since it's a two-semester course. I feel like the relationships built in this course are different than in the one-semester courses.

My partner in the volunteer teaching was an American classmate. She could speak a little bit of Chinese but she's not that fluent. Because she was trying to get closer to the students in her class, she pushed herself to use more and more Chinese. Her students were very young and if she only taught in English, they could not understand everything. Sometimes if she was stuck on some phrase that she wanted to express in Chinese, I would help her. At the end of the course, I think my partner's Chinese became a lot more fluent. She was learning together with the children. It's very interesting.

We had several meetings at the beginning of the teaching, but as we became more and more familiar, we basically just had virtual discussions with each other through writing in a weekly dialogue journal about the teaching experience. Each week, one person would write first and then the other person would give a short response. Reading those journals now, it's really interesting to see how I made progress throughout my teaching experience. In the first class I taught, I was very nervous. Gradually, I became more and more confident. My partner and I learned from each other's teaching styles and teaching methods. The experience was amazing. I was a student and a teacher at the same time.

Professor Iams' comments in the dialogue journal were very useful. I remember sharing in class that when we were teaching the children about occupations, the pictures that Stepping Stones gave us in the lesson slides had only male police officers while for other occupations, only pictures of women were used. I didn't point out to the children that these occupations can be done by both men and women, but I wrote about it in my journal. Professor Iams encouraged me in his comments not to hesitate to bring this up to Stepping Stones and to the children. If it wasn't for this class, I wouldn't be able to reflect on things like this so quickly. For later classes, I changed the slides based on my own teaching style and realized I didn't have to follow the slides strictly. I became more confident in my own teaching and had the courage to change more things. I also gave feedback about the slides to Stepping Stones.

Professor Feedback and Support

Through the dialogue journals, I kept a record of my learning. It's special because it's not just my own internal dialogue but has the thoughts of both me and my partner. For the final paper, Professor Iams mentioned that we could excerpt from our dialogue journal entries. As I looked back through the journal entries, I found that my partner and I actually experienced the same kind of problems and had the same kind of worries. For example, when we were learning about accent stigma, I loosened my standards about English pronunciation because I was afraid of giving the children the sense that only standard pronunciation is acceptable or good. My partner wrote that because she's American, she was worried about inflicting her American pronunciation on the children and also loosened her standards. It felt very meaningful to see how my partner and I were growing. We made progress in different ways, but we shared the same concerns. I think that's what's great about the dialogue journal.

Academic Learning

The theories taught in class made me critical of the phenomenon I observed while volunteering. The imbalanced power structure in language systems is quite hard to change in the short term. Sometimes our own effort is not enough to change that situation. It needs to be a joint effort with the culture at large, the teachers, and maybe the families of the children. For example, although I loosened my standards when correcting the pronunciation of my students, I also realize that learning standard pronunciation is very important to them because they are still in the educational system in China where they have to take tests. If we don't correct them, they will lose points in those tests. It's very hard to balance those two ends. I struggled a lot, but I feel like it's not something that we can change on our own. Maybe we have to accept this reality. But just observing those phenomena is great. The biggest thing that the class taught me is to be able to observe such phenomena.

I gained a lot from doing the final project. It's a mini capstone. We needed to make our own research questions, do interviews, and integrate the experience of teaching in Stepping Stones. Professor Iams gave good guidelines and a handbook in the linguistic field as a starting point. He suggested that we pick a topic that we are interested in and then dig deeper into the specific questions. Following these steps helped me gain a lot of experience in doing research.

Learning how to teach

Stepping Stones offered a lot of teaching resources for us. They gave us access to PowerPoint slides beforehand with the basic structure and the knowledge of the lesson we were supposed to teach. My partner and I added a little bit to the slides that related to the children's lives. At the beginning, I just followed the slides. I learned a lot from my partner. In one lesson about stationary, we had to teach students words like "erasers" and "pencils". My partner invited the students to take out their pencil case and to use what they were learning in class to introduce what they had in their pencil cases.

My class size was very small. I only had two girls. Sometimes one of them was absent from class so I would only have one student. They were very smart. There was always more time left over after I finished the slides so I would have conversations with the students. They could read the sentences on the slides but if you asked them questions, they could not speak very well. When asked to introduce themselves, they did not know what to say. After I realized this, I used the time we had left in the class to practice speaking. For example, after we learned the vocabulary and the content in the slides, I asked them to talk about the classes they take in school. This kind of conversation is more useful to them. I really wanted to help them to turn English into a tool that they could use instead of only something for taking tests.

The children became more confident using English as a communication tool after the course. I'm very happy about that. I taught them for two semesters. In the last class, I asked them to introduce themselves. Both could do it in a relatively fluent way. They can at least engage in very simple English conversations. I don't know whether it changed their mind about what English means to them, but I hope that they can start to use it in context, not just when taking tests.

After doing the service in Stepping Stones, I started to pay more attention to the migrant children group and the education problems of this group of children. It was no longer just about language teaching or the language and power topics. It was about this group of children. It motivated me to take part in a CEL Office-organized summer camp for migrant children, and it turned out to be a very meaningful experience for me. I appreciate that.



"I feel like the relationships built in this course are different than in the one-semester courses."



"My partner and I learned from each other's teaching styles and teaching methods. The experience was amazing. I was a student and a teacher at the same time."





Mahder Takele Teshome
Class of 2022

It was really the title of the course—*Language & Power*—that compelled me to take it. I was in the process of crafting a self-designed honors major that focused on religion and language. The fact that this course was about language and power made me really curious to learn more.

I was partnered with two other students for my volunteer teaching service. One was Chinese from Sichuan Province. The other was an American. I am from Ethiopia. We were assigned to the Sunflower community center site. We went on Saturday mornings. I really enjoyed it because my Saturday mornings used to be spent lying in bed thinking about what I have to do for the next week, but not doing anything and feeling guilty. This gave me an excuse to wake up early. The journey there was actually quite fun because we took the metro together. I really enjoyed it. It never felt like a burden.

We had about 12 students in the second and third grades. After getting to know the children for a little while, I had to make sure that the content fit with what works for them. It seems almost unnecessary to review second grade English content because it's too easy, but it actually is necessary because you have to familiarize yourself with the concepts not just as a speaker of the language but as someone who is teaching that language. It took a good amount of coordination because I had co-teachers and had to work with them.

I've learned that communication is really important. How we decided to carry out the class was kind of a contract between us teachers. Because we had three people on our team, we had to make sure that all three of us were in sync. It was very, very important for us to be listening to each other and deciding early on how to structure the class and then follow a plan. We started off a little rough but by the end, we had a really smooth working style as a team.

Sometimes language barriers can actually be beneficial for language learning. I didn't speak enough Mandarin so I had to come up with creative ways to demonstrate what I wanted to say. It felt very rewarding when the children responded to that. I realized that sometimes it's better when students don't have a direct translation to rely on when trying to understand a new concept.

Support for teaching

I remember when Professor Iams visited us to observe our teaching. Even though technically we are students, in that specific context we were the ones in power. In a different setting, we are the students and Professor Iams is the one with the power. It felt good to have a conversation with him about what's going well, what's happening, and how to improve. I genuinely remember it as a pretty positive

experience. It was really good to have his feedback.

The dialogue journals made me think a little bit more critically than I otherwise would have. Most other times when I was engaged in service projects like this, I would carry out my responsibilities but not much else. Having to keep a dialogue journal helped me reflect a lot more and embedded the experience on a deeper level.

Having to read and respond to each other's journal entries gave us different perspectives on the same experience. For instance, if I wrote about something that happened during class, my teaching partner might have written about the same thing, but she might have a completely different outlook. I also liked to share moments of success that might encourage or inspire others.

Connection with academic topics

We really discussed the language status of the kids we were working with. We really wanted to understand their backgrounds so we dedicated a lot of course time to discussing migrant populations in Shanghai. We saw how their financial situations or their current status impacted their attendance in class or how they perceived things. There are also a lot of social elements that come into the classroom. The children would respond to some things a little differently or in a way that we weren't used to. We had to really think about that and discuss it in class.

After taking this class, I began to realize the power that comes with the language of instruction in schools. For a lot of people, for different communities, there's a prestigious variant of English that's usually instructed in schools. I was able to relate this to my own educational journey and the languages that I was instructed in and how they shaped a good amount of my opportunities. It made me realize how languages can be used both as a tool and a weapon in the construction of different societies. I started to become more aware of the language policies of different places.

I think what impacted me the most is what kind of education projects I am willing to be engaged in. This course experience really made me think about whether introducing something for a very short period is better than not having it at all. Personally, I now prefer to do things only long-term. I don't want to just show up and then disappear.

This course was a launching point in my academic career. For my self-designed honors major proposal, I ended up making it one of my core classes. Because of this class, I was very much inspired to take a lot more sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology classes. So it was really instrumental in my life trajectory and in the career plans I set for myself. I'm very grateful for it.

"This course was a launching point in my academic career. Because of this class, I was very much inspired to take a lot more sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology classes. It was really instrumental in my life trajectory and in the career plans I set for myself."



INTM-SHU 271

Re-made in China

Faculty Voice

CEL Staff Voice

Community Partner Voice

Student Voice

Course Overview

A trolley to make it easier for janitorial staff to carry heavy tools. Space-saving bookshelves for the Campus Store. A screen divider to create private space for cafeteria staff on work breaks. These are just some of the projects that students in the Interactive Media Arts (IMA) class *Re-made in China* designed to make life a bit easier for campus workers. Taught by Assistant Arts Professor of IMA Marcela Godoy, *Re-made in China* offers students a chance to explore innovative ways to transform discarded materials into products that can respond to needs of specific community members.

In this course, students collaborate to develop a critical understanding of sustainability through research and development of an original design project. They learn how traditional fabrication techniques, new technologies, and a sustainable design philosophy can become powerful tools for addressing social and environmental problems. Learning takes place through lectures; guest speakers; regular reading assignments; interactive discussions; student presentations; project critiques; group projects; hands-on activities; and experimentation with making new materials by recycling waste products like used plastics.

This course was not originally designed as an academic service-learning course. However, through collaboration with the CEL Office, Professor Godoy transformed the main assignment of the course into a community service project. The first time the course was taught, students partnered with oft-overlooked members of the university's own campus community, such as staff of the cafeteria, janitorial team, and campus store. CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian reached out to the managers of these areas to ask if they would be open to students working on projects for their staff. With the managers' go-ahead, Chunhao and Professor Godoy organized



students into teams, each of which partnered with either an individual staff or group of workers. The students interviewed the workers about their challenges and then brainstormed ways to use recycled materials to address one of their needs. "It reminds us that we don't need to look far for things that can be improved in our own surrounding environment," said Qian.

The following year, students were partnered with residents of a neighborhood next to campus. Students created products for them that were designed to assist residents in their hobbies or volunteer work. For example, one group designed a tool for volunteers who patrolled the neighborhood picking up litter. Another group made display cases for a group of retired ladies to show off their handicrafts. A third group investigated the workings of a community garden and helped residents make shelves that could hold flower pots that beautified the space. All of the products were made with recycled plastics and other recycled materials using methods that students had learned in class.

Following are in-depth perspectives on the course implementation process:



Faculty Voice:

Marcela Godoy, Assistant Arts Professor of Interactive Media Arts (IMA)



CEL Staff Voice:

Chunhao Qian, CEL Coordinator



Community Partner Voice:

Zheng Xue, Former Head of the Fuzhu Neighborhood Committee



Student Voice:

Xiaoyan Kong, Class of 2021



Student Voice:

Kat Valachova, Class of 2022



Student Voice:

Kaiwen Chen, Class of 2022



Students interviewing neighborhood officials about the tools used by community volunteers to pick up litter.



Students visit their community partner in the residential neighborhood next to the university campus.



Students taught community members how to make coin purses out of recycled materials.

Adapted from:

Godoy, M. (2021) ART-SHU 250 Visual Culture and Social Art Practice: Collaborations and Community Interactions [Syllabus]. Shanghai: NYU Shanghai.

NYU Shanghai University Communications. (2020, December 11). *Course Spotlight: Recycling Materials While Serving Others*. News and Publications In Focus. <https://shanghai.nyu.edu/is/course-spotlight-recycling-materials-while-serving-others>



Marcela Godoy
Assistant Arts Professor
Interactive Media Arts (IMA)

My teaching philosophy is learning by doing. It's also a lot about collaboration, not only with students or faculty, but also with the community. When I was living in New York, I developed a project that was related to sustainability. I offered workshops for anyone who wanted to come to learn how to create necklaces out of e-waste. I'm interested not only in teaching young people, but people of all ages.



Recycling plastic into new materials

I'm a designer and I like to design things but I didn't have many resources so I started looking for trash that could be made into materials for my designs. I created a tutorial on how to do this. It was a technique that I wanted to share rather than something that I wanted to sell. When I moved to China, I didn't find the same kinds of trash that I'd been using in New York but I did find a lot of plastic trash from the 3D printers and packaging around campus. Everywhere, you could see plastic. That's why I started researching how to recycle plastic into new materials. I met a Shanghai group called Precious Plastic. They had machines that could recycle plastic. That's how I started experimenting in this area.



Engaging with local people

I've lived in Shanghai for several years now. I like to greet my neighbors. In my apartment building, I say hello to all the cleaning staff aiyis and security guard. I see them around a lot and just try to communicate with them as much as possible even though I don't speak much Chinese. There is a trash collector who comes to my building. I invited him to come speak to my class because I wanted students to learn about trash, but not all knowledge can be found in books. Sometimes the best knowledge lies with people on the street. If students want to learn about trash, who better to talk to than a trash collector?

Huang Ayi ("Auntie Huang") is the janitor assigned to the 8th floor on campus where I teach. I see her all the time. I noticed that she took her breaks inside a small storage closet. She didn't have a comfortable place to sit so I ordered her a chair online. However, I saw that she didn't use it much. Then I noticed that in China, older people around Huang Ayi's age like to sit on small low stools. I realized that the chair that I had bought for her was not the best because it's not the way she rests. Instead, I decided to design a small stool for her. I used recycled plastic to mold and construct it. Huang Ayi was pretty happy with the stool and actually used it. I was just trying to find a solution for her to rest and to improve her day at work

I first got started connecting with local people around our university when Jing Chai, a professor in the Chinese Language Program, asked if I wanted to do a



Professor Godoy and CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian with the course guest speaker, an experienced trash collector.

workshop for retired ladies from the nearby neighborhood. I thought that it was a good opportunity for collaboration. In the workshop, I taught the ladies how to use trash to create a product. Students helped me to facilitate the workshop because I couldn't speak Chinese. For the students, it was a learning experience not only about converting trash into a product, but also in practicing their language skills. We were making something, learning by doing, and collaborating to learn different things at the same time.

Teaching students to solve "real" problems

As a student, I studied architecture. We had to develop projects in our courses but usually didn't have real experiences with the people for whom we wanted to design. We could imagine any design without thinking about a budget. By contrast, in the *Re-made in China* course, my students need to find materials to recycle and use for their projects. They cannot simply buy new material. They need to work within the kinds of constraints that will come when working in a job in the future.

I taught *Re-made in China* once before turning it into a service-learning course. In the original version of the course, students were asked to identify a problem and come up with a solution using recycled materials. However, the problems that they picked started to look unreal to me because they were only imagining who would use the product and what kinds of problems that person had. I felt that some of the problems that they were trying to solve were not that important because they were too focused on their own perceptions or maybe some of the problems weren't real problems.

I wanted to put students in a situation where they needed to find real problems and get feedback from real users. I want students to connect with people whom they come across around Shanghai: their neighbors and other people who are not their age. It's these situations that are more real and like what they will encounter when working in a job.

Turning "Re-made in China" into a service-learning course

I got the idea of turning *Re-made in China* into an academic service-learning course because of an invitation from Diane Geng, Director of the CEL Office. I was interested because unlike simply doing a one-time workshop with community members, all of the students would be able to work with the community and they would make a project for community members.

I think the benefits of working with the community are more than simply students developing better products technically. Adding service learning to the class aligns well with the course objectives of learning about sustainability and social responsibility, which go beyond technical knowledge. I try to help students to develop an understanding of the consequences of using new technology, what we can do about it, and solutions or ideas that can help society to solve problems.

In my way of teaching, I let the students pursue their own interests. I don't like to define what they are going to make because I want them to enjoy the process of learning. If they are making something that they are interested in, they will put more effort into it and they will learn.

It's pretty hard for students to create a complex product in the short period of our 14-week semester, especially since they are taking a lot of other courses and have to coordinate with different people's schedules. It's not like they can dedicate themselves full-time to developing the project. I've been trying to address this by asking students to work in groups and develop one project throughout the whole semester. Before, my syllabus had multiple kinds of assignments but now I have decreased them.



"I wanted to put students in a situation where they needed to find real problems and get feedback from real users."

I want students to connect with people whom they come across around Shanghai: their neighbors and other people who are not their age. It's these situations that are more real and like what they will encounter when working in a job."



"Adding service-learning to the class aligns well with the course objectives of learning about sustainability and social responsibility, which go beyond technical knowledge."

Student teamwork

I let students choose their own teams because I don't want to force them to work with someone whom they don't want to work with. They decide according to who they are friends with, or which community partner they prefer to work with. In the first class, we introduce who the community partners are, write their names on the board, and then students sign up for the ones whom they are interested in serving.

One problem I encountered was that some students were more focused on ideas and not learning by doing. For example, some students spent most of their time communicating with their community partners. However, according to the learning objectives of the course, it's important that they also experiment with recycling material and making their own project prototypes. If they don't do this, it's hard to grade them because not all of the students undergo the same learning experience.

I want each student to gain the knowledge of how to create using recycled materials. If they work in a group from the start, one student might be helping more with the concept, another student with making, and another assisting. However, they're only producing one prototype. But if the students each develop their own individual prototype, the group will have three options to choose from and they all individually get hands-on experience in making. In the future, I will probably require all the students to make their own prototypes before the team decides on the final version to make together.

Connecting with community partners

Chunhao Qian, CEL Coordinator, creates most of the connections with community partners because I cannot speak Chinese. I go with him to meet them. He translates what I want to say, but usually he and the community partners are talking, and then he needs to translate what is going on for me. We try to understand more about the community partners, what they do in their communities, and how the community works. We collect information and figure out what the students could possibly do for these community partners.

When we began to develop a partnership with people in the neighborhood near campus, we at first tried to reach out to the neighborhood elementary school. But it was hard to get connected with them and it was difficult for us to schedule events with them. It was easier to work with retired people in the community. This worked well as I noticed that students preferred to serve individuals, not organizations.

We created opportunities where students could meet with the community partners and get to know them more. For example, we held workshops with the local residents where the students would teach them how to do something or where they would teach us one of their crafting skills. We also invited the local residents to come on to campus for the opening of our class art exhibit. At these events, the students and community partners could learn from each other and get to know each other in a more natural, casual setting.

Chunhao helped me to develop guidelines for students to use when they go to interview community partners. Students should prepare some questions and gather information that is important for them to know before they propose their service project. It's important to take good advantage of these meetings with community partners because they're not easy to schedule. Both sides are making efforts, and students need to be prepared to use the time well.

Impact of service-learning

The students' projects might look simple sometimes, but their takeaways are better than before I added service-learning to the course. Even if the end products are not complex or don't use many electronics, the experience that students have is much

deeper because they serve the community and they learn a lot of things that they are not able to learn otherwise. Their project is useful for someone whom they have developed a relationship with. It's valuable when students see that they can work for someone and make someone happy. The learning experience is more valuable.

I noticed that the cafeteria workers still use the privacy screen that one group of students in this course made for them. I see the cafeteria workers behind the screen resting. It was meaningful for them to be noticed in this school, and I think that's true also for the cleaning staff. I've noticed more connections between staff and students.



"I noticed that the cafeteria workers still use the screen that students in this course made for them. It was meaningful for them to be noticed in this school. I've noticed more connections between staff and students."



Professor Godoy and students in the *Re-made in China* course invited community members to a workshop.



Mr. Yan, who collects recyclable trash for a living, was invited to share his knowledge with students.



CEL Staff Voice



Chunhao Qian
CEL Coordinator

We had planned to work with the Fuzhu Neighborhood of the Weifang Sub-District for *Re-made in China*, but it didn't happen until the second year due to interruptions from COVID-19. I was originally introduced to Mr. Xue, the head official of the neighborhood, by Jing Chai and Jinghong Bi, two faculty from the Chinese Language Program who had been taking their students to interact with residents there to practice Chinese.

Mr. Xue was very open-minded and helped to introduce me to more residents of the neighborhood. We developed a good relationship. He had always wanted to work with our university, and I always expressed gratitude for his support. When a child with a disability in his neighborhood needed tutoring, I helped recruit NYU Shanghai student volunteers who worked with the child in shifts for the whole summer.

During the summer, I arranged meetings between Professor Godoy and the neighborhood committee officials. Through these officials, we were introduced to three groups of residents who were active in the community. I talked with the three groups, and they agreed to become community partners for the course. However, I sometimes wonder to what extent the residents viewed the partnerships as something assigned to them by the neighborhood committee. Most of the residents were retired elderly people. They have a lot of knowledge and wisdom to offer, but communication between them and the students could be difficult due to age, culture gaps, and language barriers.

To help bring students and their community partners together, I invited the community partners to workshops taught by our students on how to reuse recycled material. I checked in with the students on how the partnerships were going by informally chatting with them during class breaks and hosting a formal midterm reflection session during class. To show respect to the community partners, we held the students' project proposals presentation at the community center in their neighborhood. At the end of the course, I conducted a feedback survey about the partnership and thanked the neighborhood officials for their help with coordinating the partnership.

My advice for working with neighborhood residents as community partners is to be thorough in communicating the reasons for the partnership and to clearly define each party's goals. In one of the groups, students and their community partners ran into problems due to insufficient communication and mutual understanding. When such problems occur, the CEL coordinator can facilitate a dialogue between the two parties. On an equal basis, everyone can talk about their assumptions and have an open dialogue. This is difficult work but on the other hand, it makes my role exciting and can bring surprising outcomes.



Students' reflections at the midterm meeting facilitated by CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian.

Community Partner Voice



Zheng Xue
Former Head of the Fuzhu Neighborhood Committee

Zheng Xue was the head of the Fuzhu Neighborhood Committee who introduced residents who could be community partners for the Re-made in China course.

My motivation for cooperating with people from NYU Shanghai has to do with the idea of community fusion—of co-building and sharing the community among different members. People should not just mind their own business. Together we are a community. The community consists of not just the residents. We try to involve the schools and the companies situated around our community in order to expand the concept of community. Young people today have lots of ideas. When they become integrated in a community, they will add more energy to it. The community members in our neighborhood are quite elderly. I hope that young people can bring more ideas and a sense of togetherness to the neighborhood.

The collaborations with NYU Shanghai proved my belief that infusing different parts of the community together is viable. After working with NYU Shanghai on so many events and in different ways, I found that our paths can indeed intersect. Exchanges can happen.

The partnership also broadened the horizons of our community members. I always tell the elderly ladies in the handicraft hobby group, "Don't just have fun behind closed doors. You have good stuff to share with the world outside." I think they really enjoyed their exchanges with Professor Godoy. They had a lot of fun when they attended the workshop where Professor Godoy taught them how to make coin purses out of recycled materials. They brought their art as gifts for Professor Godoy. That was something very delightful for them.

However, it is difficult for the elderly to constantly meet new people and build new relationships. It is inefficient to start anew with a group of new students. It takes months to get familiar with the ins and outs of these relationships. Originally, I wanted even more residents from the neighborhood to participate, but it is hard for me to mobilize the younger and middle-aged residents in the community to get involved. This kind of collaboration depends on the residents' own motivation and each neighborhood's unique situation. Personally, I am supportive of such collaborations, but not everyone will be. I also like to try new things and continue growing. I don't think a close-minded person would be suitable for this kind of work.

The design of each partnership does not follow a fixed model. Each is different. They also face many uncertainties. For example, we community officials might be assigned a task in another neighborhood at short notice and be forced to change plans. Or when residents come to me with an emergency, I have to drop everything else and handle the emergency. So from the community side, our strength is still very tiny. Engaging in this kind of collaboration depends on the individual motivation of each community official.

"My motivation for cooperating has to do with the idea of community fusion—of co-building and sharing the community among different members."



Kat Valachova
Class of 2021

Kat Valachova and two teammates designed several projects for an handicrafts hobby group made up of elderly ladies from the neighborhood. The students used bioplastics and recycled materials to make products that protected and showed off the ladies' handicrafts.

Motivation

Since I was in high school, I have been extremely interested in sustainability as well as working with communities. I come from the Czech countryside. When I was about 3 years old, my parents built a house with a garden because it has always been my mom's dream to have chickens. I grew up with animals and because my dad is very knowledgeable about nature, he taught me the names of all the plants. He also taught me the importance of having a relationship with nature so I don't just see it as something to be taken for granted or to exploit. If we had leftover food, it would go to the animals or get composted. So I was always brought up to value things. Even if something gets broken, it's still usable material.

I had a friend who was in the first cohort of the *Re-made in China* course. Because I spent a lot of time on the eighth floor where IMA courses are held, I saw what they were doing in the class. When there was space in the class the second time it was taught, I jumped at the opportunity to enroll. I also know Professor Godoy is an amazing person in terms of sustainability. She knows so much. I thought, why don't I challenge myself?

Learning from guest speakers

Before this class, I thought I knew quite a lot about sustainability. But we had these guest speakers come in and talk to us and we started to research different materials, conducting experiments, and trying to collect plastic in our everyday life. I realized how different reality was from what I thought I knew. I collected all the trash I made in a week and thought, "There is no way this is me!" It was a good reality check and I highly recommend it to everyone.

Professor Godoy brought in a lot of guest speakers from different areas, like an elderly man who collects trash and is very hard working. He told us his life story. We got a lot of ideas about how trash recycling works, what gets recycled, and what does not. A presentation by guest speaker Mr. Gabriele Tempesta was extremely helpful too. I took notes. It was about people-oriented design: putting yourself in the shoes of the other person and trying to look at the situation from the bigger picture. If you ever try to help someone, always try to speak with them, look at the situation, and observe them, because many times people don't even notice that they have so

"Before this class, I thought I knew quite a lot about sustainability. But we had these guest speakers come in and talk to us and we started to research different materials, conducting experiments, and trying to collect plastic in our everyday life. I realized how different reality was from what I thought I knew."



many resources around them. You don't necessarily have to get materials from the outside. You just need to look around the area and see how people live. As long as you're thinking creatively, many times you're able to find solutions on the spot. I think that is my biggest take away from this, which I plan to apply elsewhere as well.

Challenges

At the first meeting, the ladies in the handicrafts group who were our community partners told us that they hoped to put their art in display boxes, but the boxes were too expensive for them to buy. We immediately thought of looking for sustainable materials that could be made into a display box which they could later replicate on their own. However, after we had already started making prototypes, they changed their mind about what they needed. Instead, they said, "We are going to have a charity art sale. Make us some gift bags that can be used at the sale."

My teammates and I felt a little bit confused and lost. We did not want to argue with them and we wanted to make them happy. However, we had also expended a lot of time and effort already. I realized that we should have defined with the ladies at the very beginning what the goal and timeline was more clearly so that we all knew what to expect.

To make the gift bags requested, my teammates and I experimented with recycled bioplastics material and very quickly scheduled another appointment with the ladies to show them our progress. In the end, they were very appreciative and happy to see the results. They immediately pulled out their handicrafts and put them in the gift bags to check what they looked like. I could see that they appreciated our work the

"Sometimes people have ideas about what they need, but you just need to step back and look at the actual issue."



Kat (left) and classmates with their community partners.



Residents from the Fuzhu neighborhood near NYU Shanghai came to campus for a workshop led by students. The workshop taught them to make coin purses out of recycled plastics.

same way that they appreciate their own work, which I think is very important. It felt like we were accepted on a similar level, on similar grounds, which was good.

Improvements

If we spent more time with the ladies and accompanied them as they went about their daily life, we might have realized earlier what they truly wanted and needed. The guest speaker Mr. Tempesta told us an analogy: Imagine somebody tells you that they need a drill because they need to make a hole. But they don't really need a

drill. They just need the hole. You can find another way to make the hole. Similarly, sometimes people have ideas about what they need, but maybe you just need to step back and look at the actual issue.

Support from instructor and peers

Professor Godoy was extremely helpful. She's always around the work space and basically, anytime I messaged her, she responded right away. She was always ready to give recommendations and help us out. The same goes for my classmates. We work in an open area and get to talking easily. This is how you end up generating ideas you would never have thought of on your own. CEL Coordinator Chunhao Qian also came to class and helped us reflect on our process. We got different perspectives on our work, which was, I believe, very useful.



Impact of the course

This course inspired my capstone senior thesis. I was a RA (Resident Assistant) in the dorms. I've seen firsthand how much trash people leave when they move out of the dorms. It is very painful to see. Connected to this course, I felt the pressing need to address this issue. I designed a Virtual Reality experience to motivate people to change their consumption habits, combined with an app follow-up that gives them concrete suggestions on how to do so.



Bioplastic packaging made from gelatin and design template made by Kat's teammates.



Products designed by Kat - carabiner and shadow frames made from recycled materials.

Student Voice



Xiaoyan Kong

Xiaoyan Kong and her classmates worked with cafeteria staff as their community partners. They made a screen that the staff could use to give themselves some privacy during their afternoon breaktimes. The screen was made out of various recycled materials and placed in the cafeteria.

I took this course because it fulfills my major requirements. I'm also very interested in sustainability and related topics in China. In addition, I love to make things by hand so I was attracted to the word "Re-made" in the title.

"We often try to create prototypes with technology that can make life more convenient. But we don't talk about people that much."

Meeting the Community Partners

Our first meeting with the cafeteria staff was quite formal. We were all sitting around a table. We, the students, had our computers open. It was a necessary starting point to show the staff that we were legitimate. However, people generally won't say what they really think under those circumstances.

I believe that more truth and genuine information is likely to be shared outside of the official meeting room, in one-on-one settings or in familiar daily environments when the staff are carrying out their jobs. In those situations, they are more likely to speak more sincerely. One of the staff who worked as a cashier liked to talk to me. I would chat with her every time that I went to pay for my food. When I spoke to her, I felt like I was talking to a sister. It seemed that she felt the same way about me. I came to know that she has two children back in her hometown whom she hadn't seen in over a year because of the pandemic. She didn't want her kids to come to Shanghai because she lived in cramped quarters and wouldn't have much time to be with them. She couldn't bring them to work with her and she had to leave for work very early each morning and come home late. She felt tired, body and soul.

Normally, I would just chat with her about these common family issues. That was very easy for me. I like to do that with people. It makes me feel more connected to them. Gradually, they begin to accept you as one of their own. They start to feel more open and relaxed to bring up things that they wouldn't otherwise. That's my approach. I also have an advantage because of how I grew up. I was raised in a family that migrated from the countryside to Shanghai and lived through similar circumstances as them.



Xiaoyan's team asking for feedback on the prototype design from cafeteria manager Yan He and colleague.

Deciding on A Project

My classmates and I discovered several problems in the cafeteria that we could potentially tackle. For example, we could design a technology to prevent students from wasting so many napkins every day. The cafeteria staff would indirectly



benefit from this because they wouldn't have to replenish the napkins so frequently. In the end, though, we decided that we wanted to help the staff more directly. Sustainability is not just about addressing waste, but also about how people are treated.

During our second meeting, we asked the cafeteria staff what they did during their breaks. They said that they usually sat at the cafeteria tables or benches and played on their phones. We asked, "Do you have a rest space or a break room?" They said no. Eventually we felt that this issue was the most closely related to the staff's lives and decided to work on making a resting area with some privacy for them.

When I was observing in the cafeteria, I saw that during breaks, the male staff would indeed lie on the benches and nap, play on their phone, or do whatever they wanted to do. But the female staff were less likely to do that. I never saw any of the women lie on the benches and take a nap, probably because it was so exposed with no privacy. I personally wanted to do something for the women to have a more private, safe area to lie down or play on their phone, just like the guys did. This made me more determined to tackle this issue and carry out this project.

Getting feedback on the prototype

We made a prototype of a privacy screen that the staff workers could use to block off some space to rest. When we showed it them, their faces showed surprise. It was like they were thinking, "Wow, you guys actually made something. You weren't just saying it!" Their feedback was very important for us. They were really kind and supportive and tried the prototype out for a week. We were motivated by the fact that they were actually using the prototype and finding it helpful. To me, this was not just a task or project to finish. If the motivation comes from helping real people, then I have unlimited motivation to work on the project.

The cafeteria staff could feel that we were acting in a sincere way. It wasn't just one or two actions, or one interview, that built the trust between us. It was our interactions throughout the semester-long project. We interacted with the staff every week or every two weeks, and we built trust throughout the whole process, not just through one or two meetings.

Teamwork

My teammates and I could have chosen to do individual projects, which I usually prefer. However, for this project there was a lot of hands-on construction involved and it was much easier to finish on time with the help of teammates. The three of us were all very involved. In fact, I recall that all of the groups in our class were working hard in the IMA lab on their service projects. That's something that's magical or unique about IMA courses. You can see people working in the lab and it motivates you to be there too. IMA has that kind of atmosphere.

Value of Guest Speakers

The guest speakers that Professor Godoy invited to the class had a very big impact on me. One was a trash collector from Professor Godoy's neighborhood. He told us about his daily work and shared his knowledge about where trash goes in Shanghai. This impressed me because although Professor Godoy can't speak Chinese, she still spent a lot of effort inviting a person who can only speak Chinese with a strong accent to our class. That really moved me. It might be easier for a native Chinese professor to do something like this, but often we locals feel like people like trash collectors are too commonplace and don't pay attention or notice them.

We also had a guest speaker who recycles jeans. She is from a foreign country but is trying to solve China's issue of over-production of jeans. She brought a different

perspective. Another foreign guest speaker talked about food sustainability in China. That also opened a different perspective to me on our daily food. Although we couldn't go on field trips due to COVID-19 policies, the speakers brought the outside world in. I really appreciated the effort that Professor Godoy put into inviting the speakers and bringing them into our world.

Personal impact

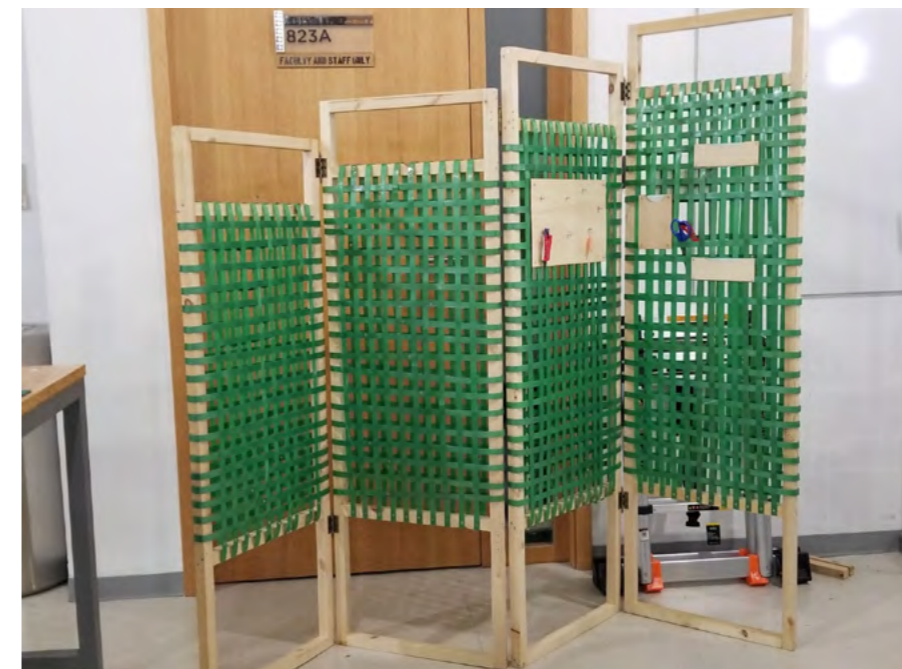
I want to have a career working on sustainability and this course has pushed me further on this path. I also came to feel more connected to the people who work on our campus, not just students and faculty, but also those staff workers whom we don't normally notice.

I find similarities between the work that I did in this course and the fieldwork that I did in rural Sichuan Province after graduation. It's all about noticing people and not necessarily trying to help them, but rather doing whatever we can to provide them with more opportunity. Some of the thinking that I did in this course influenced the research that I did afterwards. In my other courses, we didn't have much opportunity to interview real people, to ask about the problems that they encounter, and to try to solve real world problems. This course provided me with a unique opportunity to do this kind of research.

Impact of the project

Throughout the whole process, I worried whether we made something that could truly be helpful to the cafeteria staff, or if we just convinced ourselves that it should be helpful to them. Even though I thought of myself as being pretty close to the staff, it still worried me every time they would praise us, saying, "We like what you made. People are using it and we enjoy it."

With my own eyes, I only saw people using the privacy screen we made a few times. Most of the time it was a man, not a woman, using it. This bothers me. We wanted to do something with good intentions but sometimes it can go a different way. But when I think about this from another perspective, at least we acted and developed a greater consciousness. Maybe we can't make something that can truly affect the cafeteria workers' lives, but we did grow in our awareness and consciousness that we should pay attention to them. When other students see fellow students, courses, and professors doing something for people whom we normally neglect or don't notice, then maybe it will also change their way of treating them.



"It's all about noticing people and not necessarily trying to help them, but using whatever we can to provide them with more opportunity."



The group made a divider to create more privacy for cafeteria workers when they go on break. The plastic strips were recycled from a construction site.

"If the motivation comes from helping real people, then I have unlimited motivation to work on the project."





Kaiwen Chen

A trolley made from over 700 recycled plastic bottle caps and wood that could bear the weight of a heavy bucket and tools was how Kaiwen Chen and his classmates responded to the challenges of the eighth floor's janitor, Huang Ayi ("Auntie Huang"). Kaiwen, a student from NYU New York studying in Shanghai during his sophomore year, reflected on his service-learning experience.

I was born in Jiangsu. I am a student at NYU Tandon in New York but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I traveled back to China and decided to study at NYU Shanghai for the year. I really wanted to learn about design related to China, so I was attracted to the *Re-made in China* title of this course.



The students with Huang Ayi holding the finished product. The improved design featured a round shape and ropes for pulling as well as hanging for easier storage in the small janitor's closet.

Professor Godoy said that we were going to do community service in the course. I thought that sounded very fun. I had done a previous community service project for a course back in New York City, but it wasn't a huge project like this one. The one in New York was a two-week project, but in Shanghai we had the whole semester, so the project was more thoroughly completed. In New York, we picked a community and tried to get to know their needs through library or online research. In this *Re-made in China* course, we had multiple conversations and investigations with our community partner before we made the design. We went through a complete process of service. In my New York course, we were making a general design for a general community-at-large but at NYU Shanghai, we focused on individual people.

One of the core concepts of *Re-made in China* is community service. The other core concept is learning how to use recycled material to make things. Professor Godoy is an expert at this. She taught us a lot about plastic, how plastic pollutes the environment, and how we can use recycled plastic to form new kinds of material to make designs. This is really embedded in my mind.

Chunhao Qian, the CEL Coordinator, told us more about the community service part of the course. He turned our minds from designing for ourselves or for our GPAs to designing for others. For example, how do we think from others' point of view? How do we communicate with them and ask for their requirements and needs?

At first, the most challenging part was that Huang Ayi, our community partner, was too shy to talk with us. She was afraid that what she said would eventually get back to her manager so she could not tell us the whole truth. She also thought that we had higher status than her and she shouldn't talk to us because we are college students, and she is just a janitor. But we kept telling her that we are all the same and that everyone in the NYU Shanghai Academic Building is equal, no matter who you are.

After a reflection meeting about these challenges facilitated by Chunhao, Chunhao told our group that he could attend the next meeting between us and Huang Ayi. During that second meeting, Chunhao displayed a very good ability to communicate with Huang Ayi. He didn't ask questions at first. He used a technique of first talking about something relaxing and happy with Huang Ayi so that she accepted the conversation. Then when she became talkative, Chunhao helped us to start asking more project-related questions. In later meetings with Huang Ayi without Chunhao there, we adopted this mode of communicating. We would first go to Huang Ayi's small storage closet and chat with her about our progress, what we were doing, and about her personal life. When she became more open to us, we asked her questions about our design.

From our observations, we saw that Huang Ayi often carried around a water bucket by hand when she mopped the floor. The water bucket was really heavy. She admitted it, but she didn't really want to admit it, you know? We asked her what might help. She said that anything would be fine. After identifying this need for a better way to transport the water bucket, we started the process of making prototypes.

We didn't want to surprise Huang Ayi with a finished, final product so after making each prototype, we asked if it was good for her. Of course, she always said yes, but in the final stages, she did make one suggestion. We had created a trolley for carrying the water bucket and needed to add a handle so that she could pull it around with her. The first design had a wooden stick as the handle. Then we asked her, "What kind of handle do you want?" She said that she wanted something that would allow her to hang the trolley up on the wall of her storage closet so that it would take up less space. So we came up with the idea of using a rope as the handle instead of a stick because the rope can pull the trolley just as well. When we told her we had used the rope, she laughed very happily and said that's what she wanted.

I want to give special thanks to Andy Garcia, manager of the IMA Fabrication Lab. My groupmate Emily and I bothered him every day in the lab asking him to teach us how to use the machines. Some older students also helped us with some of the machines when Andy wasn't there. Everybody helped each other in IMA and that's really cool.

Professor Godoy is a real expert in making recycled plastic parts. When we were making the final decoration piece for the top of the trolley, we had never made such a big component before. We asked Professor Godoy for help and she showed us how to manufacture it on the machines. We produced a really beautiful piece.

Takeaways from the course

I think that the best takeaway from this course is that I improved my ability to think for others and design for others. I'm not saying that I'm a selfish person, but I usually think of myself a lot more than I think of others. This experience made me think about others before I say anything or do anything related to another person. It just shaped me into a better person.

Before, I mostly made designs for myself and seldom designed for others. In the future, if I work at a design company or have my own studio, I will need to design for clients. This class opened my mind to designing for others. I now know that I need to have a conversation with my client, ask what they need, try to think from their point of view, put myself in their shoes, and design for them.

Another important thing is that I know how to talk with people like Huang Ayi, people such as essential workers: taxi drivers, bus drivers. Before this experience, I respected them, but I wouldn't talk with them much. I would think, "Why should I talk with those guys?" But now I regularly chat with the driver if I take a taxi. Sometimes I chat with the workers in my neighborhood. It just made me a more friendly person.



Kaiwen and his teammate talking to Huang Ayi to learn about her needs for the project design.

"I think that the best takeaway from this course is that I improved my ability to think for others and design for others."



Huang Ayi thought that she had a different, lower social status than us college students. Although it shouldn't be that way, it's a kind of social norm. Working with different groups of people is really challenging but educational. Previously, I was just working with my friends or other college students—people who are similar to me. But this time I was working with someone who was completely different from me—her job, her life, her social status, everything was completely different—and we still had a nice cooperation. It was really educational.

Out of this relationship, I know how difficult it is for people like Huang Ayi to live in Shanghai. She wakes up at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning because she has to commute a long way to the university campus. She goes home very late. She is still using the oldest generation Android phone. She barely opens WeChat. She and her family live in a very small space and their life is not very abundant. When she comes to school at 7:00am, she works the whole day long for 10 hours or 12 hours. We would never have known this if we didn't make friends with her. That was a trigger that made me just want to make a very good design for her, to help her.

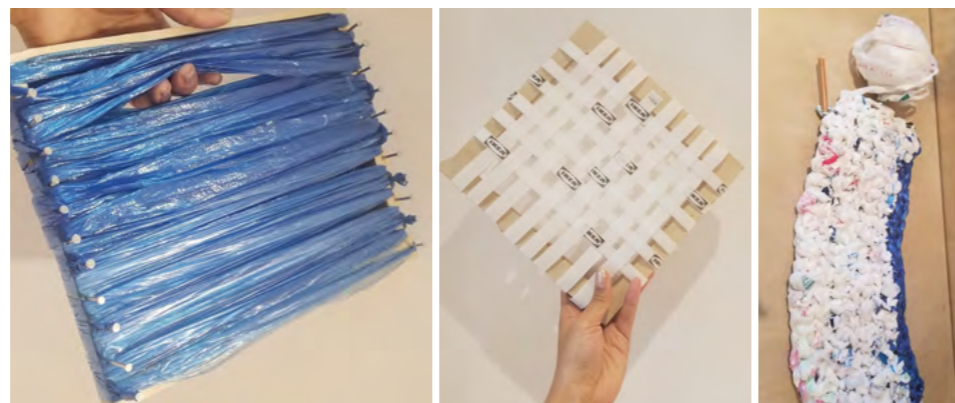
In the professional area of design, I also learned a lot of design techniques. We cut a lot of wood, and I now know how to use the computer-manuevered machines and cutters.

After the project, I stayed in Shanghai for two more semesters. My teammate Emily and I became friends with Huang Ayi. Every time when I went to the 8th floor, we would have a small chat with her. I was super happy to see in the next semester that she was still using the bucket trolley that we made.

Everybody in the course did different projects for different staff workers at NYU Shanghai. It's always fun to learn about the needs of different people. I was very inspired by everybody's work and effort and how they devoted their time—like we did—to their community partner. I think that's the inspiring part. For us designers, design can be done anytime, anywhere, with anything, but the experience is more precious and inspiring.



Students present a member of the cleaning staff with colorful picture frames they made for her using recycled plastics.



Examples of students' experimentation with different recycled materials in the process of constructing the privacy screen for the cafeteria workers.



Trash exhibition by students in the *Re-made in China* course.



Neighbors from the community were attended the trash exhibition and learn about the themes of the course.



A representation of a typical student's usage of plastic bags each week.

ART-SHU 250
Visual Culture and
Social Art Practice:
Collaborations and
Community Interactions

Faculty Voice

CEL Staff Voice

Community Partner Voice

Student Voice

Course Overview

Who is art for? What does it represent, and why?

How can we, as visual culture participants and producers, ensure that we are relevant, engaged, engaging, and inclusive?

How does locality and culture play a part in how we think about and present what we are making?

The cross-disciplinary course *Visual Culture and Social Art Practice: Collaborations and Community Interactions* addresses these questions and more through socially-based art projects that allow students to meet and engage directly with diverse communities in Shanghai. In one project, students visited the Power Station of Art, a Shanghai museum dedicated to contemporary art, and led local children in producing work inspired by the exhibition they had seen.

“I’m drawn to this subject because of my own questions regarding the role art plays in contemporary society,” says Professor Monika Lin, whose chosen texts for the course include Hal Foster’s “The Artist as Ethnographer?”, Grant Kester’s “Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage,” Zhao Chuan’s “A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China: Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics,” and Amy Pleasant’s “Artists as Activists: Pursuing Social Justice.”

“Students seem to particularly enjoy discovering how art is a lens through which to investigate the world rather than a product,” she says, “and that they themselves have the ability to interact creatively with others.”



The course has two main purposes. First, students gain an understanding of Social Art Practice in China. Second, students engage directly with the Shanghai public through outreach and collaborative projects. Through the lens of social and relational art practices, they interact artistically and directly with local communities as well as consider themselves in relation to those communities. In the past, Professor Lin and her students have delivered artistic workshops at art museums, public schools, and a community center for elderly people living with dementia.

In the visual arts, conscious engagement with communities is both a way to open up new considerations and approaches to visual culture language as well as to make spaces for autonomy and agency. In addition, interpersonal and collaborative techniques can inform students’ other disciplinary pursuits and life beyond this particular class.

Below are in-depth perspectives on the course implementation process:



Faculty Voice:

Monika Lin, Assistant Arts Professor of Visual Arts



CEL Staff Voice:

Chunhao Qian, Community Engaged Learning Coordinator



Community Partner Voice:

Jerry Ma, Staff member of Shanghai Jinmei Elderly Care Center



Student Voice:

Chelsea McLean, Class of 2022



Visiting Power Station of Art, a museum dedicated to contemporary art in mainland China.



Volunteer guides local children in producing work inspired by the exhibition they had seen at the museum.

Adapted from:

Lin, M. (2022) ART-SHU 250 Visual Culture and Social Art Practice: Collaborations and Community Interactions [Syllabus]. Shanghai: NYU Shanghai.

Reynolds, E. and Lord, K. (2018, July 6). *Culture and Social Art Practice: Collaborations and Community Interactions*. NYU News. <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2018/july/cool-course-alert--visual-culture-and-social-art-practice--colla.html>



Monika Lin
Assistant Arts Professor
of Visual Arts

I started my foray into community engaged learning when I was an undergraduate student at the College of Creative Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara. The college was divided into various concentrations that ranged from visual arts to mathematics. It wasn't just about the creative arts as we might imagine them, but also included the sciences, literature, and other subjects. Most instructors allowed you to present something related to their topic as a final. For instance, in math, I composed a piece on the violin and submitted that as my math exam in conjunction with an explanation of the mathematics behind it. This led me to think in more expansive ways about what art was, and how it could be shaped.

This, coupled with some personal experiences of mine, led me to organize an event called "Performance Art for the Homeless". It was an evening of performances done by other students. The money from the ticket sales was donated to an organization that concentrated on helping one homeless family at a time. I did get some criticism that the donation could have gone to, for example, a soup kitchen. Soup kitchens are great, and they should be funded, but it felt different to think of the possible impact of helping a family. This was my starting point in engaging in these kinds of individual relationships in a humanized, personalized way, rather than being seen as a benefactor.

From that point on, I always had a connection in some way with the community and with grassroots fundraising or ways of thinking about a practice that included community. But it wasn't necessarily what I considered my artistic practice. This was back in the 1980s, pre-"social art practice" lingo. Working with the community was definitely something that was placed into a different realm from art.

After graduating, I started a nonprofit organization in my mid-20s in San Francisco. I see this as the starting point to my understanding of pre-terminology social art practice and also my first foray into teaching. The organization organized mentorship from more established artists to younger artists within the greater Bay Area community. It also did educational outreach to the community and put on exhibitions.

My concentration was on women and children in crisis. There was a center for women who were having difficulty for whatever reasons coping with everyday life. I worked at the Oakland Children's hospital with children with HIV/AIDS, at various halfway houses for women and children that were being abused, and in economically-depressed public schools and their communities. One of the practices that I had established is that I would personally go into a partner institution and work with them before I would ask any other volunteers or artists to do so.

I funded this work through a system of exhibition spaces where a percentage of sales from the exhibits would go towards funding these projects. There was also an annual

"I would personally go into a partner institution and work with them before I would ask any other volunteers or artists to do so."

auction of all the artists who were part of the nonprofit, which was at its height 40 artists. We would raise funds for a charity each year.

Re-engaging with social art practice in China

This form of work was "interrupted" by my leaving San Francisco and moving to Kansas City, Missouri and then to New York to teach. I eventually moved to China. In the United States, I had a very successful gallery and museum career. Here in China, international mid-career artists like me didn't have the same kind of support network. Very few of us were able to sell work. That opened me up to doing work that had no saleable content. My work wasn't based on making something that someone could buy. This setting led me to start to do work with communities.

It harkened back to what I was doing in San Francisco but finally bridged to where the work itself was an artistic practice, not just a segment of my life that was related but not the practice itself. I started to see this as a practice. This was very interesting because I was very separate from any of the social art practice movements that might have been developing in the United States. The Chinese social art practice, which is still very small, hadn't yet started. Those impulses from back in my college days and then in the nonprofit organization somehow re-emerged here in Shanghai as I didn't have to think about work in the same ways that I did previously.

Teaching at NYU Shanghai

When I started teaching at NYU Shanghai, I came in with a very fresh outlook. Printmaking and Painting were the first two classes that I taught. Even in those classes, I saw the deep need for some kind of broadening of the scope of understanding of what printmaking was.

That very first semester, for their final project, students did a version of a printmaking project at the end-of-semester show where any passerby could come and make prints. As part of their coursework, the students were required to be present at the event and work with individuals who stopped by to help them make prints.

It was from there that I started to develop the Social Art Practice class, which then ran the following year. I'm glad to not have started it that very first semester because I had to first learn about the NYU Shanghai student body and how to work with students who were not art students but rather from a general population. I realized that, actually, my whole teaching at NYU Shanghai was socially engaged practice. It wasn't about helping students to develop their own practices in the artistic realm in terms of becoming artists—though perhaps some of them will and did. It was more about how art has an effect on our thinking process and how it can be incorporated as a knowledge base and as an attitude and a lens through which to deal with everything else we encounter. The shift into teaching that practice immediately necessitated that students themselves went out into the community.

Relationships with community partners

I have been very fortunate to have very strong relationships with a lot of the Shanghai museums in this practice. I started with the Minsheng Museum and the Rockbund Museum. When the Power Station of Art (PSA) opened, I started working with them. I would probably do six to eight workshops a year with PSA. Through this, PSA and I have developed a deep level of trust and understanding.

I also partner with schools. However, I only asked schools that I have worked with for a very, very long time and that have been open and enthusiastic. For instance, one school would call me up every 6 months, asking, "Is there another workshop coming up? When are you coming back?" That felt very different from other schools that also welcomed the workshops but didn't really reach out in this kind of



Professor Lin observes as students try facilitating an art workshop on their own for the first time.

way that I found very, very refreshing and at the same time, felt very, very equal.

Trust develops through these interactions that indicate to me that a school is the right space, that it's welcoming, it's forgiving. There's definitely collaboration going on and they are more open-minded.

What is social art practice?

Through the course, students are based in this contextual understanding of other artists working in social art practice but there is a blurred line between whether or not it's art, and whether it's a community-engaged practice by an artist but isn't necessarily artwork itself.

Even though I do ground community-engaged learning and social art practice in practices of other artists and my own practice, students often still don't quite see it as an artistic practice, and that's fine. How my teaching has evolved to embrace that a little bit more has been quite interesting for me.

I always start with the context of a relatively famous artist and then a lesser known, but actually more successful, artist in this particular discipline of art. I start with this discussion showing artists framed by discussion of what relational aesthetics are and social art practice.

Relational aesthetics are not necessarily socially engaged in collaborative ways, but are attempting to be socially aware. They tend to be within the institutional system of artist-as-hero, if you will, and not necessarily as collaboration. One of the big pieces that Rirkrit Tiravanija did was cook meals for people to come and eat in a very big-name gallery. The people who were coming to eat his food were all gallery-goers and people that were from a particular kind of class. It was about how to create an environment where there was engagement, but not necessarily something that was socially-minded beyond an already pre-self-selected group. It wasn't a collaboration. It wasn't like, why don't we all come in and talk about x , y , or z . Perhaps in some way, Marina Abramović is at the forefront of that. The artist is present where you come and you sit in front of her. That's probably the start of this relational aesthetic practice. Whereas social art practice, the intention is to have a collaborative environment where the collaboration and the participants are the art makers themselves. And that's a big difference.

So we start there in understanding that and interrogating that and looking at someone like Ai Weiwei. Is this social art practice? Is this socially aware? Is he using people? What is going on here? And then move into practices that are really hard to grasp as artistic practices. For instance, there's an artist that collaborated with the local government and some builders to rebuild a neighborhood in New Orleans that people just came back and lived in. And students were like, why is that art practice? Well, if you want to break down what art is, it's communication. He worked with the government, he worked with these individuals, he listened to their needs. They created beautiful environments together, and it's sustaining rather than making an object or something that is put on display or accessible to only a privileged few.

The problem that social art practitioners face is because it's for so many people, and because there's a flattening of the hierarchy of artmaker, people don't want to consider it art. Because if the artist isn't the art maker only, then where is the value in the artist by our capitalist infrastructure and the understanding of the art institution? And the understanding of artist-as-hero? What makes the artist special?

At the end of the course, many of the students still don't think it's art. What I have to grapple with is, does that matter, ultimately? Is it something that people will carry forward in their practice as a business major? This is a model that students can think of as they're embarking on careers outside of the arts. This class is an art class, but it is an art class that has at its core an offer to gain skills and knowledge that can be



Early on in the class, a theater group was invited in to help students practice nonverbal communication as well as teamwork.



"This class is an art class that has at its core an offer to gain skills and knowledge that can be brought into other realms."

brought into other realms. That is, for me, more important than ultimately people coming out of the course thinking whether or not what we did is art. I started to realize that that was an important thing for anyone to do, regardless of whether or not they saw it as an artistic practice and understood it to be such.

Theoretical grounding and opening the discussion

We do a lot of readings and discussions about ethical approaches to how we understand ourselves, self-criticality, and analysis about positionality. I want my students to have a clear understanding of racialization through readings by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak in terms of the "Other" and the idea of subcontinents and second Englishes, and all of these important notions to understand if you're going to be collaborating with communities. I want them to understand the difference between "doing good" and building relationships. That then allows me to shift the focus of helping students understand the positionality of the collaborator as well. Certain things are not necessarily social art practices in the way the terminology indicates but are instead socially-engaged practices or community-engaged practices that exist on many different levels. Some of the museum institutions have a very elite target group and are not necessarily committed to outreach in ways that I would prefer to see them be committed to. Perhaps there are ways that we can open that up a little bit more.

Students can have an entry point into thinking about their own positionality, their own privilege, or lack of privilege, or experiences, or where they may have retained some of the things that they've learned, and how it will continue to affect them. One time in class, we were looking at a workshop that we might do at one of the public schools in Shanghai. One of the students said: "Well, probably the students there have never had art education." And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to see if someone else picks up on this opinion." Nobody did, perhaps because they were uncomfortable doing so.

I said, "What makes you say that you think that they don't have art education?" (The student was a non-Chinese national.) The student responded that it was because the education system in China had no creativity. I said, "That's a really interesting thing to think about, because that definitely is the narrative that is put out there. My experience has been very different from that. Certainly there are schools that have more or less art education, but actually art education is a big part of traditional education in China. Almost all the students still have to learn calligraphy, and almost all the students still have to learn some of the traditional painting styles, whether they like it or not. It's not even optional."

And I said, "It might be that there's a way of expanding on what they're used to. However, we also don't really know what any particular school is used to. Where my daughter went to school, which is a Chinese public school, they had an entire two rooms dedicated to all different kinds of art, including digital media and animation. Another school that we go to doesn't have any of that, but they have traditional Chinese art education." I asked the rest of the class, "So what might be a good way to try and figure out what would be appropriate?" Another student said, "Well, maybe we can ask them." Rather than me saying, "We really should ask them," I find that opening up the discussion in that way is much better. And then, depending on how the rest of the discussion goes, if the students have already been reading about othering, the discussion is able to move into that realm. Even language like "they"—maybe we can interrogate why we use the word "they", or how we're using it or what we're actually thinking in the moment that we use it.

Requiring an application before course enrollment

I think that having the DSS application process helps students to understand that signing up for this course isn't just ticking a box. A student who has to go through



the application and read the questions and write answers is unlikely to just be checking off a requirement or getting pressure from someone else to take the course.

The DSS students are really, really good. I half joke that I only ever want to teach DSS classes again because the students are much more serious and much more dedicated. They are obviously students who feel very strongly about the course. If you have to fill out an application to join a course, that means you are serious about doing the work of the course as well. That creates its own energy. They're also extremely supportive of one another and they can handle the workload.



Scaffolding students to interact with community partners: 6 essential skills

I am very cognizant of not making assumptions about people's levels. For myself, I know that it is really helpful to have scaffolding and that's the way I viewed structuring this course. There are easily six or seven specific skill sets that are needed in order to do this kind of work.

It was really difficult for me at first to parse, "What do my students need to know in terms of communication skills?" Communication is physical, spiritual, verbal, textual. What is effective communication depends on which realm of the world is lived in and I don't even mean culturally or linguistically. What is your world about? Are you part of the business world? Are you in an artistic world? What is effective communication? Look at the way in which communication with children needs to be extremely clear and careful and at the same time open-ended enough to create a space for real engagement and learning.

1. A lot of it has to do with listening skills. I think students might still go into a workshop thinking, what do I need to tell the participants? Well, sure. But actually you need to know how to read your audience. You need to understand how to engage with people, which is not about what you're going to give them. It's actually what you're going to receive and how you're going to process it.



I started to look at all of these different things and think, if someone were to have told me what I needed to know in order to organize and facilitate a workshop, what would that look like? I began to formulate this list of practical skills. What skills did students need? And how does one learn to do those things in a short amount of time?

2. One of the first assignments in the course has to do with creating instructions for someone else to make a work of art. It can be a performance, it can be drawing, it can be a piece of music. The students write out step-by-step instructions and give it to one of their peers to follow. Then they compare the end product with what was intended. For instance, a student might write: "Make a dot on a page." That's not good enough. Where should the dot be made? What is the page? What are they holding in their hands? Every single step along the way has to be articulated. If their peer's end product is completely different from what was expected, they haven't communicated well enough. If you're saying, "Make a dot on the page from the upper left-hand side", you also have to take into consideration whom you are instructing.



If you say, "Grab this size of a paper and make a dot in the upper left-hand side", you want to be sure that you're working with someone who can hold something to make a dot, who understands what "upper left-hand side" means, or—if you're using incremental measurements—that they know how to use those measurement units. For example, one student's instructions referred to measuring with "the width of your thumb." My thumb is not the same as a 5-year-old's. If they are working with children, maybe they should say "two thumbs width." Thinking these things through and writing instructions is a big skill.

3. The next one is how to be with people and overcome your own insecurities or anxieties as you're in the same room with someone. It isn't so much just looking them in the eye, but also allowing yourself to kind of look around and then come back to the person in a natural way, even if it's forced. We practice nonverbal communication exercises to help direct through body language. I bring in a theater group early on in the semester to demonstrate nonverbal communication as well as teamwork. We use performance methodology as a metaphor for addressing power dynamics. It overlaps with looking at ways in which small activities, simple gestures, or simple games could be metaphorical or stand in for other kinds of expression.



4. There are also these really practical business communication components that I go through with the students. For example, how do they write an email to someone? How is that structured? What is a courteous and respectful length of time in between receiving an email and responding? What's too soon? Where is the line between being respectful and not holding your own ground? What is a collaboration? How does that come across if you are writing emails? How do they write a proposal? What is that process like with the discussion between them and the community partner? What is compromise and when is that appropriate? To practice, students have to send a set of emails back and forth with each other. They're paired up and I'm reviewing tone, grammar, and giving them my assessment. They're given a combination of templates. In the first email, they introduce themselves. Whoever is writing the email introduces everybody else that is on their team. Then the second template says, when you receive an email back, you respond the same day. These are options that you have of how to reply, and if you don't have an answer, then you say I don't have an answer, and I'll get back to you by a specific date.



I have always felt a little didactic about it. But at the same time there isn't that much leeway in how you write a business email. There's tone and language, but instilling good working guidelines for how you're supposed to communicate is important. This is the most defined, narrowest of all the units. I had to make a decision about whether I go into what students' options are in this regard. I realized that would not be helpful because they need to learn this and they need to apply it in the next week. I would rather put more time into the other skill development components.

5. In addition to all of this, there is the artist statement. How do you pinpoint topics and subjects and transform them into an artistic metaphor or process or shape? That development is one skill set, but there's also the necessity to actually have an art craft. Those are 2 different things. You can know how to paint something, but you might not know how to develop the topic that is then expressed through painting - it's a different thing.



Throughout the first half of the semester, students get these kinds of assignments that look like one-off assignments, but that are actually putting students into position for what they have to do on their own later, which is to both find the topic of their workshop, find the metaphor for the topic, find the appropriate expression of that metaphor, do all of the step-by-step instructions for the workshop, and make it engaging. At the very end, they're putting it all together.

Many people aren't aware of all the different factors of work that go into a single art project and workshop. They aren't aware from the artist perspective of all of this that needs to be done.

6. Another component that goes into this whole structure is documentation. How do you document what you're doing? The concern in social art practice is that people do not feel that they are being used as subjects. There's a strong need to be very careful about how you document, what you document, and what kinds of permissions you are given. We talk about the legality or lack of legality



around image production, usage of images, usage of voice. Even if subjects give permission to be photographed or videotaped, there are still ways of being sensitive and respectful in using photos and information. We talk about making sure the environment is such that everybody is comfortable in it.

Then comes what needs to be properly documented, not only as a project but as coursework. I show students websites of other projects and we discuss what they are saying through their image-making and how accompanying text either reinforces or somehow challenges that. When is video nice and when is it necessary? Because those are two different things. And if video isn't necessary, do you need to use it? What is your purpose and reasons?

For their portfolio, students have to record themselves doing the workshop. I don't need to see the participants. I need to see the students, and I usually have them set up a wide angle. They should never be off camera. I'm not that focused on what the children or adult participants in the workshop are doing. I'm really curious about how the student facilitators are interacting.

The question naturally comes up - why is the site there? Part of this documentation is going to the site. They need to research the site so that they know what the site is, what was there before, and the circumstances of where they are. Is this an institution that's been around forever or is it a new building? Who built it, how many people are there, how many workers?

They also have to do a case study of themselves as these practitioners. It's assessing their own work and it's more formal than the journal. It brings in all of the things that we read or thought about or talked about from the semester into their own kind of assessment, viewing themselves as if they were in the case study at the end of it.

The documentation is of the site and its history, of themselves, the workshop itself, and then the products or whatever came out of the workshop. They're making something, then they need to document every single piece that they made. If it's a performance of a theater piece, then they do have to document the performance, and they need to have two cameras because they also have to document themselves.

It's not that this course is a heavy, heavy workload. It's that every point is fraught. Every point has something else embedded in it. In giving instructions, what assumptions are you making about the people you're giving instructions to? Can you just say pick up the pair of scissors, or do you actually need to make sure in advance that person has a pair of scissors? And if they don't have a pair of scissors, is it because they just don't have them on them, or that they can't afford them? You can't make assumptions. Nothing is straightforward. Everything comes under scrutiny in a way, and it can be a little bit paranoia-making because one starts to continually question. At least I do. I've seen the students say, where do you stop asking questions then? And the problem is never. Oftentimes it's not so much the actual workload, but the sense of constantly self-questioning and reviewing and considering and seeing from a different angle that I think can be difficult for students.

And this is also why I think wherever I can reduce that, such as with the business writing or business communication, just to take it out is healthier for the course and for the students because we don't need to discuss how to write a letter in this context.

Groupwork

I ask the students to define the roles that they're going to be taking on. Some of the parts of the grade are graded as a whole. Both students in a group will get the same grade. Other parts will be graded separately. In the workshop assignment, if



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"It's not that this course is a heavy, heavy workload. It's that every point is fraught. Every point has something else embedded in it."



one person leads a workshop, the other person is expected to provide support and interject in ways that could create other kinds of engagement. They have to switch roles halfway through so that I can assess them individually.

But what I cannot assess individually is the quality of the workshop as the concept and as an idea itself. That gets assessed together and we do have instances in the past where one person does a lot more work than anyone else in the group or one person doesn't do any work. That is unfortunately the nature of group work. It's why I'm very careful about making sure that in addition to the facilitation—which everybody should have a part in—there are other roles that can get divided up.

If someone is doing the documentation, someone else is doing the PowerPoint slides. I can see the amount of effort that they're putting in. In one particular case, the PowerPoint was not of high enough quality to be part of the workshop. The teammates had to redo the PowerPoint in order to bring it up to a particular standard. The person who was supposed to be in charge of the PowerPoint got assessed on their first submission, not where it ended up.

This is something that I struggle with often and I still find myself sticking to it: students write the research paper as a team. It becomes a document that each person has a role in writing an aspect of. The research paper has to do with the research of the site, but it also has to do with their concept and the research that goes into their concept. People have to sign the portions that they wrote. That is always very difficult because if a student is writing the conclusion or the last part, they're waiting on everyone else to finish writing the earlier parts. Students have struggled with that. I'm still not willing to let it go because I think it's a skill that most people have to learn how to do. We're called upon to do this kind of collaborative writing. Someone has to edit something else or add to a document all the time. The students have very mixed reviews of how they feel about this assignment. But I'm not quite willing to let it go just yet.

Impact of the course on students

One of the comments that I come back to time and again was from a former student who said that she didn't understand my class until a year after she finished. At first, I felt like, what did I do wrong, what was missing? She said that there were so many components to the course and there wasn't anything tangible about the things that we were doing, that it took her some time to be able to digest it. This student went on to pursue her master's study with an eye towards interactive social art practice.

Other students have said that it helped them lean towards an interest in one thing. One student in urban planning said they felt the infrastructures and power dynamics that exist in the world around them needed more of a communal, collective discussion approach to design.

Impact on community partner

The children's excitement about having university students at their school, participating in their lives in this way, is something that children remember a great deal, particularly the elementary school-aged children, and all the way up to high school. The high school students are not that much younger than my students and they're still very much affected by the experience of it. There's something about having something different from an everyday experience in your life that has to do with a communication in which you're recognized as mattering. I think it's something that most people respond very positively to. Even though I obviously try to impart to my students that there's meaning to what it is they're doing, in some ways, it's almost not as important as the actual interaction. I think this is why my former student said she didn't get the point until that long after the course. She was like, "Well, what were we doing?" It's the doing. That's a really hard thing to kind of make concrete to people.



A student from the course facilitating an art workshop for children.



I love the fact that my community partner contacts and I have a close enough relationship built over years that they're comfortable enough asking for things or not immediately agreeing or being so overly thankful – those things that I think that people mistakenly feel is a sign of respect. I actually feel that her being able to say, “No, we can't do that” or “You need to take this out” or “You can do something different”, shows a level of trust that I understand where that's coming from.

The community partners are almost always calling or texting me each year asking, “When are you coming? What are you going to do this year?” There is an excitement, and a sort of familiarity, even if it is a new group of students or a new project. They're excited and willing to host, even though it is extra work on their part.



Impact on own personal growth

The reason I teach this course and what I learn from this course exist in a space for me that is different from other things that I do, or other courses that I teach. Even if I infuse my other courses with critical race theories, this is different because I believe that for students to do the work for this course – even the ones that are resistant at first – they have to go through a very specific self-questioning in order to be successful in this course. It's required through the writing. When the research paper is put together, there's reflection on some of the power dynamics that are involved in the student's subject.

The projects that emerge from this process and from working collaboratively with their peers as well as these community partners are always surprising and very touching. I learn every time, which is wonderful, and my methods change and my syllabus changes almost every time I teach it in a significant way because I learned with the students about the world and about myself and constantly evolve.

It's also really difficult because I have to be hyper aware. I try to be anyways, but in this course, I'm teaching how to be hyper aware and so the hyper awareness that is needed for me to teach how to be hyper aware can be really demanding on my psychic state. What's so strange about social art practice is it's also a performance. Everything's a performance, right? But this is also very much an embodied performance because it's not the painting that's the art, but it's what I'm doing that is setting up the parameters for making the art and the conversation that emerges out of a discussion.

Some of the factors that have occurred that make teaching the course a continually enriching and challenging learning experience for me also have to do with factors that have nothing to do with the course, but that have to do with my own subjectivity. That's why I think students do sometimes have a hard time managing everything because you're constantly encountered with your own subjectivity and being made aware over and over again about it.

It's my favorite course to teach and I absolutely couldn't teach it every semester.



Scenes from student-led workshops in museums in Shanghai.



CEL Staff Voice



Chunhao Qian
CEL Coordinator

I introduced Professor Monika Lin to the Jinmei Senior Services Center, a Shanghai nonprofit organization that serves people with dementia and their caretakers, because Diane Geng and I thought it could be a good partnership for her course. The CEL Office has close contacts with a nonprofit community foundation in the subdistrict neighborhood where Jinmei is located, and they introduced me to Jinmei's staff.

When Diane and I first paid visits to Jinmei's community center, not far from our university's campus, the staff were very friendly and open to possible collaborations. Thus, I organized a meeting for some NYU Shanghai faculty, including Professor Lin, to tour the Jinmei center and meet Jinmei's staff. Both sides had a good impression of each other as potential partners. Professor Lin is very thoughtful and careful about selecting potential partners and she spent additional time getting to know Jinmei before confirming that it was a suitable new partner for the course. I then accompanied Professor Lin to further meetings with Jinmei where detailed plans were laid out for the partnership.

When working with community partners, we look out for opportunities that might be of interest to their staff and constituencies. For example, Professor Lin and Professor Godoy organized a workshop for NYU Shanghai students on how to make face masks out of old clothes. I invited Jinmei staff to attend the workshop and they really enjoyed it. Another time, I organized a documentary film screening about dementia at Jinmei's Center, which was also open to their community members to attend. The post-film discussion with students, community members, and Jinmei staff was very interesting and educational. These events brought the personnel of the two institutions closer.



A workshop held at the Jinmei Senior Services Center.

Community Partner Voice



Jerry Ma
Staff, Shanghai Jinmei Senior Services Center



Jerry Ma was a staff member of the Shanghai Jinmei Elderly Care Center. Professor Lin's students designed and delivered an art workshop for seniors with dementia and their caretakers from the Jinmei community.

Jinmei wanted to work with NYU Shanghai to test out cross-cultural collaboration since we usually work with more local schools and organizations. We also wanted to popularize knowledge about dementia and promote dementia-friendly practices and concepts amongst young people.

At our first meeting, Chunhao Qian, CEL Coordinator, introduced Professor Monika Lin to our staff. We talked about possibilities for collaboration, and I showed artwork done by seniors at our dementia care center. We thought that perhaps the seniors could do art projects with faculty and students.

Professor Lin then came to lead a free woodblock printmaking workshop at our center. It was very nice and provided sensory stimulation for the seniors. It also laid the foundation for our future collaboration with Professor Lin's DSS course.

During the course, Professor Lin's students designed another art workshop for the seniors. Jinmei provided an orientation lesson about dementia to the student volunteers. We taught them how to interact with the seniors. Sometimes, young people talk too fast or the language they use to market their workshop is more geared towards youth culture rather than the target audience. I gave the students feedback on their plans and how to make adjustments for the seniors. I guided the students to be more patient.

However, in the end, due to COVID-19, the students couldn't hold the workshop in-person at the center. Everything had to be done via asynchronous communication in a WeChat group. The students made a video of the instructions for the art project and posted it in the WeChat group. The seniors and their caretakers watched the video and were able to make the art project at home. In the past, we had only done online synchronous workshops so this asynchronous format was inspiring for us.

The collaboration with this DSS course was very pleasant. It was beneficial both for our organization and for the seniors. We usually charge a fee to external organizations that want to do an event at our center. However, if the effect of the event is expected to be highly beneficial to our mission, we may calculate a rate that is just enough to cover the cost of our staff labor. We didn't have a rate set for the kind of collaboration we had with DSS, but through good communication with CEL Coordinator Chunhao and Professor Lin, we came up with a satisfactory arrangement. I appreciate that the communication with faculty, CEL staff and students has always been very direct.

Our organization has worked with high schools and companies before in delivering dementia education workshops at our center to their students or employees. However, the goal of those events was to help them learn about dementia. In comparison, NYU Shanghai's DSS course made a deeper investment. The students in the DSS course interacted more with the seniors. They hosted art workshops and were more engaged than other volunteers I've worked with before. I think the difference stems from their motives. Did they only want to explore a new topic, or did they really want to create something of value for the seniors living with dementia?

Our partnership with Professor Lin's DSS course was very concrete. The service project was not just for show but was actually intended to serve the seniors and integrate with students' academic studies. Personally, this made me feel very comfortable with the partnership. Sometimes students come up with good ideas for service but they remain at the theoretical design level and end when the course is over, never to be implemented. Having a concrete product at the end of the partnership makes it a more complete experience. In addition, through this collaboration, some NYU Shanghai students signed up to do other volunteer work with us.

In all, I appreciated interacting with NYU Shanghai students and the opportunities to engage with a reputable, interesting university. I also enjoyed visiting your campus. It was very refreshing to experience the atmosphere at NYU Shanghai. I work with many elderly people in my daily work so going into a university classroom and interacting with students was very interesting.

Jinmei's vision is to engage with different institutions around us and make them more dementia-friendly. The DSS course allowed seniors with dementia and their caretakers to engage with the broader society. In the WeChat group, they thanked the student organizers for their careful preparation. At the printmaking workshop led by Professor Lin, we saw the joyful expression on everyone's face. Although some seniors can't express themselves very well through words anymore, their body language and the look in their eyes said a lot.





Chelsea Mclean
Class of 2022

Chelsea McClean took Professor Monika Lin's course as a first-year student. The community partner she worked with was a public middle school. Chelsea and her classmates prepared and delivered an art workshop for the middle school students.

I'm majoring in business and marketing on the management track and minoring in Chinese. I'm currently a senior, and I'm from New Jersey in the United States.



When I enrolled in this course in my first year of college, I did not realize it was an art class. I just saw "Social Art Practices in China" in the course title and thought, "Oh, that will help me learn cultural differences which will be helpful in a business setting." I remember walking into the classroom and realizing with surprise, "This is an art room!" Later, I learned that first year students were not supposed to be in the class. It ended up being one of the hardest classes I took my first year of college but I was really glad I took it.



It was the first formalized art class that I'd taken. It involved creating art, interacting with the community, and also reading and interpreting art – three things I had never done on a collegiate level. But Professor Lin has been teaching for a long time and the course was very well-developed. It gave me the chance to explore the city and interact with the community beyond just NYU Shanghai. I think this set the tone for my wanting to be active throughout my college experience.

Compared to my other first year courses, this course had so many different facets. It had the forum blog posting to talk about the art and interpret it. It also had the "design your own workshop" element and workshops with Professor Lin. There was also group work collaboration with other students. It felt very, very comprehensive, especially coming out of high school where courses were very specialized in one area, like math is math, and history is history. This course felt so in-depth. I didn't think a course could be as in-depth as it was.

Professor Lin was one of the first professors to be very accommodating to me. I was scared to do forum posting, because there were a lot of seniors in the class, and this was my first time interacting with the arts. I wasn't sure if what I was saying was accurate or true. I stopped turning in the forum posts and thought I would just take whatever grade penalty resulted. Professor Lin reached out to me via email and said she noticed that I hadn't been writing in the forum. I explained that I was scared, and she said, "You can just send them directly to me if you're scared of posting." That skirted my anxiety about being publicized for my writing and I was able to continue in the class without being scared. She's the first professor that's been really accommodating and I will never forget that. It's been 4 years and I still haven't forgotten.

"It's so nice to be creative and be encouraged to be creative, especially if you're a business major. It gives you this extra burst of art and inspiration that you don't otherwise have in the mix."

It was an asset to be in a class with older students. I made friends with a senior in the class who was really in tune with art. It was cool to interact with somebody who's a real and established artist. As a business major, I originally thought that art is not a real job. In the first-year required course Global Perspectives on Society (GPS), I remember being surrounded by a lot of first-year peers who felt like that was a very useless class and didn't see the point in it. I came from a high school where my social studies and history classes didn't relate to social topics. However, having seniors share why GPS matters as opposed to figuring it out totally on my own helped me to develop a lot more perspective. It taught me to be more open.

The thing that I remember the most about this course was the workshops. My group went to a middle school and did a workshop about stress and emotions. In Chinese language class, we learned how stressful the gaokao can be. We wanted to establish ways to de-stress through art. After the class ended, students texted me, which made me feel like I made a mark on them. That is what made me feel good about taking the class.

To prepare to deliver the workshop, we first held a workshop with Professor Lin at the Power Station of Art Museum. We learned how Professor Lin conducts a workshop, and we were her assistants. We interacted with the kids. After that, we designed our own workshop and organized the logistics. The preparation of seeing Professor Lin do a workshop first really helped me because as a first-year international student it is a daunting task to go into a place you've never been before, such as a school that primarily speaks Chinese. Professor Lin approved our workshop plan and we rehearsed with her how the workshop would be led. I think this made it way easier and less stressful.

In class, we had weekly workshops just with Professor Lin and the rest of our classmates or we would have an outside guest come and lead us in a workshop. We wrote about how these workshops went. Looking back on what I wrote, I felt like I didn't understand why we were doing this at the time. It was a transition in my understanding of art, which I definitely did not understand at the time. I fully understand why this class was not supposed to be open for first-year students.

Impact of the course

There are definitely many places where you can integrate art into things that you're doing, not just in making a better project, but visually and in terms of impact. A lot of the projects that I've been doing lately have a focus on art and visual aesthetics, whereas before I really didn't see the need to personally incorporate that. But I like thinking through concepts and using art in ways to try and make things more visual now.

I've come to learn that some professors create an impact through a class that extends beyond the content of the class. The best outcome of taking this class was meeting Professor Lin early on in my college years, because she's helped me in many other things. Looking at things through art added another perspective that I didn't have before. It opened a lot more doors creatively.

If you're not into art, this is going to be a really hard class for you. But it's definitely worth it. You get to interact with the community. The course was a bit of a de-stressor. We would have an hour and a half of lecture and then do something with our hands. It's so nice to be creative and be encouraged to be creative, especially if you're a business major. It gives you this extra burst of art and inspiration that you don't otherwise have in the mix.



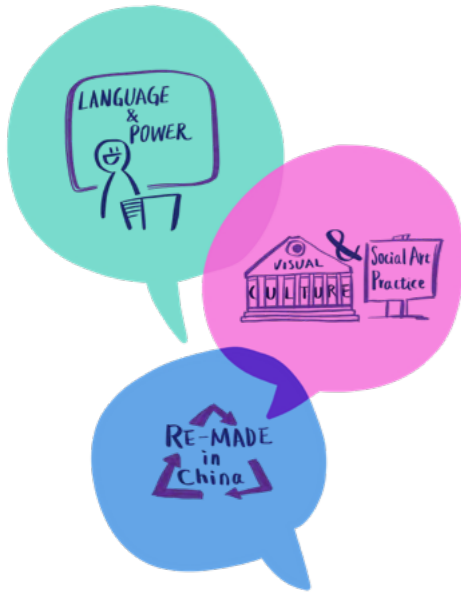
Conclusion

As a long-time nonprofit organization founder, a university administrator, and a volunteer in various social projects, I have participated in the university-community partnership nexus from multiple sides. Some partnerships turned out to be fulfilling and beneficial while others ended up more burdensome than helpful to one side or the other. The courses featured in this booklet exemplified reciprocal partnerships in which all sides felt rewarded, which is why I wanted to examine the “behind-the-scenes” mechanisms and reflections of the various parties involved in their design and implementation.

Key Course Traits

The course-community partnerships described here had several key characteristics in common that were crucial for their successful implementation:

- The instructors had direct experience carrying out the service work that they expected their students to conduct in the course. This allowed the instructors to effectively prepare and mentor their students to carry out the service and navigate challenges that would inevitably arise. When faculty are interested in teaching service-learning but have not done the service work themselves—particularly in the local context—the CEL Office can help them connect with opportunities to first engage in the service and thereby accumulate the direct experience needed to design their teaching.
- Students were motivated and committed. Since students had to apply and be selected to enroll in the DSS courses, they showed a strong personal interest in doing the community service and there was less of a risk that they would fail to fulfill their commitments to their community partners.
- The courses used reflection as a tool to advance student learning in writing assignments, class discussions, and presentations. This helped students to digest their service experiences and turn their observations and challenges into concrete lessons connected to their academic studies and personal growth.
- The community partner liaisons were open-minded and good communicators. The responsiveness and cooperative attitude of the community partner liaisons were crucial to the successful implementation of partnership agreements and the ability to collaboratively solve problems that arose.
- CEL staff helped to facilitate communication and trust-building between parties. CEL staff laid a foundation of trust with each party by seeking to understand their interests and needs and then made introductions to help all sides explore partnership possibilities. In an international university like NYU Shanghai, this often entails cross-cultural communication, language translation, and bridging working norms and expectations between academia and local community cultures among people of different backgrounds.



Course Development

The three courses spotlighted in this booklet represent three pathways through which academic service-learning courses are developed and supported at NYU Shanghai. In the first, a new course is proposed by a faculty member with an interest in teaching service-learning, as was the case with *Language & Power*. In the second, the CEL Office identifies courses with topics and teaching methods that have strong potential to engage with a community need and approaches the faculty member to explore integrating a community service component into the course. This was the case with *Re-made in China*. Finally, for courses that already incorporate community engagement but are open to establishing new partnerships, the CEL Office can make suggestions and help to facilitate introductions to potential new community partners. This was the case with *Visual Culture and Social Art Practice*.

Special Thanks

Academic service-learning courses can successfully bridge the needs within both universities and the larger community if thoughtfully designed for mutual benefit. However, this cannot happen in a vacuum. The strong mandate and supportive environment created by NYU Shanghai’s leadership was and is key to our ability to experiment and innovate.

In particular, I would like to thank Associate Provost for Academic Affairs John Robertson for his belief in the value of academic service-learning and his steadfast sponsorship of CEL initiatives. I am grateful to Provost Joanna Waley-Cohen, Dean of Arts and Science Maria Montoya, and former Dean of Students Charlene Visconti for their encouragement and support of academic service-learning course development at NYU Shanghai from the beginning. The generosity of The Moh Foundation helped make so many CEL programs possible, for which we are extremely thankful. Finally, I greatly appreciate the faculty, students, staff, and community partners for participating in the interviews and sharing in such detail about their reflections on these courses.

I strongly believe in the educational value that can come out of university-community partnerships as students are supported to think through the larger context of their community service work and its connections with their academic and personal growth. As such, I hope that readers will find the cases documented in this booklet encouraging as examples of the great potential for and value of academic service-learning in international higher education.

If you would like to get in touch to learn more or exchange experiences, please email us at shanghai.cel@nyu.edu. More information can be found on our website at: <https://shanghai.nyu.edu/undergraduate/community-engaged-learning>.

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