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INNOVATIVE TEACHING

International Exchanges Through Living Lab

Inkyoung Kim

This article introduces pedagogical experiences with the combination of the Living Lab and virtual international exchanges. The Living Lab is a social innovation mechanism, an experiential teaching model, emphasizing “learning by doing.” Through the process of co-creation, residents collaborate with experts, local governments, corporations, and activists to solve their local problems. Various participants design and implement Living Lab experiments to produce and test a prototype or a solution. I explored the Living Lab for one of my courses in spring 2023 through the virtual international collaboration and exchange with Dr. Sangbum Shin at the Mirae campus of Yonsei University, one of BSU’s partner universities in South Korea.

Living Lab in the Classroom
I embedded the Living Lab project in the course assignments of POLI 306/SUST 399 Global Environmental Controversies, a newly developed course supported by the Sustainability Program’s New Course Development Grant in spring 2022. To introduce the idea of the Living Lab project, the class discussed four project examples conducted by Yonsei students in the past few years, while focusing on the relevance to students’ life in Bridgewater. In the fourth week of the semester, students presented their individual problem narrative to identify issues, discuss the community partner’s needs, and imagine a way that the student can address their needs.

After the presentations, students were grouped based on their interests and the relevance to their topics.

International Exchanges through Living Lab
In the last week of spring 2023, each group presented their Living Lab project to the class. The instructor recorded their presentations and shared the recording with Dr. Shin so that his students at Yonsei University could watch the presentations. Dr. Shin did the same thing. After watching the presentations, students wrote a one-page feedback memo about one of the projects conducted by the partner university to discuss similarities and differences in terms of local problems and various local contexts including political, economic, social, and cultural factors. The process of international exchanges helped students understand their own community more deeply. Furthermore, their expected virtual audience helped students keep their energy for their projects to the end of the semester.

Two Living Lab Projects in Bridgewater
The first group focused on overconsumption and textile waste issues. This group aimed to start a thrift store on campus to disrupt toxic fast fashion trends and to assist at-risk students who may not be able to afford market-priced necessities and amenities. This group designed a student-run pop-up store on campus every month to sell secondhand clothing highlighting sustainability, affordability, and proximity of their business. After interviewing several stakeholders on campus, students found that the pop-up store idea would resolve a space issue on campus because securing a permanent space on campus

Dr. Inkyoung Kim virtually presented this work at the 2023 International Conference on Living Lab: Community Problem Solving and Innovation in Higher Education, held on August 22-23, 2023, at Yonsei University, Mirae campus. Image: Inkyoung Kim.
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was one of the biggest challenges for this project.

The other group focused on food waste issues. It sought to start a consulting company to make a greener Bridgewater through promoting recycling, composting, and supporting gardens. The students explored how to get disposable food waste out of the local trash and how to get people utilizing compost bins to reduce the amount of waste. This group designed a consulting organization to create a municipal system that organizes and distributes compost bins to southeastern Massachusetts through collaborating with local town governments and the Massachusetts Department of Health. It also intended to utilize the compost made from food waste for gardens or other purposes in the town.

Excitement and Lessons Learned

Students were eager to participate in the Living Lab model and contribute to solving local environmental problems through this course. Both groups participated in the annual Bear B.I.D. (Bright Ideas Developed) business plan competition, held by the College of Business. Only the first group, as one of the top five proposals, was invited to advance to the final presentation round. Even though this group did not win the competition, students were grateful to have a chance to utilize their Living Lab idea to develop a business proposal.

Both groups of students cherished their opportunities to develop their ideas on sustainability into actionable projects, as the whole process of the competition urged students to think harder and research more rigorously to persuade their judges. However, students found that they should have collaborated more with local stakeholders. Their participation in the competition led their projects into the spirit of how to win the market competition rather than how to work together with community members.

The biggest challenge for the instructor was how to guide students to build community partnership. The instructor participated in a workshop on “Community-Engaged Teaching and Scholarship” at BSU in May 2023 and learned about resources and support that BSU offers for civic engagement and will use that support system to guide students towards building community partnership with local business and local governments.