Spending Your Heartbeats Well: Dr. Dick Richardson

By Anny Chang

Service learning has gradually been introduced to various universities across the nation with Berkeley, Stanford, and many other top universities leading the way to explore the potential of service learning on enhancing education. Here at The University of Texas at Austin, service learning has just begun to impact and influence styles of teaching and learning. With the support of Provost Sheldon Ekland-Olson the staff of The Office of the Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs James Vick, UT SEES met with many wonderful professors who involve their students in service learning through their courses, such as Dr. Dick Richardson.

Dr. Richardson has taught many courses with service learning components. In his Natural Resources Management class, students closely interact with the ecological world through active service learning projects, such as mentoring elementary school students. Students applied their knowledge that they learned in class through the process of teaching and mentoring the fourth and fifth grade students. This project also provided real world experience for the elementary school students to see the natural world outside of textbooks. Visiting the park three times each year, the elementary school students had the chance to make contact with ecological world and to observe the natural changes of the ecological environment. As Dr. Richardson points out, the project provided "real world ecology" for the all of the students and also a "real world of sociology" in which the students can interact with others.

Service learning classes are very different from traditional lecture courses at UT in several ways, as seen in Dr. Richardson's courses. Participation in service learning projects is optional. Not all the students in his course participated in the service learning projects, so the size of the class was not a significant factor. Service learning projects allowed the students to follow their interests by letting the students choose research or service projects. Service learning provides the students a chance to participate in application analysis and solving problems by applying knowledge in new situations. Dr. Richardson believes that it is better to have the student experiencing and seeing things in their own perspective instead of repeating what has been told to them or what the textbook said. Through the service learning part of the course, Dr. Richardson tries to make the in class experience like "outside of class", so that students learn to make decisions independently, identify unprecedented problems, and find solutions to those problems. With the realization that things in the real world are not always predictable and expected, his students developed their problem-solving and critical thinking skills through their individual service learning projects. Service learning also allowed many of his students to broaden their view of the biological sciences outside of textbooks, which contain very selective and limited information about necessary skills essential for their future careers. "The service learning part of the course extends the understanding of information since the course cannot support all the information that they need," said Dr. Richardson. He distinguished the difference between living with science and studying science. Studying science focuses on expected outcomes, while living with science considers the variable and unexpected factors through real life investigations. With such a different approach to learning, many students went through a period of confusion and high stress while others saw service learning as a challenge, depending on the student whether they found the new style of teaching to be pleasant or unpleasant. "But in either case, it's something that is realistic and they are learning in their own way how to deal with it", said Dr. Richardson.

Assessment of the student's progress was accomplished through building a learning portfolio to reflect on their project. Students often worked in teams and collaborated. "In a service learning class, collaboration is no longer cheating," said Dr. Richardson. Service learning is an active and dynamic way to foster interaction among students and connect community service to the academic content of the course. Aside from lecturing in a regular class period, Dr. Richardson served as the students' advisor in separate discussion sections to monitor student progress in their service learning projects. To Dr. Richardson, although the service learning component of his course required a larger time commitment, it has been more fulfilling to interact with students than just standing and lecturing. "It is rewarding to watch them gain skills and help them become successful," said Dr. Richardson. His Natural Resource Management class not only trained the students to manage environmental resources but also taught his students to manage one's own non-renewable resource – their heartbeats. Dr. Richardson encouraged his students to invest their non-renewable resources in something worthwhile. Depending on whether they have spent their heartbeats well or not, rewards come when they are spent well. For Dr. Richardson, his heartbeat is well spent when he sees his students go through a life changing experience and become successful later on in life.

According to Dr. Richardson, the job of an educator is teaching the information and allowing the students to build their confidence by letting them discover that they have learned the material and thus generate their enthusiasm and motivation for learning. As a professor, Dr. Richardson enjoys the learning aspect of his teaching. "Students pay to learn and I am paid to learn," said Dr. Richardson. When one of these students asks him when he will retire, Dr. Richardson responded, "When I die". Because as long as Dr. Richardson has a heartbeat, he will spend his time nurturing the next generation of students and propagate the value of real world experience.