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Conceptual Distinctions, Design Logics, and Practical Comparisons between University Social Responsibility Courses and Social Practice Courses in Taiwanese Higher Education

By

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the conceptual positioning, design logics, and practical differences between “University Social Responsibility (USR) courses” and “social practice courses” in Taiwanese higher education. In recent years, USR has increasingly been incorporated into higher education governance, curriculum development, and talent cultivation. In practice, however, USR courses and social practice courses are often used interchangeably, obscuring their differences in curricular nature and educational purpose. This article argues that USR courses primarily concern how the university, as an institutional actor, responds through curriculum to local needs, public issues, and policy tasks. They therefore tend to exhibit stronger institutional, policy-oriented, and task-driven characteristics. By contrast, social practice courses emphasize how students develop social understanding, ethical judgment, and the capacity for public action through observation, participation, action, and reflection in real-world settings. They are thus more educational, process-oriented, and reflective in nature. The article further suggests that USR courses can provide the institutional resources and field-based foundations required for social practice courses, while social practice courses can bring educational depth and learning transformation to USR. Only by clearly distinguishing the two conceptually, enabling mutual support in curriculum design, and avoiding instrumentalization in practice can social engagement courses in Taiwanese higher education move beyond outcome-oriented task implementation toward socially meaningful and educationally substantive social practice.

KEYWORDS: Community Engagement, Curriculum Design, Learning Transformation, University Social Responsibility, Social Practice.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Problematization

In recent years, Taiwanese higher education has increasingly been assigned a more active social role amid multiple contextual pressures, including demographic decline, regional revitalization, sustainable development, and the reconfiguration of the publicness of higher education. Existing research indicates that the relationship between regional revitalization and University Social Responsibility (USR) involves not only local development strategies but also the ways in which universities reposition their public role through sustainable curriculum design (Tsai, 2025a). Since Taiwan’s Ministry of Education began promoting

the USR Practice Project, “local connection” and “talent cultivation” have served as its core principles. The project has guided universities to respond to local needs by integrating humanistic concern, technological application, and interdisciplinary collaboration, thereby helping address regional issues and fulfil their social responsibilities. The fourth phase of the project further emphasizes that USR should be more concretely connected with universities’ medium- and long-term institutional development plans, systematic formal curricula, innovative pedagogical design, and the United Nations Sustainable

Development Goals (Ministry of Education, 2024, 2025). This suggests that USR is no longer merely an auxiliary activity of external service or social contribution; rather, it has increasingly been incorporated into higher education governance, curriculum development, and talent cultivation mechanisms.

Within this policy context, many universities have begun to incorporate social engagement, local connection, sustainable development, community collaboration, and interdisciplinary practice into curriculum design. As a result, “University Social Responsibility courses” and “social practice courses” have become important terms in the curriculum reform of Taiwanese higher education. In practice, however, these two course concepts are often used interchangeably. They are even treated as similar or substitutable categories in teaching plans, institutional development reports, course outcome exhibitions, and project proposals. Whenever a course involves community fieldwork, local issues, service action, sustainable development, disadvantaged groups, or regional revitalization, it may be broadly labelled either a USR course or a social practice course. Although such conceptual interchangeability may facilitate policy implementation and practical operation, it may also obscure the differences between the two in terms of curricular nature, design objectives, and learning logic.

More specifically, USR courses are usually connected with institutional USR projects, higher education enhancement policies, regional revitalization strategies, Sustainable Development Goals, and university governance mechanisms. Their curriculum design often carries more explicit policy tasks and social response objectives, emphasizing how universities respond to local needs through curricular resources, integrate internal and external resources, establish partnerships, and produce identifiable social impacts. Vasilescu et al. (2010) argue that USR involves the university’s responses to social needs across education, research, management, and social service. Vallaey (2014) further suggests that USR should be understood as an institutional practice through which universities responsibly manage their organizational, educational, cognitive, and social impacts. From this perspective, a USR course is not simply a classroom-based teaching

arrangement; rather, it is an institutionalized practice through which a university translates its public responsibility, local commitment, and sustainability goals into curricular form.

By contrast, social practice courses are not necessarily attached directly to USR projects, nor do they necessarily take policy outcomes or institutional tasks as their primary point of departure. Their core is more closely aligned with the educational traditions of experiential learning, service-learning, action learning, and reflective learning (Tsai & Huang, 2026). Dewey (1938) emphasizes that the value of educational experience lies not in activity itself but in whether experience can be organized, reflected upon, and transformed into subsequent growth. Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Bringle and Hatcher’s (1996) classical definition of service-learning likewise indicates that service-learning is a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in organized service activities that respond to community needs, while reflection deepens curricular learning, disciplinary understanding, and civic responsibility. Accordingly, the core of a social practice course is not merely to bring students into the field or to have them complete action-based tasks. Rather, it is to enable students, through observation, participation, action, and reflection, to reconstruct their understanding of social issues, public concerns, local knowledge, and their own roles.

Thus, although USR courses and social practice courses both incorporate “society” into higher education curricula, their underlying problematics are not identical. USR courses primarily ask how the university fulfils its social responsibility through curriculum, how the curriculum responds to local needs, sustainability goals, and policy tasks, and how curriculum design integrates teaching, research, service, and social engagement. By contrast, social practice courses primarily ask how students learn in real-world social settings and how, through interaction with communities, residents, organizations, and local problems, they develop social understanding, ethical judgment, action capacity, and reflective competence. The former is more oriented toward institutional tasks and the fulfilment of public responsibility, whereas the

latter is more oriented toward learning processes and the formation of student subjectivity.

The problematique of this article is grounded in this distinction. When universities incorporate “society” into the curriculum, is the primary purpose to fulfil the public responsibility tasks required by USR projects, or to cultivate students’ capacity to understand society, participate in public life, and reflect upon their own positionality? These two aims are not necessarily opposed. Indeed, an ideal USR course, if supported institutionally while maintaining educational depth, can become an important resource base for social practice courses. Conversely, a mature social practice course, if connected with the university’s public responsibility and local partnerships, can prevent USR from remaining merely an administrative project or an exhibition of outcomes. However, if the two are not conceptually distinguished, courses may fall into two forms of distortion: first, USR courses may be reduced to policy tasks, activity implementation, and outcome production; second, social practice courses may be instrumentalized as pedagogical supplements to USR projects, thereby marginalizing students’ learning processes, critical reflection, and public understanding.

This issue also reflects a deeper tension in contemporary curriculum governance in higher education. When social engagement is incorporated into project-based governance, performance indicators, funding mechanisms, and outcome presentation, courses are often required to demonstrate external effectiveness and visible results. This tendency may indeed facilitate resource integration and the institutionalization of public responsibility. Yet it may also cause curriculum design to be excessively shaped by policy language, project timelines, and performance indicators. Biesta (2010) cautions that when education is overly governed by measurement, performance, and visible outputs, its democratic, ethical, and subjectifying functions may be compressed. This perspective offers an important insight for comparing USR courses and social practice courses in Taiwan: if universities ask only whether courses can produce outputs, serve a certain number of participants, or complete a certain number of activities, without further asking how students understand social issues, how community knowledge enters the curriculum, or whether

reciprocal relationships are formed among teachers, students, and residents, then so-called social engagement courses may become activity-oriented, task-driven, and display-oriented, without generating genuine educational transformation.

Based on this problematique, this article seeks to clarify the conceptual differences and practical relationships between USR courses and social practice courses. The analysis proceeds on three levels. First, at the conceptual level, it distinguishes USR courses as institutional tasks from social practice courses as learning processes. Second, at the level of curriculum design, it compares how the two are respectively shaped by policy-oriented and learning-oriented logics. Third, at the practical level, it examines their differences in field roles, teacher–student positioning, and community relationships. Through this comparison, this article argues that USR courses and social practice courses should not be understood as identical course types. Rather, they should be viewed as two mutually supportive forms of curriculum with distinct design logics and educational functions. Only by making clear conceptual distinctions, avoiding confusion in design, and preventing instrumentalization in practice can social engagement courses in Taiwanese higher education move beyond the implementation of policy tasks toward curricular practice with educational depth, public meaning, and reflective transformation.

Conceptual Distinctions: USR Courses as Institutional Tasks and Social Practice Courses as Learning Processes

To compare USR courses and social practice courses, it is first necessary to clarify their distinct conceptual positions. Although both emphasize the relationship between the university and society, and both may involve local issues, community collaboration, public engagement, sustainable development, and interdisciplinary practice, they do not share the same curricular nature. USR courses are more closely associated with a curricular form through which universities fulfil social responsibility within an institutional framework. By contrast, social practice courses are better understood as educational processes through which students engage in experiential learning, action participation, and reflective transformation in real-world social contexts. In other words, the central question of the former is how the university fulfils

its social responsibility through curriculum, whereas that of the latter is how students come to understand and participate in society through curriculum. The two can support each other, but they should not be directly equated.

First, USR courses can be understood as an institutionalized practice through which universities, within the policy framework of USR, translate social responsibility, local needs, public issues, and sustainable development goals into curricular content. Since Taiwan's Ministry of Education launched the USR Practice Project in 2018, it has emphasized that universities should bring their professional capacities to bear on local issues while promoting talent cultivation, local connection, and sustainable development. The 2023–2027 project period further indicates that USR should be incorporated into university governance and sustainable implementation mechanisms in order to deepen and expand outcomes related to “local connection” and “talent cultivation” (University Social Responsibility Promotion Center, n.d.). This suggests that USR courses are not merely forms of curricular innovation arising from individual teachers' interests. Rather, they are often connected with institutional USR projects, higher education enhancement policies, regional revitalization strategies, sustainable development goals, institutional development directions, and project-based resource allocation. Accordingly, USR courses tend to exhibit strong institutional, policy-oriented, and task-driven characteristics.

From the perspective of international USR theory, USR is not simply a matter of universities providing external services or organizing public welfare activities. Rather, it refers to the university's responsible management of its organizational operations, educational functions, knowledge production, and social impacts as an integrated practice. Vallaeys (2014) argues that the key to understanding USR lies in how universities manage the impacts they generate on society and sustainable development. Vasilescu et al. (2010) similarly conceptualize USR as a model through which universities respond to the challenges of an emerging civil society across education, research, management, and social service. Therefore, when USR is translated into curriculum, the key issue is not merely whether a course enters a community,

but how the course becomes an institutional medium through which the university fulfils its public responsibility. Such courses usually carry relatively explicit purposes of social response, such as addressing local aging, industrial transformation, environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, health promotion, care for disadvantaged groups, or regional development.

On this basis, the design logic of USR courses is often grounded in the relationship among the university, the locality, and policy. Courses are expected to integrate teachers' professional expertise, student learning, community needs, and local resources, while generating concrete social impacts through interdisciplinary collaboration. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has also explicitly encouraged teachers and students to adopt real-world problem-solving as an orientation, to promote cross-institutional and cross-sector collaboration through local and international cooperation, and to create social innovation value (Ministry of Education, 2025). Thus, USR courses often involve action plans, local connection, social impact, outcome presentation, and policy response. Their curricular value derives not only from student learning but also from whether the university can demonstrate, through curriculum, its responsibility toward society, local communities, and sustainability issues.

However, precisely because USR courses are strongly characterized by institutional tasks, they are also likely to be shaped by project timelines, outcome indicators, funding requirements, and performance evaluation. This feature is not necessarily negative, since institutionalized resources can support curriculum development, field management, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Yet if curriculum design becomes overly dependent on project objectives, courses may come to function as implementation units of USR projects. Students may even be positioned as activity implementers, outcome producers, or local service labor. In such cases, a course may fulfil project requirements without necessarily fostering students' social understanding, ethical reflection, or knowledge transformation. Therefore, any conceptual definition of USR courses must recognize both their institutional value and their potential limitations.

By contrast, the core of social practice courses

does not necessarily lie in responding to a specific USR policy agenda. Rather, it lies in how students enter real-world social fields through curriculum and come to understand problems, relationships, and structures within the lifeworld. The educational foundations of social practice courses can be traced to traditions such as experiential education, volunteer service, service-learning, action learning, and reflective practice. However, social practice courses should not be equated with volunteer service, community activities, or short-term off-campus internships. They should instead be understood as an educational orientation that redefines the relationship between the university and society. Their emphasis is not simply on whether the university enters local communities, but on whether teaching, research, and social responsibility can be reconsidered within a framework of interaction, responsiveness, and publicness (Tsai & Huang, 2026). Dewey (1938) emphasizes that the significance of educational experience lies not in whether students have “done something,” but in whether experience can be reflected upon, organized, and directed toward subsequent growth. Kolb (1984) further conceptualizes experiential learning as a cycle composed of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. From this perspective, the key to social practice courses is not merely to arrange for students to leave the classroom, but to enable them to reinterpret the relationship between knowledge and society through field experience. In this sense, social practice can be understood as a form of practice centered on knowledge co-construction, public engagement, and local collaboration, through which the public role of the university and the meaning of education are reconsidered (Tsai & Huang, 2026).

Bringle and Hatcher’s (1996) definition of service-learning also provides an important reference for understanding social practice courses. They argue that service-learning is a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in organized service activities that respond to community needs and, through reflection, deepen curricular learning, disciplinary understanding, and civic responsibility. This definition reminds us that social practice courses cannot be judged merely by whether they serve the community, nor can learning

outcomes be evaluated solely by whether activities are completed (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). A genuinely educational social practice course must connect field experience with curricular objectives, disciplinary knowledge, reflective activities, and public responsibility. In other words, students do not simply enter communities to “do things”; rather, they learn within social contexts how to see problems, understand others, identify structures, reflect on their own positionality, and develop capacities for public engagement.

Social practice courses therefore have stronger educational, process-oriented, and reflective characteristics. Their core is not how the university completes a particular institutional task, but how students experience a process of transformation from knowledge acquisition to knowledge application and, further, to knowledge reconstruction. First, before entering the field, students need to develop a basic problem consciousness through theories, cases, and issue analysis. Second, in the field, they come to understand the complexity of real social problems through observation, interviews, participation, collaboration, or action plans. Finally, through reflection, discussion, writing, and synthesis of outcomes, students re-examine the applicability and limitations of classroom knowledge. This process means that social practice courses are not merely about “applying what has been learned”; rather, they enable students to reinterpret the sources, uses, and ethical boundaries of knowledge in real-world contexts.

It follows that the difference between USR courses and social practice courses does not lie in whether one is social and the other is not, nor in whether one values locality while the other does not. The real difference lies in the different core questions they answer. USR courses primarily ask: How does the university fulfil its social responsibility through curriculum? Their focus is on how the university, as an institutional actor, connects curriculum with local needs, public issues, sustainable development, and social impact. Social practice courses primarily ask: How do students learn to understand and participate in society through curriculum? Their focus is on how students, as learning subjects, develop social understanding, ethical judgment, and the capacity for public action through field experience, action participation, and

critical reflection.

Accordingly, this article distinguishes the two as follows: USR courses are curricular forms centered on the institutional responsibility of the university and characterized by policy orientation, social response, and public tasks; social practice courses are curricular forms centered on students' learning processes and characterized by experiential learning, action participation, and reflective transformation. The former is oriented toward institutional responsibility and public tasks, while the latter is oriented toward learning processes and subject formation. The two can be complementary: USR courses can provide the institutional resources, field foundations, and long-term partnerships required by social practice courses, while social practice courses can bring educational depth, reflective mechanisms, and learning transformation to USR courses. Nevertheless, they should not be directly equated. If social practice courses are fully subsumed under USR courses, curriculum may become an auxiliary tool for policy tasks. Conversely, if USR courses are treated merely as ordinary social practice courses, their institutional responsibilities, governance implications, and public impact requirements may be overlooked.

On this basis, this article argues that Taiwanese higher education should avoid using “whether a course enters the community” or “whether it produces outcomes” as the sole criteria for determining course type. Instead, it is necessary to examine more carefully the course's design starting point, responsible subject, and learning logic. If a course is primarily driven by USR projects, policy tasks, local needs, and the university's social responsibility goals, it may be understood as a USR course. If a course is primarily organized around student learning objectives, field experience, action participation, and reflective transformation, it is closer to a social practice course. This distinction is not intended to separate the two, but to avoid conceptual confusion that blurs curriculum design, so that universities can attend simultaneously to institutional responsibility and the educational essence of social engagement courses.

Comparing Design Logics: From Policy-Oriented Courses to Learning-Oriented Courses

After conceptually distinguishing USR courses from social practice courses, it is necessary to further examine how they differ in their underlying logics of

curriculum design. Both types of courses may enter communities, respond to local issues, engage with public problems, and employ pedagogical approaches such as teacher–student participation, fieldwork, action plans, and outcome presentation. However, when examined in terms of the starting point of curriculum design, modes of organization, and evaluative focus, USR courses and social practice courses are not identical. The former usually begin from policy goals, project themes, local needs, and USR-related tasks, whereas the latter should begin from students' learning objectives, knowledge transformation, field experience, and reflective processes. Therefore, the most significant difference between the two does not simply lie in whether a course involves a social field, but in whether it is driven by policy tasks or organized around learning processes.

First, USR courses usually exhibit clear policy-oriented and problem-oriented characteristics. Taiwan's Ministry of Education's USR Practice Project explicitly states that USR aims to encourage universities to fulfill their social responsibilities, strengthen organic connections and positive collaboration between universities and local urban and rural communities, and, through the interdisciplinary, cross-team, and cross-institutional capacities of faculty and students, integrate resources from local governments, industries, and non-profit organizations to jointly promote industrial upgrading, cultural innovation, educational transformation, and environmental sustainability (Tsai & Yeh, 2025; Yang, 2023). The project also emphasizes that USR should gradually be incorporated into university governance and connected with institutional medium- and long-term development plans, systematic formal curricula, and innovative pedagogical design. This suggests that USR courses are often not pedagogical designs spontaneously generated within a single course, but curricular arrangements situated among policy objectives, institutional governance, local issues, and social impact.

On this basis, USR courses often begin from specific policy issues or local problems, such as active aging, regional revitalization, environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, community health, the digital divide, industrial transformation, rural education, or disaster resilience. Related cases of community health and active aging courses also show that when university courses enter local fields, they often carry multiple tasks simultaneously, including health promotion, community interaction, and students' field-based learning (Tsai, 2026). These issues are usually already embedded within USR project themes, local needs assessments, or institutional development features. Curriculum design must therefore respond to project-stage objectives, field management needs, outcome indicators, and social impact requirements. The call for proposals for Taiwan's

fourth-phase USR project further indicates that experienced project teams are expected to continue deepening local connection and talent cultivation, moving toward the development of local studies, teaching–research characteristics, local knowledge construction, and sustainable mechanisms, while aligning proposal content with talent cultivation mechanisms in universities’ medium- and long-term institutional development plans (Ministry of Education, 2024). Accordingly, the design of USR courses is not merely a matter of individual teachers’ curriculum planning; rather, it is an institutional form of curriculum design shaped simultaneously by policy documents, project applications, resource allocation, institutional characteristics, and local partnerships.

Within this design logic, USR courses tend to form a curricular pattern of “problem orientation—resource integration—action planning—outcome presentation.” First, the course begins with a local or social problem and identifies the public issue to be addressed. Second, the teacher and project team integrate internal professional expertise, student manpower, community partners, local governments, or industrial resources. Third, the course responds to the problem through workshops, fieldwork, interviews, co-creation, service, design proposals, exhibitions, or action plans. Finally, course outcomes are presented through reports, community presentations, exhibitions, videos, manuals, websites, indicator data, or activity records. The advantage of this model lies in its ability to connect curriculum with real social needs and facilitate the entry of university resources into local communities. Its risk, however, is that the course may gradually become governed by project outcomes, administrative timelines, and externally visible outputs, thereby reducing pedagogical activity to an implementation component of a USR project.

By contrast, the design logic of social practice courses should begin from students’ learning objectives rather than from policy outcomes or project tasks. The central question is not “What outcomes can this course produce for a USR project?” but “How do students develop understanding, judgment, and action capacity through social participation in this course?” Dewey (1938) emphasizes that experience does not automatically constitute education; experience becomes educational only when it is reflected upon, organized, and connected to subsequent growth. Kolb (1984) similarly understands experiential learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In other words, learning does not occur simply in the moment of “doing”; it occurs when students are able to analyze, conceptualize, and act again after experience. Therefore, the design of social practice courses must place

reflection, theoretical connection, and learning transformation at the center.

From this perspective, social practice courses are closer to a design model of “theoretical preparation—field experience—action participation—reflective integration—learning transformation.” First, before students enter the field, the course should use theoretical texts, case analysis, introductions to social issues, and ethical preparation to help students develop problem consciousness and basic understanding. Second, in the field, students encounter the complexity of real social situations through observation, interviews, participation, collaboration, or service. Third, through action participation, students bring classroom knowledge into concrete contexts and confront knowledge insufficiencies, value conflicts, ambiguous roles, and practical constraints. Finally, through reflective writing, classroom discussion, learning portfolios, interpretation of outcomes, and teacher–student dialogue, students reintegrate classroom knowledge and field experience, thereby developing a deeper understanding of social problems. This model emphasizes not the completion of tasks themselves, but whether students can develop social understanding, ethical judgment, and public action capacity through the process of practice.

Service-learning theory provides an important reference for this discussion. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service-learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in organized service activities that respond to community needs, while reflection deepens their understanding of course content, disciplinary knowledge, and civic responsibility. This definition reminds us that social practice courses should not take “entering the community” or “completing service” as their primary design focus. Instead, they must connect academic learning, social needs, and reflective mechanisms. Without reflection and curricular integration, students may complete a large number of activities yet remain at the level of accumulated experience or service implementation. Conversely, if systematic reflection can guide students to re-examine the relationship between knowledge and society, social practice courses can move beyond “knowledge application” toward “knowledge reconstruction.”

Thus, the differences in design logic between USR courses and social practice courses can be summarized in terms of differences in design starting points, objects of responsibility, and evaluative focus. USR courses usually begin from the question of “how the university responds to social needs,” and their objects of responsibility include local communities, policy projects, institutional development, and social impact. Social practice courses, by contrast, begin from the question of “how students learn in social contexts,” and

their primary objects of responsibility are students' learning processes, knowledge transformation, and cultivation of public competence. The evaluation of the former tends to emphasize the quantity of outcomes, social benefits, collaborative networks, and local impact. The evaluation of the latter should emphasize students' problem understanding, depth of reflection, action judgment, ethical sensitivity, and learning transformation. The difference between the two does not lie in which is more important, but in their different understandings of "curricular effectiveness."

However, if USR courses are overly driven by policy outcomes, they may be reduced to activity units under project-based governance. For example, a course may take the number of completed workshops, residents served, outputs produced, or partnerships established as its primary indicators of effectiveness, while paying insufficient attention to how students understand local problems, reflect on their own roles, or confront the tension between community knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Biesta (2010) cautions that when education is excessively incorporated into the logic of measurement, performance, and output, its democratic, ethical, and subjectifying functions can be compressed. This perspective reminds designers of USR courses that visible outcomes are certainly important; however, if curriculum design pursues only the visualization of outcomes while neglecting students' understanding, judgment, and reflection, USR courses may complete institutional tasks while weakening the transformative meaning of education itself.

Conversely, if social practice courses completely lack institutional support, they may remain isolated practices undertaken by individual teachers. Social practice courses usually require long-term field management, community trust-building, interdisciplinary collaboration, teaching assistant support, ethical preparation, and reflective mechanisms. If they rely entirely on a single teacher's personal experience and networks, courses can easily become unsustainable due to excessive teacher workload, insufficient resources, or unstable field relationships. From this perspective, USR policy and project resources should not be understood only as external pressures; they can also serve as important conditions for supporting the institutionalization and sustainability of social practice courses. The key is that institutional resources should serve the educational purposes of the course, rather than turning the course into a tool for producing project performance.

Therefore, an ideal curriculum design does not require a binary choice between USR courses and social practice courses. Rather, it requires a complementary relationship between the two. USR can provide social practice courses with institutional resources, long-term fields,

interdisciplinary platforms, and local partnerships. Social practice courses, in turn, can bring learning orientation, reflective depth, ethical awareness, and educational transformation into USR. In other words, if USR courses can incorporate the learning logic of social practice courses, they will not remain confined to policy tasks and outcome presentation. If social practice courses can receive support from the institutional framework of USR, they will not remain fragmented, short-term, or individualized pedagogical attempts. The key connection between the two lies in ensuring that "policy orientation" does not compress "learning orientation," while enabling "learning orientation" to gain stable support within institutional conditions.

In sum, the difference in design logic between USR courses and social practice courses lies primarily in the fact that the former begin from the university's response to social needs and fulfilment of public responsibility, whereas the latter begin from students' learning and transformation in social contexts. The former tend to form a model of "problem orientation—resource integration—action planning—outcome presentation," while the latter should develop a model of "theoretical preparation—field experience—action participation—reflective integration—learning transformation." In promoting social engagement courses, Taiwanese higher education should avoid allowing USR policy objectives to replace educational objectives, while also preventing social practice courses from becoming unsustainable due to a lack of institutional support. Only when USR provides institutional resources and social practice courses deepen educational substance can university social engagement become a curricular practice that integrates public responsibility with educational meaning.

Practical Comparison: Differences in Field Roles, Teacher–Student Positioning, and Community Relationships

Following the conceptual distinction and comparison of design logics, it is necessary to examine the differences between USR courses and social practice courses at the level of actual operation. Both types of courses may enter communities, respond to local issues, engage with public problems, and employ pedagogical forms such as fieldwork, interviews, workshops, action plans, service activities, or outcome presentations. However, when examined in terms of field roles, teacher–student positioning, and community relationships, the practical relations they construct are not identical. USR courses tend to emphasize public collaboration between the university and the locality, whereas social practice courses place

greater emphasis on the learning transformation that occurs between students and the field. The former focuses on how the university responds to local needs and creates social impact; the latter focuses on how students learn to understand society, reflect on knowledge, and develop public action capacity within local contexts.

First, USR courses usually emphasize collaborative relationships between universities and local communities. The course field is often positioned as a space through which the university responds to local problems, demonstrates public responsibility, and creates social impact. Taiwan's Ministry of Education's USR Practice Project emphasizes that universities should proceed from local needs, integrate internal and external resources, interdisciplinary expertise, and local partnerships, and assist in addressing regional problems while promoting sustainable development (Ministry of Education, 2024, 2025). From this perspective, the field in a USR course is not merely a site of student learning, but a practical base through which the university fulfils its social responsibility. Through local collaboration, resource integration, and action plans, university knowledge, professional expertise, and student participation enter the community to respond to issues such as local aging, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, health promotion, regional revitalization, and industrial transformation.

Within this context, the role of teachers also changes significantly. In USR courses, teachers are often not merely instructors; they are also assigned the roles of project integrators, resource coordinators, and field connectors. This role transformation requires teachers to mediate among pedagogical responsibility, institutional tasks, and local response, while also making USR practice a matter of professional ethics concerning whether teachers act, how they act, and why they act (Tsai, 2025b). In other words, teachers in USR courses must not only design curricular content, but also maintain local relationships, coordinate administrative resources, respond to project goals, and negotiate the gap between student learning and community needs. This role has positive significance because it enables teachers to move beyond the enclosed classroom and connect teaching with real social problems. Yet it also

entails risks: if institutional tasks override educational purposes, teachers may be transformed from educational facilitators into project implementers, and the course itself may be compressed into a tool for producing outcomes.

Correspondingly, students in USR courses are often expected to participate in action plans, assist in activity implementation, produce outcomes, or serve local communities. Such participation can help students encounter real problems and understand the practical application of university knowledge in local fields. However, if a course overemphasizes activity completion, outcome presentation, and external performance, students may merely assist with interviews, exhibitions, services, design work, documentation, or proposals without sufficiently understanding the historical contexts, social structures, and power relations embedded in local problems. In other words, although students may enter the field, without reflective guidance and knowledge integration, their participation may remain at the level of task execution rather than being transformed into deeper social understanding and public competence.

By contrast, social practice courses place greater emphasis on the field as a space of learning generation. The community is not merely an object of service, nor is it simply a place that provides opportunities for student practice; rather, it is a partner in the co-production of knowledge. Dewey (1938) argues that educational experience should not be equated with activity itself; genuinely educational experience must be reflected upon, organized, and directed toward subsequent growth. Kolb (1984) similarly understands learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. From this perspective, the field in a social practice course is not a site for the one-way application of classroom knowledge. It is a generative space in which students reinterpret knowledge, others, and social relations. When students enter local communities, they are not simply "bringing knowledge to the community"; rather, through interaction with the local lifeworld, they re-examine their own knowledge frameworks, value assumptions, and positions of action.

Accordingly, teachers in social practice courses do more than arrange activities and manage outcomes. They guide students to understand

problems, confront conflicts, identify power relations, and engage in reflection within real-world contexts. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) argue that service-learning, as a credit-bearing educational experience, must connect community needs, curricular learning, and structured reflection. This definition reminds us that social practice courses should not be evaluated merely by whether students enter a community or complete service activities. Rather, they must attend to whether students can deepen disciplinary understanding, civic responsibility, and public engagement capacity through reflection. In this sense, teachers should act as learning mediators and facilitators of reflection, helping students transform field experience into academic understanding, ethical judgment, and public action capacity.

Students in social practice courses should likewise not be positioned merely as task executors. Rather, they should be understood as reflective participants who enter the field with learning questions. They need to learn how to observe, listen, inquire, collaborate, and reflect, rather than rushing to provide solutions or produce outcomes. When students encounter residents' lived experiences, local memories, practical wisdom, and everyday judgments, they may discover that classroom-based professional knowledge is insufficient to fully explain local problems. They may also come to recognize that the relationship between university knowledge and community knowledge is not one of one-way transmission, but one that requires reorganization through dialogue and collaboration. Tsai and Huang (2026) argue that social practice in Taiwanese higher education should not be reduced to service, activity, or off-campus practice. Rather, it should be understood as an educational orientation that reconsiders the public role of the university and the meaning of curriculum through knowledge co-construction, public engagement, and local collaboration.

In this sense, the construction of community relationships is a crucial factor in distinguishing the two types of courses. If the community is positioned merely as an object of service, an activity site, or a platform for outcome presentation, then even when a course enters a local field, it may reproduce a university-centered, one-way relationship. Conversely, if the community is understood as a partner in the co-production of knowledge,

residents' lived experiences, local memories, cultural practices, and practical judgments can become important sources of curricular knowledge. Saltmarsh et al. (2009), in their account of democratic engagement, argue that community engagement in higher education should not remain at the level of outreach, service, or one-way intervention, but should move toward democratic collaboration through shared inquiry, reciprocity, and public problem-solving. This perspective reminds us that communities in social engagement courses should not merely serve as fields in which universities display outcomes. Rather, they should be partners with whom teachers, students, and residents jointly understand problems, negotiate action, and produce public value.

From the perspective of "dialogue capacity" in USR community practice, field relationships should likewise not be understood as the university's one-way entry into a locality. Rather, they should be understood as processes through which teachers, students, residents, and community organizations jointly understand problems, adjust actions, and generate educational reflection through dialogue (Tsai & Yeh, 2025). Related research further indicates that dialogue capacity helps foster understanding, collaboration, and educational reflection between universities and communities, making SDGs-oriented community practice not merely an intervention through action, but a process of public learning and value co-construction (Tsai, 2024). Therefore, the deeper value of social practice courses does not lie in whether the university successfully "serves" the locality, but in whether teachers, students, and communities can form more reciprocal, equitable, and reflective relationships through sustained interaction.

It follows that the differences between USR courses and social practice courses in field relationships can be summarized as two distinct orientations. USR courses tend to emphasize public collaboration between the university and the locality, focusing on how the university integrates resources, responds to local needs, builds collaborative networks, and creates social impact. Social practice courses, by contrast, place greater emphasis on learning transformation between students and the field, focusing on how students understand society, reflect on knowledge, identify structures, and develop public action capacity

through local experience. The former asks what the university can bring to the locality, while the latter asks how students learn to understand society within the locality. The two are not opposed; rather, they point to different levels of practical emphasis.

However, if the two are not properly integrated, different problems may arise. If USR courses focus only on the collaborative outcomes between universities and local communities while neglecting students' learning processes, communities may be instrumentalized as fields for outcome production, and students may be instrumentalized as project implementation labor. If social practice courses focus only on students' experience and reflection while neglecting community needs, local ethics, and long-term partnerships, they may become short-term, extractive learning activities and may even impose burdens on communities. Jacoby (2015) notes that the quality of service-learning and community engagement depends on whether courses can establish reciprocal, respectful, and sustainable partnerships, rather than simply arranging for students to provide short-term service in communities. Therefore, the core of field practice is not merely entering the community, but establishing curricular relationships that do not instrumentalize communities, taskify students, or bureaucratize teachers.

Ideally, USR courses and social practice courses should form a complementary relationship. USR courses can provide long-term field management, interdisciplinary resource integration, local partnerships, and institutional support, preventing social practice courses from becoming fragmented and short-term individual teaching attempts. Social practice courses, in turn, can remind USR courses to return to the educational essence of curriculum by emphasizing how students understand problems, develop reflection, and cultivate public action capacity in the field. If the two can be effectively integrated, the field will not only be a place where the university demonstrates social responsibility, but also a learning space in which students understand society and reconstruct knowledge. Teachers will not merely be project managers, but also educators who facilitate learning and reflection. Communities will not merely be objects of service, but partners in the co-production of knowledge and public value.

In sum, the practical differences between USR

courses and social practice courses are mainly reflected in how field roles, teacher–student positioning, and community relationships are organized. USR courses tend to understand the field as a collaborative space through which the university responds to local problems and demonstrates public responsibility. Teachers are more likely to serve as project integrators and resource coordinators, while students are more likely to be positioned as participants in action plans and producers of outcomes. Social practice courses, by contrast, tend to understand the field as a space of learning generation and knowledge reconstruction. Teachers are positioned as facilitators of reflection and learning mediators, while students are positioned as reflective participants who enter the field with questions. This distinction reminds Taiwanese higher education that social engagement courses should not simply pursue visible outcomes of local collaboration, nor should they merely emphasize students' experience of entering the field. Rather, they should build practical relationships among universities, teachers and students, and communities that are more reciprocal, reflective, and educationally substantive.

Conclusion and Reflection

The preceding analysis has shown that, although USR courses and social practice courses both center on the relationship between the university and society and may involve local issues, community collaboration, public engagement, sustainable development, and field-based learning, they differ in curricular nature, design logic, and practical emphasis. USR courses foreground how the university, as an institutional actor, responds through curriculum to local needs, public issues, sustainable development goals, and policy tasks. Social practice courses, by contrast, foreground how students, as learning subjects, develop social understanding, ethical judgment, and public action capacity through observation, participation, action, and reflection in real-world settings. The former is oriented toward institutional responsibility and policy response, whereas the latter is oriented toward educational transformation and learning deepening. The two are closely related, but they should not be treated as synonymous.

Within Taiwan's higher education policy context, the significance of USR courses lies in their capacity to translate the university's public

responsibility from an abstract declaration into concrete practice through formal curricula, innovative teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and local connection. The Ministry of Education's USR Practice Project takes "local connection" and "talent cultivation" as its core principles, guiding universities to proceed from local needs, integrate knowledge, technology, and resources, focus on regional or local development characteristics, and strengthen their responsiveness to society and local communities. The fourth phase of the USR project further emphasizes that USR should be connected more deeply with universities' medium- and long-term institutional development, promote talent cultivation mechanisms required by society through systematic formal curricula and innovative pedagogical design, and incorporate social responsibility into institutional governance and sustainable development mechanisms. This indicates that USR courses have institutionalized, policy-oriented, and organizational characteristics, and can provide resources, platforms, fields, and long-term collaborative foundations for curriculum development.

However, the institutional advantages of USR courses also entail corresponding risks. When courses are overly shaped by policy timelines, outcome indicators, funding mechanisms, and social impact requirements, they may be transformed from educational processes into tools for project implementation. Courses may be required to demonstrate external effectiveness, such as the number of activities completed, residents served, outputs produced, or partnerships established, while insufficient attention is paid to how students understand local problems, reflect on their own roles, or confront the tension between community knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Biesta (2010) cautions that when education is excessively governed by measurement, performance, and visible outcomes, its ethical, democratic, and subjectifying functions may be compressed. This perspective provides an important warning for USR courses: if universities emphasize only whether course outcomes can be made visible, quantified, and incorporated into project performance, while neglecting students' reflection, judgment, and subject formation, USR courses may fulfil institutional tasks without realizing the transformative meaning of education itself.

By contrast, the significance of social practice courses lies in their insistence that social engagement in higher education should not be reduced to external service, local support, or outcome presentation. Rather, it should return to the educational question of how students learn in real-world social contexts. Dewey (1938) argues that experience does not automatically become education; it becomes educational only when it is reflected upon, organized, and connected to subsequent growth. Kolb (1984) similarly understands learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Bringle and Hatcher's (1996) definition of service-learning also indicates that when students participate in community service activities, reflection must deepen their curricular understanding, disciplinary learning, and civic responsibility. Thus, the core of social practice courses is not whether students enter communities or complete tasks, but whether they can understand problems in the field, interact with others, identify structural constraints, and transform experience into knowledge reconstruction and public action capacity.

Accordingly, this article argues that, in promoting USR courses and social practice courses, Taiwanese higher education should avoid classifying all courses that enter communities, localities, or fields as USR courses. It should also avoid treating social practice courses merely as implementation tools for USR projects. The former risks conceptual inflation, turning "USR courses" into a catch-all label for all locally engaged courses. The latter risks educational instrumentalization, subordinating social practice courses to the administrative logic of project outcomes. More importantly, curriculum design should return to the educational essence of social engagement by asking how students learn in the field, how community knowledge is respected, how local problems are understood, and whether more ethical, reciprocal, and public relationships are formed between universities and society. Saltmarsh et al. (2009), from the perspective of democratic engagement, argue that community engagement in higher education should not remain at the level of outreach or service, but should move toward democratic collaboration through shared inquiry, reciprocity, and public problem-solving. Related

research on SDGs-oriented community practice further indicates that dialogue capacity can foster understanding, collaboration, and educational reflection between universities and communities, making social engagement not merely an intervention through action but a process of public learning and value co-construction (Tsai, 2024).

In this respect, the ideal relationship between USR courses and social practice courses should not be one of substitution, but of mutual support. USR courses can provide institutional resources, university-level support, interdisciplinary platforms, long-term field management, and local collaborative foundations, thereby preventing social practice courses from remaining isolated practices of individual teachers or short-term activities. Social practice courses, in turn, can bring educational depth to USR courses, ensuring that they do not remain merely project tasks, activity implementation, or outcome presentation, but become learning processes through which students understand society, reflect on knowledge, and develop public action capacity. In other words, USR provides institutional conditions and a framework of public responsibility, while social practice courses provide educational methods and mechanisms of learning transformation. If the two are effectively integrated, curriculum can move beyond an outcome-oriented implementation logic toward social engagement with educational depth.

Future curriculum design may therefore be guided by four reflective questions. First, does the course merely respond to the outcome requirements of a USR project, or does it also construct students' problem consciousness and public judgment? Second, is the community treated only as an object of service, a practice site, or a platform for outcome presentation, or can it become a partner in the co-production of knowledge? Third, is the teacher merely a project integrator and outcome manager, or can the teacher become an educator who guides students to understand the field, confront conflicts, and engage in reflection? Fourth, are students merely task executors and outcome producers, or can they become reflective participants who enter the field with questions, interact with local communities, and reinterpret society? These questions can serve as important criteria for assessing whether a social engagement course possesses educational depth.

In sum, although USR courses and social practice courses both address the relationship between the university and society, they should be understood as two complementary rather than interchangeable curricular forms. USR courses emphasize the university's public responsibility as an institutional actor, while social practice courses emphasize students' practical transformation as learning subjects. If the former lacks the reflective and learning logic of social practice courses, it may become activity-oriented, task-driven, and display-oriented. If the latter lacks the institutional support and long-term field foundations provided by USR, it may become fragmented, short-term, and individualized. Only by making clear conceptual distinctions, enabling mutual support in curriculum design, and avoiding instrumentalization in practice can social engagement courses in Taiwanese higher education move beyond outcome-oriented implementation toward social practice with educational depth, public meaning, and reflective transformation.

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