

## **Opportunities for General Education Afforded by SARS**

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“After SARS: Education and Research Agenda for the Future”

Joint HKU/CUHK/CPU Academic Seminar on July 2, 2003

The outbreak of SARS has provided a unique chance for education, student development and raising students’ social awareness. The General Education Unit, together with other units of the University of Hong Kong, has embarked on two initiatives to make use of the opportunity for education.

### Thematic course

Thematic teaching is interdisciplinary teaching that organizes around a central theme or issue with an integrated curriculum across a variety of disciplines. As the SARS epidemic has captured the attention of the community and involves many disciplines such as, to name a few, medicine, genetics, engineering and architecture, public policies, economics and business, etc., it is a highly appropriate theme for a thematic course.

A preliminary web-based version of the course was offered in April during the peak of SARS. The preliminary course was shared with secondary schools and teachers. In the coming semester, a more complete course will be offered to all undergraduates of HKU. Students will attend guest lectures offered by teachers and experts of different disciplines. Integration will be achieved with comprehensive lectures, seminars and a self-directed project. Evaluation of learning outcome will focus on how thematic teaching achieves educational goals such as broadening, self-learning, and process instead of outcome-oriented learning.

### Service-based Learning

In a service-based learning course, students participate in community service that meets both the needs of a community and the needs of a course. Students prepare for service in the chosen community, perform that service, and then reflect on the experience.

In the summer, a group of 30 students are working with a local award-winning IT company to make use of a brand new real-time hypertext-to-speech conversion technology to help bridge the digital divide for elderly people, new immigrants and unemployed people with low education. Students undertake the project as if they were launching a new product to a certain clientele. They will survey on the needs of these social groups, engage in in-depth contact with them, and launch the free-service to them. In the meantime, they will brush up their career skills in tasks such as business proposal preparation and marketing. We plan to evaluate, on one hand, how volunteering and contact with the deprived may increase students’ social awareness and commitment, and, on the other hand, prepare them for career.