

# Ethical Challenges in Multidisciplinary Approach to Service-Learning

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Service Learning (SL) responds to one of the domains in the National Competency-Based Teacher Standards which is to establish learning environments that respond to the aspiration of the community. Thus, in Pilgrim Christian College, SL was integrated with NSTP, Practice Teaching, and Entrepreneurship / Franchising Classes. Different communities were identified as partners in SL. These communities were groups of people with common characteristics such as parents of children at a Day Care Center and the survivors of Sendong. Memoranda of Agreement were formulated to protect both parties--the program implementors and the partner communities.

Positive outcomes were objectively observed but limited to written and verbal testimonies among the students, members of the partner communities, and the faculty. Practical application of concepts from the classroom to the field was highly appreciated.

In the implementation of SL, PCC tried to address the domain of the learning environment. Being fair and making sure that the physical environment was safe and conducive to learning were among the ethical and human protection issues considered for dissection. A formal construct focused on consent, confidentiality, competence, and conflict of interest. Since PCC is a UCCP and bible-based institution, and the students' parents or families come from different religious orientations, a written consent/ informed decision from the parents has become a challenge, especially in getting their consent for the inculcation of biblical values among the students, as an add-on in the literacy program. With implementors overwhelmed with the program, confidentiality should have been emphasized especially among the students and community partners. In terms of competence, selection of cooperators, entry issues, and sustainability were the essence. For the partner communities, conflict

of interest may have taken place especially when required to attend the worship services of the Pilgrim Christian Community Fellowship (PCCF); however, the judgment may have been ethical itself with regard to culture and situations.

Sustainability in implementing SL, while considering ethical and human protection issues, is PCC's goal. Respecting people as ends, not means, being listened to, is ensured.

## INTRODUCTION

**E**thics is a code of thinking and behavior governed by a combination of personal, moral, legal, and social standards of what is right although the definition of "right" varies with situations and cultures (Kansas University, 2014). Ethics is also taken to mean as a philosophical science that deals with the morality of human conduct or human acts (Babor, 2006). Ethics is further categorized under normative philosophy that poses what is good and what is bad, or what is the right action or wrong action. Ethics as a science establishes standards or norms of human conduct. Ethics, therefore, requires a person to act properly as a human being and, ideally, to do what is good and what is right. Pilgrim Christian College, being a church and bible-based institution, abides by absolute ethics which Jesus taught and which a Christian entity should advocate. However, when a person knows what is good and what is right, it is not automatic that he/she executes what he/she knows. Thus, challenges arise.

Meanwhile, operationally, multidisciplinary approach in the implementation of SL at PCC refers to the different subjects where the program was integrated. At the same time, this approach includes the different dimensions each subject may cover. As mentioned earlier, SL was integrated in three (3) subjects and in each subject, spiritual, leadership, environmental, agricultural, and livelihood dimensions were covered.

In this paper, Pilgrim Christian College uses the lenses of the multidisciplinary approach to determine ethical challenges encountered in SL.

## APPLICATION OF SL IN THE COURSE

One of the domains in the National Competency-Based Teacher Standards is to establish learning environments that respond to the aspiration of the community (Bilbao, Corbuz, Llagas, & Salandanan, 2012). SL responds to such. Thus, when Silliman University (SU) paved the way for the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA) to support SL,

Pilgrim Christian College embraced the program in 2010.

SL was integrated in NSTP, Education, and Business Courses. Foci were on spiritual, leadership, environmental, health, literacy, and livelihood pursuits. Moreover, literacy services were offered. Literacy activities with inculcation of biblical values continued even during summer through the vacation bible school. Tree growing and solid waste management were monitored. Parents were taught the FAITH Basket which stands for Food Always in the Home. Health dimensions were integrated in NSTP and Practice Teaching. Livelihood dimensions were integrated in Practice Teaching and Entrepreneurship/Franchising. Then, journal entry forms were prepared. The service and learning components were the criteria used to assess learning for the purpose of academic credit. The celebrations were done through public presentations which gave due recognition to all parents and students involved. Awareness, proactive partnership, and consistency were key.

## **COLLEGE-COMMUNITY TIE UP**

After a series of seminars, workshops, and creation of a core group, formulation of policies and guidelines in the conduct of activities, benchmarking activity, and coming up with plan of action, profiling of communities in Cagayan de Oro City took place to determine community needs and possible intervention programs. As operationally defined in this program, community refers to a group of people with shared characteristics. These communities consisted of parents and children of the Day Care Center of Sitio Midkiwan of Barangay Bayanga, the HUGpong PArA SA KAugmaran (HUPASAKA) people's group of Barangay FS Catanico, and women survivors of Sendong (Washi) at Barangay 17. Memoranda of Agreement were signed between PCC and the Barangay through the Barangay Captains and the individual adult participants. Witnesses were barangay officials and residents, and school officials and students of NSTP, education, and business courses.

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES MATCHED WITH STUDENTS' SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY**

“The school and the community are the mainsprings of effective and powerful forces that can create a wholesome climate for mutual gains and betterment.

They can forge a kind of partnership where both are willing to share information as well as responsibilities to the best interest of the children while in school, likewise when dealing with members of the community” (Bilbao *et al.*, 2012). Participatory planning with the community and students took place. Thus, as it is ideal, learning objectives of the course and the needs of the community were matched.

For NSTP, learning objectives and needs were matched focusing on leadership and environment. Tree Growing and Solid Waste Management Program (SWMP) were identified both by the students, PCC, and people in the community. Learning objectives were the following: 1) to shift paradigm from the traditional tree planting to the sustainable tree growing; and 2) to promote SWMP by actual participation at home, in school, and in the community.

For education students, the community identified was a barangay which is about a 45-minute-ride away from the heart of Cagayan de Oro City. During the assessment, the students themselves were the ones who identified the parents and children from the Day Care Center due to the distance and the need for follow-up on the education and health of the children. The parents themselves verbalized their need for assistance because they worried that their children would have lesser chances to have classes every day due to the lack of permanent teachers. The parents could not sustain having a permanent teacher for their children because they did not have regular jobs, a condition that has led to poor income and failure to live up to the daily cost of living. This condition also caused impediments on the children’s health. The learning objectives were as follows: 1) to develop a conducive learning environment for children, focusing on literacy and biblical virtues; and 2) to partner with parents in the FAITH Basket program.

For the business students, the community identified was composed of women survivors of Typhoon Sendong (Washi). These women already had skills in handling *sari-sari* stores (i.e., small stores with miscellaneous items). The women came from a neighboring barangay of PCC. Learning objectives were as follows: 1) to establish a symbiotic learning relationship between the students and the community; and 2) to apply theories from the classroom to the community or field.

What the students learned were evaluated based on the aforementioned objectives through journal writing, verbal expression of values appreciated, picture documentation, and observations of the teacher and the community. Not including the rubrics, below were the criteria for grading.

**Service Component : 50%**

Activity Preparation: Team Involvement and Attendance	20%
Actual Conduct of Activity: Community Involvement	30%

**Learning Component : 50%**

Quality of Output (Documentation, Journal, Posters, etc.)	20%
Evidence of expressed positive self-development	15%
Evidence of values expressed concern for others	15%

**Total : 100%**

During the celebration, the students gave a positive feedback while the community commended the students and, at the same time, shared words to live by. In the NSTP group, the students wrote, in their respective journals, about the sense of fulfillment in getting involved in the tree-growing program and the solid waste management program with and for the people in the community. There was this sense of contribution to a healthy environment among the participants as they also looked forward to more opportunities of doing the mentioned activities. Above all, the participants acknowledged their stewardship over God's creation.

As for the education group, the practice-teachers who partnered with the parents restructured Day Care Centers and refurbished instructional materials. The literacy program focused on reading and sharing of bible stories. There was also launching of the FAITH (Food Always In The Home) Basket program.

For the business group, the students hosted a mini-workshop on bookkeeping with the women who were rebuilding their respective sari-sari stores. After the workshop, a no-interest loan was granted with corresponding agreement on the payments. The students checked the entries in the ledgers while PCC supervised the payments. Those who did not follow the policies paid the interests per the provision in the agreement. However, the names of those who did not pay were endorsed to the Barangay Captain, and they were no longer included in the next series of loans and activities.

On the part of the faculty, the above-mentioned outcomes were considered accomplishments. In spite of paradigm shift, the extra time rendered both in the classroom and community settings, and the necessary adjustments to individual partners/beneficiaries especially to those who

refused to understand the main purpose of the partnership and anticipated receiving dole outs without obligation, it was observed that the students themselves learned to adjust to the community partners.

**Areas of concern identified.** A multidisciplinary approach was used in implementing Service Learning at PCC. As PCC is a Christian institution, application of the theories was not only limited to specific area of discipline such as literacy and livelihood but also included spiritual, leadership, environmental, health, and agricultural dimensions. In all these, ethical concerns emerged and needed further dissection.

In relation to the National Competency-Based Teacher Standards, the learning environment should promote fairness and should make the physical environment safe and conducive to learning. In the context of implementing SL at PCC, observation of fairness, and provision of safe and conducive learning environment are among the guiding principles which need further understanding. The ethical challenges related to the guiding principles focused on consent, competence, confidentiality, and conflict of interest.

**Consent.** This is about consent to apply a concept or ideology, during a program implementation. Consent can also refer to permission to share information, and in the context of a community, this can refer to consent on involvement of the people. Consent may also refer to informed decision among the members of the community. However, if written, is consent limited to an MOA between the community and PCC or will each member be asked to make a written consent? During the planning session, that is, before the engagement or action part, is consent taken into consideration?

If students go to the community, parents are asked to sign a waiver interpreted as the written consent. It is a waiver related to an issue on fairness and protection from harm among the students. However, the waiver may sound beneficial only to PCC. But with the latest Bulacan incident, CHED is making the waiver null and void.

PCC is an institution of the UCCP. Students and the community belong to different religious orientations. The parents of the children who went through the literacy program with inculcation of biblical values embraced the activities. There had been an assumption that because the school is known to be a Christian school, biblical integration was always part of many activities. However, was there fairness on the part of the parents in the absence of a written consent/informed decision? Was written consent/informed decision from the parents necessary prior to the inculcation of biblical values that go

with the teaching of basic literacy to the children, even if the parents had already given verbal consent? The partners on livelihood were asked to attend the newly formed Pilgrim Christian Community Fellowship. Did they accept the program because of PCC's generosity to them as they may be lacking a regular income? Moreover, eventually, they no longer joined the worship services because they were not required.

The resolution to this issue is to determine a future action. The planning process has to include written consent or informed decision from the partners and parents in close coordination with the offices of Spiritual Formation, Community Extension, and the Vice-President for Academic Affairs for more administrative support.

**Competence.** Accordingly, by offering services, PCC tried to make a contract with participants to do the job they said they would do. This implied that the ones who were actually working and the institution as a whole are competent to accomplish their goals under reasonable circumstances.

In the planning stage, did the community and the students fully understand service-learning? Was PCC competently fair in the selection process of cooperators? How about in regard to entry to the community, did PCC take the opportunity knowing that the community was in need? Or did PCC do it because SU introduced SL and to a certain extent PCC needed the community as well? Did PCC go to the communities because of the people or because of SL? Was the selection process sufficient to determine the chosen community of the class per the learning objectives? Through NSTP was in communities where the students brought to the field the concepts related to leadership and environment. Moreover, the practice-teachers and the business students were in communities where they brought the concepts of literacy and health, and livelihood, respectively. Did PCC reach out just because of Sendong? Was it right that the school extended assistance because the partners were Sendong survivors?

How about the transfer of technology – when is this apt without jeopardizing book knowledge and cultural considerations? The practice teachers were confident that they could deliver concepts on literacy. They were oriented about cultural and local knowledge, and thus examples were based on the culture of the community.

On the other hand, was PCC competent in the avoidance of physical and emotional harm to the students and the community? Were spoken words appropriate? Was subjectivity set aside and objectivity properly observed?

Lastly, how capable was PCC in sustaining what it had started with SL? The resolution is that PCC can be a catalyst. The school does not have a course on agriculture; however, the teaching dimension was emphasized using innovative information on biblical virtues--as PCC is a Christian School-- and on agriculture and health concepts from the FAITH Basket Program. For the input on biblical virtues, the help of the Spiritual Formation Department was sought. For the input on agriculture and health, the consultant was the Dean of the School of Education who happens to be a graduate of Agricultural Education and who used to be the President of the Misamis Oriental State College of Agriculture and Technology. Moreover, the heads of the community such as the barangay council, purok head, and indigenous people group leader were consulted before action was done. However, as early as the planning stage of future projects, SL implementors have to do more examination on areas which have to be brought. As for sustainability, though the partners are benefitting from the program, the program itself needs follow up from the extension office, considering that students come and go every semester. Close coordination between the faculty and the extension office is very necessary.

**Confidentiality.** Probably the most familiar of ethical issues—perhaps because it is the one most often violated— is the expectation that communications and information from participants in the course of a community intervention or program (including conversations, written or taped records, notes, etc.) will be kept confidential. As a general rule, confidentiality is the best policy. Practicing confidentiality protects both the participants and the organization from invasion of privacy and establishes a bond of trust between the participants and the implementors. However, in the course of engagement between PCC and its partners in the community, breach of confidentiality took place. The implementers were surprised that the non-members of the community knew about the members who failed to comply with requirements such as loan payments. Resolution to this challenge includes thorough orientation among the implementors/students and the members of the community on this ethical issue. Orientation should emphasize the importance of reporting accurate results as observed and as told or narrated. Interview responses are not to be taken out of context. Observations should not be discussed without putting them into the appropriate context.



**Conflict of interest.** A conflict of interest is a situation in which someone's personal (e.g., financial, political, professional, social, sexual, family, etc.) interests could influence his/her judgment or actions in a financial decision or other decisions made when carrying out his/her job or in relating with participants. In community interventions, conflicts of interest may change— to the community's disadvantage--how a program is run or how money is spent.

Moreover, partner communities have internal concerns affecting proactive cooperation and the attainment of learning objectives. There is also dependence. In the case of SL at PCC, the criteria of the women were established, but some barangay officials still explored possibilities of benefitting from the program. There was an assumption that barangay officials tended to grab more opportunities because they could receive information first hand when programs of different organizations were first introduced at the barangay hall; thus, PCC exempted barangay officials.

Resolution on this area goes back to well contemplated plans as well as to the community heads, partners, and the implementors. Attending to the concern on conflict of interest addresses emotionally-Do-No-Harm issues.

## **OTHER CHALLENGES**

Considering that service-learning is an explicit goal of the curriculum and that it implies increased workload and responsibilities for faculty, how does the administration manifest support and recognition of its teachers, students, and partner community?

The administration manifests support and recognition of its faculty, students, and partner community through special honoraria, permission to go to the field, provision of vehicle with fuel allowance, safety and security provided to students, and opportunities for better partnerships.

Do the SL implementors see the community as a laboratory where people may become the subjects of study (as opposed to people as the focus of development efforts)?

From the perspective of the SL implementors, the community was not seen as a laboratory but was defined as the field where learners could implement what they had learned from the classroom. The members of the community were partners in meeting the learning objectives. Furthermore, the people were the focus of development efforts, and thus, their suggestions were heard.

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## LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPLEMENTING SL

1. Full engagement of school leaders is ensured if they understand the meaning and significance of SL as a pedagogical method.
2. Partner community leaders must be approached because they are the “gatekeepers” who give the “green light” before implementing SL.
3. A memorandum of agreement signed publicly by PCC administrators and barangay officials is necessary to ensure the success of the endeavor.
4. Program implementers specifically the teachers must be given a thorough orientation regarding SL before commencing the engagement.
5. The participants must signify their voluntary participation and cooperation in SL because they want to learn and improve their lives holistically.
6. Values are either “taught” or “caught” depending on the situation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ethics can be specific in the implementation of SL. The challenges start from seemingly scattered ethical concepts unique to the program, thereby needing formal constructs to arrive at an ethically-sound SL. With PCC as a church institution, disciplines in implementing SL do not just focus on the subject matter of the course. The focus includes a spiritual dimension which is the main guiding principle when examining ethical concerns on consent, competence, confidentiality, and conflict of interest. Resolutions should be part of future considerations and the bulk of work is on the planning stage. Moreover, there is good motivation for students, faculty, and the community to get involved in SL, and people are seen as partners in meeting the learning objectives.

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