AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING: THE PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

Enrique G. Oracion

ABSTRACT

Service-learning is not designed to be a substitute for classroom teaching but to reinforce the latter by providing practical meanings to the theoretical knowledge acquired by students. As a teaching-learning strategy, it pursues the growth of students' intellectual capacity along their chosen career paths and aims to promote their sense of social responsibility by providing them the opportunity to serve the community. But the need for a holistic approach to community problems makes it imperative for the different academic units to pool resources—human, technical, and material—and to work together in the same community as co-equals. The interdisciplinary framework of the service-learning program of Silliman University guided the design and implementation of the community projects of the participating academic units. Within this framework, students and faculty coordinators involved in the service-learning program served the same community but individually addressed specific problem areas according to their expertise in a coordinated manner.

Introduction

As a teaching strategy, service-learning is not designed to be a substitute for classroom teaching but to reinforce the latter by providing practical meanings to the theoretical knowledge acquired by students (Dickson 1989). Moreover, service-learning is offered as a tool to mold students to become good citizens (Berry and Chisholm 1999) and as a venue for them to reflect on the impact of community service on the career path they have chosen to pursue and the significance of such experience on their own lives (Whitehead 2001).

The importance of providing students the opportunity to experience working in the community for at least a brief period of their academic life cannot be overstressed. This experience gives

them an initial taste of what they could contribute to social transformation without considering personal gains.

Service-learning brings the students out of the the academic realm to the real world. In the traditional mode of instruction, learning is contained within the halls of an academic institution with the teacher as the main source of knowledge. The changing notions of pedagogy, however, have challenged the traditional image of teachers as the sole authority on knowledge. As a consequence, teachers are still accorded respect but they are no longer considered as infallible beings. Students who have been exposed to real life situations during the course of their studies gain new knowledge from the field work experience which emboldens them to question either the things they have learned in class or the teachings of their teachers.

These circumstances have led us to re-examine our traditional notion of a teacher. Rather than an all-out provider of knowledge, a teacher is now considered more as a facilitator for students to gain more knowledge through the provision of situations and events where they could best learn. According to the critical pedagogy espoused by Freire, a teacher's responsibility is to train students to be inquisitive, critical, and analytical individuals, not to make them mere reservoirs of information and ideas handed to them.

Beyond Off-campus Learning

Long before service-learning was formally known at Silliman University, a number of academic units have been pursuing strategies such as field trips, internship, practicum, or outreach activities which bring students outside of the university campus to visit or work in a community where they could put into practice what they have learned in their respective academic programs. The main concern of such projects is to enable students to apply the theories, concepts, or principles they have acquired in school in real life situations. They are also expected to satisfactorily meet a certain number of hours and get credit for their involvement without much concern for the impact of their activity on the community. In effect,

what has been stressed in this community work is mainly academic in nature. Field exposure or fieldwork has been justified in terms of how it enhances learning of students but it remains very much grounded on their desire to earn a degree. Because the community is regarded more as a social laboratory and the people as subjects, the positive impact of community work on the people with whom the students relate is a secondary concern on the students' agenda, although it is often used to justify their entry into a community.

It has to be pointed out, however, that community work per se is not necessarily self-serving and biased in favor of the students. This strategy can become mutually beneficial to the students and the community if only designed and managed in such a way that the students' desire to learn more and the values of service to others are equally emphasized. Berry says that when community service is linked to intentional and coherent learning, the value of experiences becomes exponential (2001: 2). Therefore, community work should be more than accomplishing the required number of hours or getting the highest mark in school. It is along this argument that service-learning deviates from off-campus learning which is academically centered.

Service-learning as an Innovation in Teaching

As a teaching strategy, service-learning pursues the growth of students' intellectual capacity along their chosen career path and aims to promote among them a sense of social responsibility (Dickson 1989:2). Within this framework, the students are exposed to social realities before they finally confront them as part of the country's labor force. It also aims to inculcate in them the positive notion that work as a way of earning a financial reward has to be coupled with the genuine desire to serve others. It is argued that if this value is upheld by the majority, it will lead toward social transformation of one degree. The transformative impact or reconstructive significance of service-learning may be measured not only by how it has improved the intellectual capability of students and enhanced their desire to serve others but

also by the way it has empowered the partner community and its citizens to improve themselves.

The primary aim of service-learning is to produce not intellectual robots but compassionate professionals who are concerned with the welfare of the less privileged. It is basically anchored on the principle of experiential learning (Whitehead 2001: 6). This involves the interplay of the acquisition of knowledge through research or instruction in the classroom, the application of this knowledge through service to the community, the internalization of the value of service through reflections, and the appreciation of practical learning which the students bring back to the classroom for discussion (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The Guiding Principles of Service-Learning
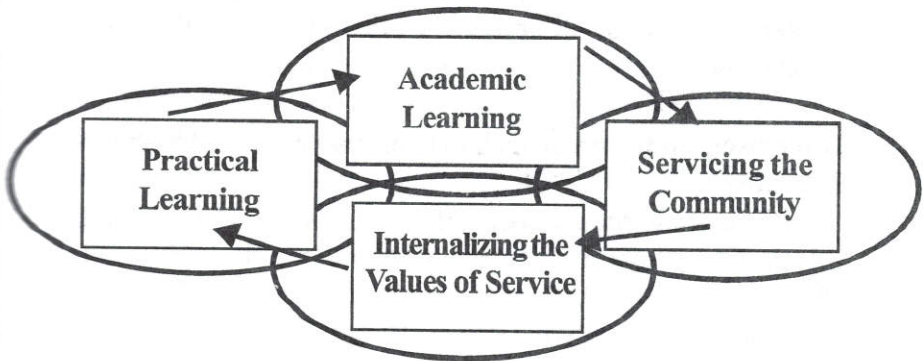
The kind of education Silliman University provides to its graduates is geared towards making them not only skillful and competitive in the labor market but compassionate and humane as well. The past graduates who now work in the country and overseas have earned the reputation of being good workers not only professionally but also socially and spiritually. This kind of graduates who are adaptable to all classes of people and circumstances is what Silliman University always aims to produce. Towards this goal, the curricula of several academic programs of the university provide opportunities for students to be exposed to community work before they graduate. For this reason, integrating service-learning in the academic program of Silliman University has been largely easy. What remains to be done is revitalizing the existing community work program along the principles of a service-learning program.

The succeeding articles in this issue describe the processes and initial achievements of the Silliman University's pilot community-based service-learning program. Together they demonstrate that despite their disciplinary differences, the various academic units can effectively work together in the same community.

Interdisciplinary Approach to Community-based Service-Learning

The academic units of Silliman University involved in piloting the principles of service-learning include Nursing, Physical Therapy, Medical Technology, Education, Business Administration, Social Work, and Sociology and Anthropology. The students and the faculty coordinators of these academic units handled specific projects for the residents of Maluay, the partner community. In applying the principles of service-learning, the various academic units were guided by the interdisciplinary framework which facilitated their collaboration despite obvious disciplinary differences.

The need for a holistic treatment of community problems made it imperative for the different academic units to pool resources—human, technical and material—and work together in the same community as co-equals. This is the ideal situation if an integrated community development program which relies on the interdisciplinary approach in the design and implementation of service-learning were to succeed. Within this framework, a particular discipline tackles a particular need of the community with consideration of how this will also impact or contribute to the other needs tackled by the other units. In general practice, an interdisciplinary approach in community development program breaks academic barriers in order for a team, for instance, of physical or medical and social scientists to work together on interrelated issues, such as environmental problems, according to their respective expertise (Milton 1996: 219).

Thus, in the design of the service-learning program of Silliman University, those in the medical and health fields such as the College of Nursing, the Department of Medical Technology, and the Physical Therapy Program addressed their activities towards the improvement of the bio-physical well-being of mothers and children. However, this could only be done when the participants have first been organized in order to ensure their sustained participation in the project activities. In this regard, the expertise of Social Work students in community organizing was of immense importance. Meanwhile, the Sociology and Anthropology students provided the survey data to the Social Work students for use in their community organizing work. They also helped in building the capability of the organized groups in the community to pursue their objectives.

A corollary assumption was that the chance of success of projects designed to improve the bio-physical well-being of people was greater if the households had enough food resources and if those resources were of the best quality to meet body needs. For this reason, the Entrepreneurship students of the College of Business Administration or were tapped to provide technical

services to the community in diversifying their income sources while those in Nutrition and Dietetics and Education disseminated information aimed at raising the people's awareness on proper nutrition and sanitation as essential to improved health.

In order to ensure coordinated efforts, however, one of the academic units involved in this undertaking had to assume the lead role. Its functions were to direct all efforts to prevent overlaps and contradictions, to synchronize field activities, and to properly manage available resources including time, energy, and money in order to gain better results. Because of their continuous contact with the people and the significant role they play in community organizing, Social Work students were in the best position to assume the responsibility of coordinating the activities of the various academic units in the community. Moreover, it was important for all the participating academic units to sit down together to draw plans and strategies before they engaged in actual community work.

Implementation of the Pilot Program

This program demonstrates how service-learning strategy allows students to work directly with the people without their project becoming a mere component of an existing government or non-government organization in the community program. With the exception of the student-teachers of the College of Education who were assigned to and supervised by designated teachers of a high school and elementary school in the community, the students who served in the community were not under the supervision of other individuals besides the faculty coordinators of their respective academic units.

The general activities described below reflect Silliman University's version of service-learning. The program is site specific and adaptive to existing social and cultural dynamics of the community and natural conditions. It is possible that given Silliman University's own peculiar social and cultural condition, its approach to service-learning deviates from the practices in other countries. Nevertheless, as results of this program indicate, Silliman University

service learning program is rooted on the basic philosophy of service-learning, which is to serve and to learn.

Establishing Partnership with a Community for Service-Learning. At the start of the first semester of SY 2001-2002, the program identified an economically depressed though accessible community which was willing to become a partner of Silliman University in community development. After other sites were considered and subsequently visited, Maluay was the final choice. The selection was based on the following criteria: (a) that the community has contiguous coastal and upland areas; (b) has both elementary and high schools; (c) has not been a project site of Silliman University or by other schools; (d) and has demonstrated willingness to be a partner community.

As soon as Maluay was formally chosen as partner for the service-learning program of Silliman University, the faculty coordinators met with the local leaders and government officials to discuss its implementation during the school year. A resolution to this effect was passed by the Barangay Council to show the formal acceptance of the community as a partner of Silliman University in the service-learning program.

This was followed by a baseline survey conducted by twelve student-volunteers majoring in Sociology and Anthropology and supervised by a faculty coordinator to identify the felt needs of the community residents. During the baseline survey, two Social Work students were already fielded to immerse themselves in the community. They also helped in the baseline survey as they went around interacting with the residents. The students subsequently presented the survey results to the community. The local leaders who attended the presentation also validated the data and helped in the prioritization of possible projects identified. A profile of Maluay is discussed in another article (Oracion, this issue of SJ).
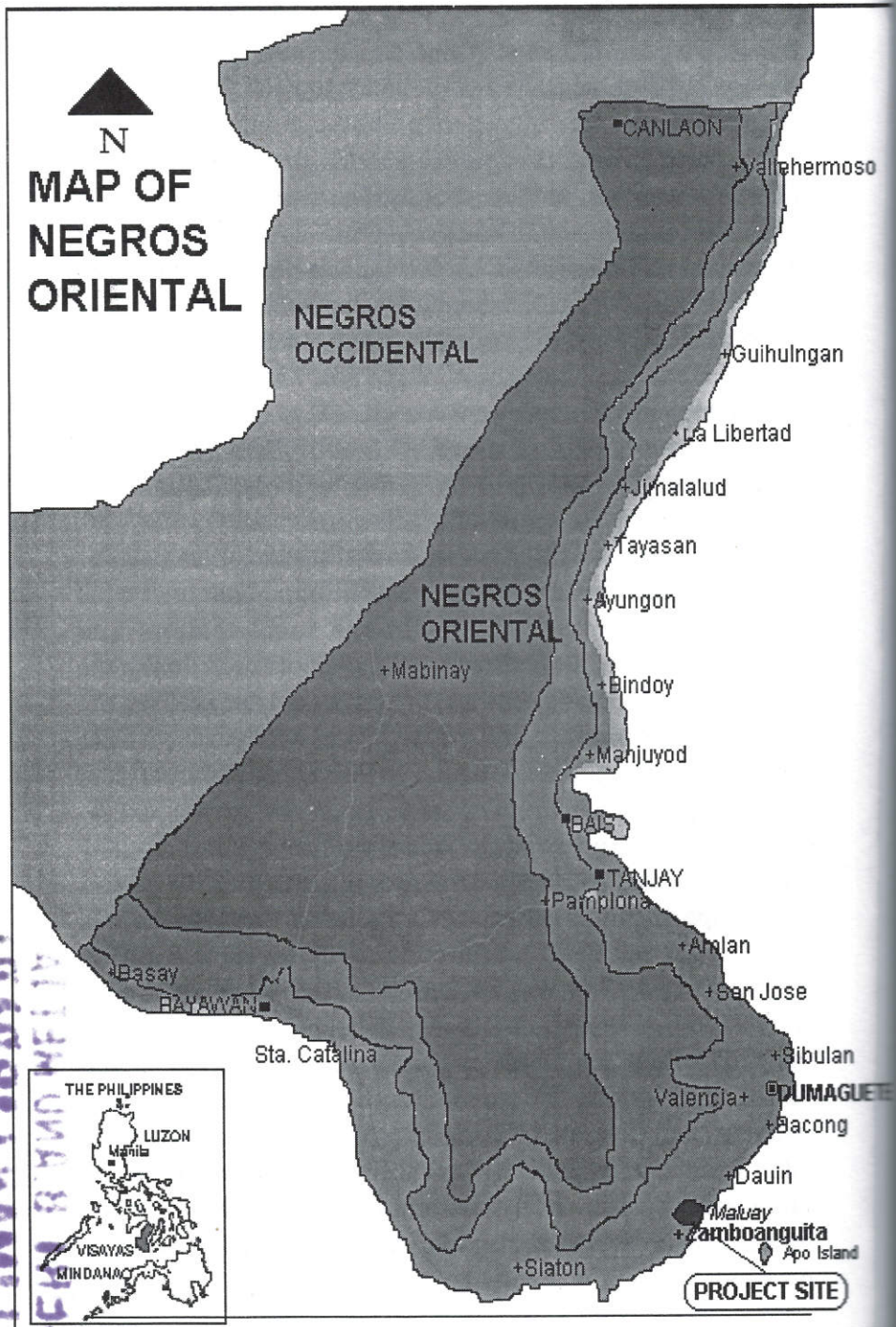
Piloting the Interdisciplinary Framework of Service-Learning. Meetings were conducted with the faculty coordinators of outreach or practicum programs of the various academic units in the university to discuss the community-based service-learning program in Maluay and to solicit their support of the project and their commitment to participate. A session was also held for the design of specific intervention projects by academic units. The group made sure that specific project plans were responsive to the felt needs identified by the people and according to the data generated by the baseline survey.

By the second semester of SY 2001-2002, the approved specific intervention projects of the participating academic units were implemented. Because they were implemented simultaneously, activities had to be coordinated to avoid contradictions and overlaps. The assigned Social Work students (Marilyn Baldado and Jennifer Navarro), who broke existing barriers of social indifference by living in the community, were responsible for the proper scheduling together with the cooperating residents for the conduct of the various project activities during the semester. Although the pilot projects were specific to their respective areas of specialization, they had to reinforce each other in the implementation.

The academic units undertaking specific projects, the number of students (a total of 102) who participated, and the responsible faculty coordinators are listed below. These are classified as capacitating and health services provision projects based on their major objectives:

Capacitating projects aim to empower the cooperating residents through organization, capability building, and skills training:
Organizing of Women, Men and the Youth (Department of Social Work- Community Program with 9 students under Prof. Merlinda C. Cepeda)

Capability Building (Department of Sociology and Anthropology-
Community Studies with 20 students under Dr. Solomon
C. Apla-on)
Livelihood Development (College of Business Administration-
Entrepreneurship with 21 students under Mr. Roberto A.
Estoconing)
Literacy Enhancement (Teacher Training Program- College of
Education with 5 Students under Dr. Jesusa L.P. Corazon
Gonzales)

**Health services provision projects aim to provide health
care services specific to the needs of cooperating residents:**
Health Project for Mothers (College of Nursing- Community
Health with 11 student-volunteers under Prof. Grace A.
Gloria)
Prevention and Control for Better Health Project (Medical
Technology Department with 18 students wherein nine were
also volunteers under Prof. Joel M. Rodriguez)
Health Project for Elderly Men and Women (Outreach Program-
Physical Therapy Department with 18 students under Ms.
Mitchelle T. Banogon)

Involving Students in the Service-Learning Program.
The students were presumed to be equipped with the basic
knowledge and skills related to their fields when they were brought
to the community. These basic knowledge and skills were then
shared with the cooperating residents of Maluay either in casual
discussions, in lectures, or in actual rendering of services to them.
As shown earlier, the students were either required by their courses
to serve the community or did their work on a voluntary basis.
The profile of students who were involved in the program in terms
of age, sex, courses, academic levels, and nature of participation
is discussed in another article (Oracion, this issue of SJ).
Aside from the four Social Work and five Education
students who lived in the community as designed by their

programs, the other participating students regularly visited and served in the community depending on the needs of the intervention projects they were undertaking. As part of their outputs, the students were required to submit to their faculty coordinators journals of their experiences in service-learning. To process their experiences, they held regular post-activity reflections and post-project reflections. According to Whitehead (2001: 6), values reflection is a very important component activity of service-learning and must be emphasized. This makes it different from any practicum or internship program where skills are the major measures of learning.

Aside from the project monitoring of the individual projects, the faculty coordinators also submitted monthly reports of the implementation and progress of their respective intervention projects to the program coordinator. At the close of the second semester, student volunteers of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology again assisted in conducting a community survey to evaluate the program.

The final outcomes of the program as a whole contained in this report highlight the experiences of the participating students involved and how the cooperating residents perceived the importance of the service-learning program to their well-being after a year. It also reveals the lessons to be learned from the strong and weak points of the program after a year of its implementation. It is hoped that these lessons will inspire the other academic units of Silliman University and the other institutions of higher learning to integrate service-learning in their existing curriculum.

Dissemination of the Experiences in Service-Learning

Before the first year of the project was about to end, two public presentations were conducted to disseminate the relevance of service-learning to a wider audience. Prof. Ester C. Delfin,

Program Coordinator, delivered an orientation lecture among the students and faculty of Silliman University on February 2002. This coincided with the celebration of the College of Arts and Sciences Week. Meanwhile, Prof. Enrique G. Oracion used the experiences of the program as a discussant during the 11th Regional Convention of the Psychological Association of the Philippines in Cebu City on March 2002. The topic was Service-Learning as a Teaching Strategy.

On March 11-12, 2002, Dr. Florence McCarthy, Vice President of the International Partnership for Service-Learning for Asia, visited Silliman University to monitor the status of its program. She had already visited Silliman the previous year when she lectured about the program in a forum with students and faculty and made a tour of selected project sites of the Silliman University Extension Program. During her second visit, she held a dialogue with the participating students and the faculty coordinators of the service-learning program, the organized women under the program, and the barangay officials of Maluay.

One international exposition of the community-based service-learning program of Silliman University was realized through the presentation of Dr. Quintin G. Doromal, Jr on May 31, 2002 during the Virginia Campus Compact Symposium with the theme, Service Focused-Learning Centered, held in Northern Virginia Community College- Manassas Campus, USA. Dr. Doromal, a graduate in Psychology from Silliman himself, was on a Rotary Foundation University Teaching Grant at Silliman University for a semester. This also gave him the opportunity to participate and observe its service-learning program. The title of his presentation was An Interdisciplinary Community Service Project in the Rural Philippines: The Results of Year One.

The visit of Dr. McCarthy and the lecture of Dr. Doromal provided them the chance also to compare the service-learning program as practiced in Silliman University and at other institutions of higher learning in Asia and the USA. Although it is to be expected that other institutions have their own style of interpreting and

implementing the program according to their respective conditions, they are anchored on the same principle of learning while extending service. It is envisioned that the experience of Silliman University will add to the growing interest in and development of service-learning in this part of the region.

Faculty coordinators and students in group discussion with community residents

Students who assisted in the community survey taking a break in the tabu center

Acknowledgment

References

Berry, H. A. 2001. Hearing other global voices: Is education listening? Action Reflection. The Partnership for Service-Learning, Fall. Pp. 1-2,7.

Berry, H. A. and L. A. Chisholm. 1999. Service-learning in higher education around the world: An initial look. New York: The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Ford Foundation.

Dickson, A. 1989. Toward a gentler society. Action Reflection. The Partnership for Service-Learning, Spring. Pp. 1-3.

De Guzman-Ladion, H. 1985. Healing wonders of herbs. Manila: Philippine Publishing House.

Friere, P. 1974. Pedagogy of the oppressed. Translated by Myra Bergan Ramos. England: Peguin Books.

Maslow, A. H. 1975. A theory of human motivation, In V. H. Vroom and E. L. Deci. Management and motivation: Selected readings. England: Peguin Books Ltd. Pp. 27-41.

Milton, K. 1996. Environmentalism and cultural theory: Exploring the role of anthropology in environmental discourse. London: Routledge.

Whitehead, L.G. 2001. South Dakota service-learning. Action Reflection. The Partnership for Service-Learning, Fall. Pp. 6-7.