

CAPABILITY BUILDING INITIATIVES FOR THE ELDERLY OF THE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the one semester community immersion and capability building experiences with the elderly of the Sociology and Anthropology students. From this activity, the students gained a clear strategic direction and heightened social commitment to serve the people in their needs. The vision of "... a peaceful, meaningful, healthful, and productive life of the elderly" enabled the service-learning participants to become aware of the need to instill among the elderly a sense of their own usefulness; to organize and assist the elderly in sustaining their significant role, collective strength, sense of community, and respect and concern for one another; and, to mobilize the elderly in some forms of peace-promoting, health-sustaining, meaning-giving, and productively fulfilling individual and community life. These experiential and collective discoveries were end-results of the planned activities undertaken, problems encountered and their mitigation, accomplishments, and lessons learned during the semester.

Introduction

"A more peaceful, meaningful, healthful, and productive life of the elderly in Maluay, Zamboanguita, Negros Oriental, Philippines." This was the collective conclusion and vision of the Sociology and Anthropology students after their community immersion under the service-learning program. Their experiences in the program led these young men and women to declare as their mission:

- ◆ To make the community aware of the elderly's capabilities to lead a peaceful, meaningful, healthful, and productive life with the other sectors in the community;
- ◆ To organize and assist the elderly in sustaining their significant role, their collective strengths, their sense of community, their

respect and concern for one another; and

- ◆ To engage the elderly, individually and collectively, in some forms of peace-promoting, health-promoting, meaning-giving, and productively fulfilling activities geared toward the establishment of a community-managed development initiative.

The strategic direction and social commitment of the students were geared towards the attainment of the following goals with and for the elderly:

- ◆ Self, group, and community awareness sessions were held to instill among the elderly a sense of their own usefulness and capabilities to lead a peaceful, meaningful, healthful, and productive life with the other sectors in the community.
- ◆ Establishment in the community of a senior citizens organization aimed at supporting the elderly's collective efforts to sustain their significant role, their sense of community with the other sectors, their respect and concern for one .
- ◆ Provision of sustainable social services to improve living conditions and other alternatives for peaceful, meaningful, healthful, and productive activities leading toward the establishment of community-managed development initiatives.

Twenty three students, six of them in the fourth year of their studies, participated in the project as a course requirement. Of these, 10 were males and 13 were females. A culturally diverse group, it included two Japanese females (one of whom was blind), a Korean male, and Filipino students, all of whom were enrolled in Sociology 74. A class in Community Studies, Sociology 74 assigns students, as a form of field exposure, to government and private organizations engaged in community work related to social, economic, and environmental programs. The purpose of such field exposure is to enable students to find areas of application and realization of the theories they have learned in school. During their service-learning exposure in Maluay, the students were under the supervision of a faculty member who provided practical guidance during the course of the field work.

This paper discusses the factors that brought about the strategic direction and social commitment of the students for the elderly in Maluay. In discussing these factors, this paper will examine the activities undertaken, problems and mitigation, accomplishments, and the lessons learned.

Activities

The thrust of the service-learning program of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology was conceptualized and implemented to provide capability building services with the various sectors, particularly the elderly in the community. This program aimed to provide the students with guided community exposure, focusing on serving the felt-needs of the elderly people and the other sectors. At the same time, the community exposure was envisioned to be the forum for the practical application of development theories in enhancing human capabilities and in building a community-managed development program. Guided by the set goals and objectives and the corresponding requirements of the course, the activities discussed here were undertaken.

Community Preparation and Entry. Following the framework of the service-learning concept, the faculty coordinator conducted a number of regular class sessions in the first two weeks of the semester to orient the students to the program. The orientation stressed the practical dimensions of the course and introduced the concept of service-learning as an opportunity to come face-to-face with concrete social realities. The students were also acquainted with the notion that genuine service and effective learning are two desirable products of shared experiences. This means that to effectively learn is to genuinely serve the people, and to genuinely serve the people is to effectively learn. In this approach, the community becomes the classroom and the life situation of the people the textbook of the students. Thus, it was emphasized to the students that the amount of time they were willing to give in order to become integrated into the life situation

of the people in the community determined to a certain degree the quantity and quality of services that they were going to perform and the learning that they expected to derive from it.

Using the data obtained from the baseline study for the service-learning program in the community, the students were divided into six work groups. Each work group was assigned to a *purok* or geographical unit as their area of responsibility in the community. A collectively designed interview schedule, based on Abraham H. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, was drafted and used to determine the felt-needs of the elderly and the corresponding services needed by them and the other sectors. Through a letter sent to the Barangay Captain of Maluay, the students formally sought permission to carry out field work in the community. Their community entry was made during the Garden Day Celebration of the municipality. From then on, the individual work groups were on their own with the faculty in-charge providing field visits and guidance along the way. To enhance teamwork, the faculty in-charge conducted a two-day live-in session on team building.

Felt-Needs Analysis. The felt-needs interviews mobilized the work groups to personally visit the homes of the elderly and this enabled them to experience the process of soliciting information through informal, person-to-person interaction. To ensure teamwork in each work group, one member was tasked as a facilitator of the interviews, another as a recorder of the information, and the others, for those groups which had more than three members, served as process observers. This phase of the community work was able to reach out to a total of 30 elderly persons. In terms of age, the elderly respondents were aged between 60-84 years, 14 (46.6%) of which were males and 16 (53.4%) were females.

The elderly respondents identified 26 problems or needs. Based on Maslow's classifications of human needs, eight were answers to the questions on *safety*, which refers to the need

to be free from actual danger, as well as the need for psychological assurance of security. Six were on the need for food, warmth, sleep, sex, and other bodily or *physiological* satisfactions. Another six were answers to questions related to self-actualization or the need to realize one's potential fully, to become what one is capable of becoming, and to realize one's real self. Four were on love and belonging needs, which refer to the basic need for other people, social acceptance, group membership, as well as to the need to give and to receive love and affection. Two were answers to the questions on the need to have the respect and esteem of others, as well as the need for self-esteem. These problems or needs are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. The Physiological, Safety, Belonging And Love, Esteem, And Self-actualization Needs Of The Elderly In Maluay, Zamboanguita, Negros Oriental (N=30)

Hierarchy of Human Needs	Particular Needs of the Elderly
Physiological needs	Poor housing; poor sleep; physical disability; inadequate water supply; insufficient medicine and health care; lack of regular meals
Safety needs	Peace and order in the community; fear of death; worry on the health of family members; lack of electric light in homes and streets; unsafe drinking water; lack of old age insurance or money; lack of privacy; lack of wholesome recreational activities
Love and belonging needs	Children are away from home; alone at home; internal family conflicts; interpersonal relationship
Esteem needs	Feeling of uselessness; low respect from other
Self-actualization needs	Lack of awareness of one's capacities; lack of peaceful and healthy life; children; lack of security in their jobs; not well-furnished homes; loss of ambitions in life; uncertainty of family's continuit

The application of network analysis on the identified problems or needs enabled the students to determine the *physiological* and *safety* dimensions as the root causes, and *self-actualization* and *love/belonging* as the aspects of the elderly's life to receive the greatest impact. Their basic need for food, shelter, and medical services were identified as the fundamental explanation for their physical deterioration and low level of capacity. These were reinforced by some environmental and social factors, as well as by psychological constraints in the life situation of the elderly. Consequently, these problems or needs affected their sense of meaning, direction, and purpose in life. The feelings of uselessness and low self-esteem were manifested in their wrinkled faces, gloomy eyes, feeble bodies, bent shoulders, and stuttering speech. Loneliness and living alone, or with only the company of small grandchildren whose parents were working away from home drove some of them into a number of vices. In short, the deteriorating physical condition of the elderly is connected with the absence of peace, meaning, good health, and productivity in their lives. The lack of support services to help them fully realize their aspirations for the remaining years of their life only contributes to make life even more difficult for the elderly.

Support Services. As may be noted, the foregoing activities were designed principally for the elderly. Nevertheless, some activities, such as capability building services, were also undertaken for the other members of the community—the men, women, and youth sectors. One of these was on team building attended by 35 participants. This one-day activity was designed to enable the men, women, and youth sectoral leaders to become aware of their self-perceptions as well as their perceptions of the other members of their organizations, to realize the importance of team building, and experience the benefits of teamwork.

With the guidance of the faculty coordinator, four selected students facilitated this particular activity using the experiential approach to awareness building, or the action-reflection method

advanced by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This method effectively stimulated active participation and interaction among the participants. The synthesis and reflections on the activities enabled the participants to appreciate and value the importance of self-disclosure as a necessary element in building a helping relationship and in creating solidarity, solidity, cooperation, harmony and, consequently, organizational health.

Coordination and Networking. The other activity conducted in the community was program coordination and networking. As results of the initial survey indicated, one of the serious problems of the elderly of Maluay was related to health. A number of the elderly contacts suffered from various physical disabilities. Because of this need, the service-learning program of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology linked up with the Physical Therapy Program.

Through this collaboration, the elderly with whom the Sociology and Anthropology students were working were introduced to the Physical Therapy students. Such coordination and linkage provided the students from the two departments of Silliman University the opportunity to interact, share common concerns, and forge a synergistic response to a concrete health situation from the Social Science and the Physical Therapy perspectives, which is almost impossible to take place in a regular classroom setting. In other words, the collaboration provided the technology of Physical Therapy a human-social dimension in dealing with health problems on the community level.

Assessment-Reflections of the Experiences of Students. Human development, the basic element and value base of service-learning, is a movement from physical, mental, and emotional constraints to freedom and self-fulfillment. It is a process of improving the quality of human life and raising the level of human capabilities to a desirable level. Thus, it is a means to ensure the transformation of the prevailing human realities from the *what is*

(the reality) and directing it towards the attainment of the *what should be* (the ideal). These concepts become clear in the assessment and reflections section of this paper.

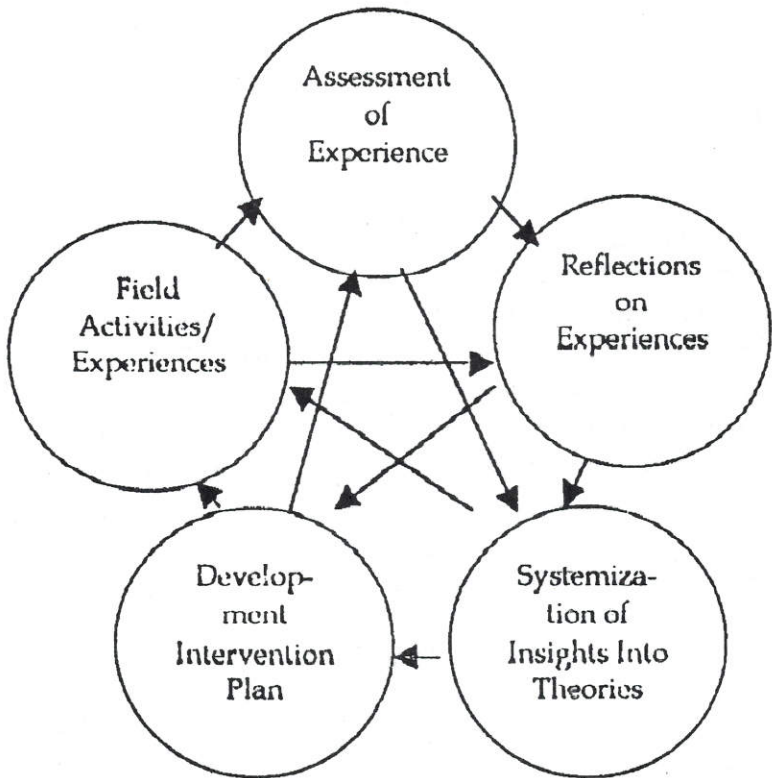
The assessment-reflection activity consisted of two phases. The first was a required mid-term paper, and the second was a required final report for the course. The assessments attempted to determine whether the activities set and undertaken during the period in review contributed to the attainment of the students' individual expectations and class learning objectives and whether they truly served the felt-needs of the people in the community. Thus the mid-term assessment report looked into the preparatory activities, the drafting of the needs-interview schedule, the community entry, the actual community immersion, and the person-to-person interaction with the elderly people in their homes and localities.

The reflection dimension of the reports articulated the students' insights, discoveries, realizations, lessons learned, as well as certain actions that needed to be given immediate and long-term attention and focus. The reflection aspect of the experience was significant. To a certain degree, it determined the students' level of social consciousness as a result of their encounter with concrete community issues. Such level of consciousness manifested itself in their behavior, in their language, in the manner they related with others, as well as in their critical attitudes towards people, institutions, and the course itself. The behavioral dimensions of individual changes were more evident among the Japanese and Korean members of the class. The blind Japanese girl whose condition initially posed a challenge to the group survived the demands of the field work, coming out of the experience even more productive than her classmates.

As an important ingredient in the service-learning process, the assessment-reflection activity helped to determine the worthiness or unworthiness of the field activities and experiences. Moreover, it determined the nature and quality of insights which may be used as significant materials in the formulation of theory which is

necessary in planning development interventions and in designing guides for future field activities. The life-energy derived from the field activities and experiences may be sustained when: (a) enough time is given for reflections and processing of insights; (b) such insights or learnings provide a clear basis for the development of an intervention plan; (c) such plan includes a specific guide to be used in assessing experience; (d) such assessment of experience provides the necessary materials in building a theory; and, (e) such theory provides a dependable direction in the implementation of the field activities.

The whole process, consisting of five inter-related and interactive elements, is shown and illustrated in the following figure.



Problems and Mitigations

Problems are blessings. They tell us where we are now and where we must be going. They tell us why we are at a particular point in time and how we get to where we want to go. They tell us what resources are needed, where they are found, and how much is required to sustain us in the process of attaining our set goals and objectives. They tell us the correct path to follow and those that we need to avoid. They tell us that balance and harmony are the natural way while the disruption of the inter-relatedness, interconnectedness, inter-supporting, inter-controlling, and inter-transformation of all things is detrimental to life. In short, problems help to mitigate the situation and allow us to survive, to sustain ourselves, and to grow towards what we want to become.

One of the problems related to the implementation of the programs for the elderly was the quality of integration of the students among the elderly and into the whole community. In the rural Philippines, outsiders or newcomers are to a certain degree looked upon with suspicion. It takes time and personal efforts to overcome these barriers and reach out to individual persons. This is done through informal interaction, sharing of ideas and concerns, participation in community activities, celebrating with the people in their joyful occasions, empathizing with them in their sorrows. Unfortunately, geographical distance, conflicting schedules of classes, language, and other cultural factors prevented the students from reaching a ripened interpersonal relationship with the community people.

Despite these problems, the students never abandoned their good intentions. Notwithstanding the limitations that beclouded the social integration process, the students' willingness to reach out was sustained by the challenging issues that they discovered. Moreover, the participation of the other groups from Silliman University provided a continuous presence of students in the community. The community organization students from the Department of Social Work, who served as the coordination link of the service-learning program, enabled the other students to work productively and harmoniously with the partner community.

Other related problems worth mentioning include the failure to orient the students with the service-learning activities of the other departments. Because of this failure, the students were not prepared to design more specific service activities which would have addressed particular problems or needs in the community. Corollary to this limitation, the needed *interpersonal relationship* among all the students from the different departments who participated in the community service program was also neglected. Compounding this problem was that some of the faculty members themselves did not consider this issue a significant parameter in the successful implementation of the service-learning program.

Consequently, the delivery of certain services to the community was merely played by ear, or based on "*pakiramdam*" and not carried out in a planned and systematic manner. Nevertheless, this lack of departmental coordination in community service was minimized by the regular sharing of field updates among the faculty involved. For their

part, students only learned about the service-learning activities of their counterparts from the other departments while informally interacting with each other during a service activity. The best consequence of these informal interactions among students while performing certain services in the community was the development of a certain level of interpersonal and working relationship among them.

Accomplishments

On the basis of the designed action program and in the light of the activities undertaken, it is possible to assess some of the results of the service-learning experiences of the Sociology and Anthropology students. The felt-needs analysis of the elderly enabled the students with their faculty coordinator to determine the strategic direction of the service-learning program of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Maluay.

Through the process of coordination and networking, a working relationship with the Physical Therapy Program of the University had been established. As experienced, the Sociology and Anthropology students served as the forerunner that prepared the coming of the Physical Therapy students who provided therapy services to the elderly. Through the services of the Physical Therapy students, ten more elderly people were identified and became participants of the program. Where the Sociology and Anthropology students failed to reach, the Physical Therapy students provided additional links that further enhanced the services and the learning process with the elderly and the other sectors in the community.

Meanwhile, a volunteer group of students facilitated a team building workshop with the leaders of the women, men, and youth organizations in Maluay. The experiential method used enabled the participants to discover that team building is a process that requires courage in opening oneself to others and reaching out to them. The participants discovered that self-disclosure enabled them to gain understanding of themselves and others. Understanding in turn enabled them to see cooperation, organizational unity, and teamwork evolve effortlessly.

Reflections of Students: Insights and Lessons Learned

The following insights, lessons learned, and foresights from their social immersion experience were culled from the mid-term and final assessment-reflection reports of the Community Studies-Service Learning students. For comparison this section consists of two categories, i. e. the perspectives of the foreign and the Filipino students in terms of the community, the people, the potentials for development, and the social immersion itself.

Perspective of the Foreign Students. The Korean and Japanese students pointed out that although the community was not urbanized, it was blessed with natural resources. They observed that the mountains and beaches, and the various crops grown—coconuts, corn, bananas and other fruit bearing plants, root crops, livestock, and others—may be further developed to provide sustainable ways of earning a living from farming, fishing,

tourism, marketing, among others.

These foreign students considered highly significant the people's understanding of, cooperation with, and commitment to the development of their community. They found that most of the elderly participants had positive attitudes toward the possibility of attaining an improved living condition. They noted that the receptive attitude of the Barangay Captain to the services made available by the service-learning programs of the participating departments of Silliman University indicated that the government in Barangay Maluay is ready to engage in some form of partnership in development.

However, these students also stressed that such partnership must address the seeming passivity of some people. For example, they found that while some of their contacts complained of lack of water, medication, available materials for house repairs, and other needs, many of them appeared either unwilling or uninterested in helping to solve the problems themselves. According to these foreign students, these contacts only talked about the problems or needs expecting that someone would come to solve these for them. Proceeding from that observation, these students asked what factors were responsible for this particular attitude of some people in the community? According to these students, their long immersion and increasing number of personal contacts in the community enabled them to catch a glimpse of the possible root causes of this sense of apathy.

Looking at the results of the the needs analysis survey among the elderly, these foreign students saw that poverty and health problems were the

most obvious explanation for the prevailing social immobility in the community. Aware that food, clothing, and shelter are basic requirements for a desirable and meaningful life, these students observed that these needs for physical survival continue to be the nagging priority concerns in the people's day-to-day experience. They reported that as foreigners, they felt that the more contacts they made and came to know well, the more they felt uneasy and emotional about the latter's situation. At the same time, they became more closely drawn to them despite their knowledge that they can do only very little for them. Pointing out that although they came from another culture and different economic condition, they acquired significant insights, discoveries, and realizations from the social immersion experience with the people.

First, these foreign students considered the friendliness and hospitality of the people a transforming experience. Second, from working closely with their elderly contacts, they came to realize that being old is not and does not mean reaching a state of helplessness and hopelessness in life. They learned that if someone sees life positively, the physical health conditions and hardship do not matter. In fact, they pointed out that the best things in life are the consequences of difficulties turned upside down. Third, from their fieldwork immersion, these students came to know that service-learning is not something which has certain pre-set instructions and goals, except those which they had to find, to see, to examine, and to learn from. "To go through negative experiences," recalled the blind Japanese student in the class, "or to realize my own limitations, are very

hard experiences; however, they often teach more than the positive ones.”

Perspective of the Filipino Students. Like most rural communities in the province, Barangay Maluay is endowed with fertile lands and sufficient supply of water. Its people grow some crops for their livelihood. The students observed that the residents were peace-loving and worked together as one community. They also noted that while many of the residents lived below poverty level, they were not discouraged by this condition. On the other hand, the students saw that these people were even optimistic about their future.

From their contacts, the students concluded that the quest for a better life was the basic driving force of the people, many of whom were born in this community. According to the students, these people had the desire to stay and to make the best out of what they had in order to sustain their hopes for progress in their own community. The students noted that to continue living with their loved ones was for the people the greatest motivation for attaining an improved living condition. However, the students also found out that the restraining force in the community was mainly political in nature. From their survey, the students found out that those who refused to follow the wishes of those in powers were not in the priority list of support services. According to them, this was the reason the community suffered from lack of basic social services. From their survey, the students also saw that the lack of knowledge in sustainable farming techniques was the other obstacle to progress. They have observed that farm-

ers in this locality continue to practice farming techniques that were detrimental to the health of the people, the natural resources, and the total environment.

From the community integration, particularly through the needs analysis survey, the Filipino students discovered the high rate of illiteracy in the community. They also gleaned from the responses to the queries that the greatest concern of the people was their economic well-being. According to the students, the person-to-person interaction with the people gave them the opportunity to understand the frame of mind of the elderly, the value of time, and patience. Although physically exhausting, field work immersion allowed these students to witness many memorable moments including the deplorable situation of the people. To them, the most depressing spectacle was men, women, young people, children, and the elderly going about in tattered clothes, barefoot, and eating with bare hands their meager meals of rice and dried fish.

Before their field immersion, the students were familiarized with the people's living conditions and problems through lectures in their Sociology 63 (Current Issues and Social Problems in the Philippines). They had therefore some prior knowledge of the situation they were going to face during their community work. But as the students themselves discovered, nothing could have prepared them for the depressing reality they had personally confronted. The close and intimate encounter with this reality was for many of them a wake up call. Reflecting on their field work, they pointed out that to them, such an experience meant

that they “[didn’t have to walk a long] distance to discover and to value the need to serve and to learn from the people.” In conclusion, they said:

The living conditions of the very poor sector in society will continue to haunt us, especially the case of the elderly in Maluay. The basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, appropriate medical health care, security, respect, acceptance, and love were very much wanting in the community. These are real human needs, the importance and significance of which can never be appreciated except through a living encounter with these people in their daily life. Through the social immersion, however, these social realities touched our hearts and opened our eyes to the value of education in the context of serving the people in their need.