

LESSONS LEARNED IN COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING: RESULTS OF YEAR ONE

A SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

This article is a synthesis of the results of the community-based service-learning program of Silliman University during its first year of implementation. An interdisciplinary group of students and faculty collaborated to realize the program's vision and mission according to a project design. Because several activities were undertaken in the community, coordination, monitoring, and supervision to achieve the desired results were imperative. Documentation of operation and evaluation of the results were carried out while the experiences of the students upon which they were expected to reflect upon the values they have learned were processed. Results of the first year of operation show a number of ideal practices that need to be developed for the conduct of service-learning to fully succeed. First, participants must have commitment and dedication; second, the program must be participatory; third, it must be process-oriented and goal-directed; fourth, it must aim for community empowerment; and fifth, it must instill social responsibility among students. Finally, it is important for the program to aim to be sustainable.

Introduction

Although a year is too soon to measure the impact of the community-based service-learning program of Silliman University on the partner community, there are lessons that need to be emphasized in order to sustain and improve its operation in the succeeding years.

The first phase of the implementation of the service-learning program of Silliman University was not without challenge. As the program progressed, some shortcomings became apparent in areas such as the management of the program at the classroom level with students, among the participating academic units, and among the cooperating residents in the community. Rather than

being considered as failure of the program, these shortcomings are viewed as opportunities for learning valuable lessons in securing the future viability of the program.

Based on the initial experience of Silliman University in community-based service-learning program, the following matters and concerns have to be dealt with in developing a program that has direction and goals.

Components in Program Development

Service-learning is a deliberate process of doing community work involving faculty and students with the aim of providing service to people which will empower them to meet their needs. The achievement of this aim is intended to be a learning experience for the students and their teachers involved in this program. Unlike programs operated by an external agency where students are assigned for placement, community-based service-learning provides students the opportunity to serve a community by being brought directly to a previously identified partner community by their teachers.

Vision and Mission. The vision and mission of the service-learning program of Silliman University is patterned after that of the revitalized Center of Extension and Development of the university in order to have a unified direction for the community work with the ultimate aim of producing more tangible impacts. Underpinning this arrangement is the belief that an ideal situation is achieved when the service-learning program and the traditional extension program work together towards the same vision.

Interdisciplinary Group. Having a mixed group of students and teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds enabled the service-learning program to meet the various needs of the community. On the one hand, a holistic treatment of community problems was possible because more human and technical resources were immediately available. On the other hand, this also helped to diminish the biases among disciplines and further promote

among the participating units greater appreciation for the expertise of people from other academic backgrounds.

As demonstrated in the specific project reports, the efforts of one academic unit were maximized while assisting another unit deal with a particular problem or need in the community. In the first year of its implementation, the service-learning program of Silliman University was able to introduce a minimum of 17 specific intervention projects which benefited a multi-sectoral group in the community. It was also noted that the close involvement in the program of cooperating residents achieved more positive results than when they simply waited to receive the services provided to them by the participating academic units.

Project Design. Nevertheless, it was clear that an interdisciplinary approach to service-learning could also lead to contradictions or overlaps when the specific intervention projects of the participating academic units are not clearly and specifically designed. In the experience of Silliman University, it was important to begin with a baseline survey of the community in order to identify the priority needs of the community. Moreover, the survey had to be validated by the community before specific intervention projects could be designed. These priority needs and the possible barriers to meeting them were also presented to the local leaders during an assembly.

The vision and mission of the program also served as a guide in project designs. Before they were carried out, the individual proponents of specific intervention projects assessed how their expected results would contribute to the attainment of the objectives of the other projects and how they could also benefit from them. The project design used in the pilot program, however, has to be supplemented by the syllabus designed by the teachers and has to be appropriate for the subjects he or she handles. However, this was not explored in the pilot program but was found to be necessary in harmonizing and facilitating instructions and activities within and outside the classroom.

The activities contained in the project design need to be reflected in the syllabus in such a way that it would serve as a guide for the teacher when the students are brought to the community to serve and shed light on how they are supposed to learn. The syllabus has to have the objectives expressed along the cognitive and affective domains of learning. In addition, it should include the concepts to learn, the strategies and activities as well as schedules, the resources needed, the expected learning of students, the procedures for value reflections and the integration of theory and practice, and the manner of evaluating what students learned. In effect, the syllabus that each student also has would guide him or her along with their teachers.

Coordination. Running various projects involving different people in the same community was not an easy task. The lessons from the program show the significant role of the program coordinator who came from the Department of Social Work, the lead academic unit of the community-based service-learning program. Because they were tasked to organize and mobilize the community, Social Work students, under the supervision of their program coordinator, were responsible for arranging the community activities of the other academic units. For this reason, it was important for them to possess not only a thorough knowledge of the vision and mission of the program but also of the developments happening in the community. Their effective coordination of field work activities and schedules of participating units and the cooperating residents prevented overlaps and conflicts.

Likewise, it was the program coordinator's responsibility to settle emerging problems among those involved in the program, to call regular meetings for group sharing of activities, and to regularly visit the community for on-site monitoring and not just rely on the reports received by the office. Finally, it was the program coordinator's task to provide the administration with progress reports and university visitors with information about the program.

Monitoring and Supervision. Meanwhile, because of its dual nature as both academic and extension program, service-learning was under the supervision of the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Office of the Extension Director. But the two offices also need to develop mechanisms to perform their tasks particularly as the Extension Office is structurally not under the Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. In effect, the program coordinator had to report to either of these offices depending on the decision made by a particular stakeholder.

In Silliman University, monitoring and supervision done at this early stage of the program implementation is still rather loose. Once service-learning is fully integrated into the curriculum, the administration has to decide on a structure which clearly shows which office it will belong. In addition, a Service-learning Program Director has to be appointed to manage the program of all the academic units to ensure that the principles of service-learning are observed and the rights and welfare of students as well as those of the community residents are protected. As one of the functions of this office is to locate funding for the projects, the Service-learning Program Director is expected to link up with prospective agencies which support programs of this sort.

Documentation of Operation and Evaluation. Despite its importance in monitoring the program's operation and terminal evaluation, proper documentation continues to be a problem in various community programs. In the experience of Silliman University, each academic unit was required to submit a monthly progress report which contains information about the activities for the month, the problems encountered and the mitigations undertaken, the accomplishments, and the future plans. The prompt submission of progress reports allowed closer follow-up monitoring in the field and the discussion of the problems during meetings for immediate solutions.

Students involved in their projects were expected to submit their activity and reflection reports to their faculty coordinators.

These reports served as one of the bases of their project progress report. In this manner, the students were also trained to be conscious in documenting their field activities. These student reports were to be reinforced by the actual field observations of the faculty coordinators. At the end the program, the faculty coordinators compiled the monthly reports and used them as basis for the terminal report.

During the pilot implementation by Silliman University of its service-learning program, a faculty member was assigned to take charge of operation research which documented the whole set of activities of the program from the beginning to the close of the school year independent of what the specific faculty coordinators were doing. The results of the operation research verified and validated the observations of the program coordinator. In the course of the pilot implementation, operation research, which began during the baseline survey and terminated during the community evaluation survey, was one area in which student-volunteers were involved and which became both a learning and an awakening experience for them.

Processing and Reflection of Experiences. The community evaluation survey was used to measure the impact of a community-based service-learning program on the cooperating residents. The same survey was also used to measure the impact of the program on the participating students. As the student journals reflected what students learned and the values they realized as a result of their service to the community, they helped students make sense of these impacts on them. Also included in these journals were problems that had to be resolved together with their faculty coordinators when they returned to the classroom.

Under the service-learning program, the processing of the lessons students learned and the problems they encountered in community work constituted a major component of the teaching strategy of Silliman University faculty involved in the program. The teachers processed not only the skills their students learned or needed to improve, but also the student reflections on the values

that they have learned from serving people. Although most of the faculty coordinators conducted their reflections in school, some of them preferred to do it in the community right after every visit. The latter procedure had the advantage of immediately allowing productive discussion as the lessons and problems the students encountered in providing services to people were still fresh in their minds.

The skills and new knowledge gained as well as the values realized are considered as measures of how much the participation of the students in the service-learning program has changed them. Students who participated in the program to fulfill a course requirement received equivalent grade credits while the student-volunteers gained some sense of fulfillment at having served people in need. It would be safe to assume that this the exposure to community work has also enhanced the knowledge students learn in the classroom.

Best Practices to Develop for a Successful Program

Some best practices described in this section result from a critical assessment of both the positive and negative experiences in the implementation of the community-based service-learning program of Silliman University. They are described here in order to serve as guide in making the future operation of the service-learning program of Silliman University even more effective in the future.

Commitment and Dedication. Engaging in community work during weekends demands taking time off from home and social activities. This entails sacrifices and physical stress on the part of the students as well as their teachers. Particularly for those students living full time in the community, this means getting away from usual social activities with friends and families in the city or at home. For participants in this program, only their deep sense of commitment and dedication to the community enabled them to cope with this challenge. In this way, they learned to value the social and psychological benefits that come from serving others.

The reflections of some students in their journals recorded their sense of fulfillment after they left the community where they have rendered services to cooperating residents who were receptive to their efforts. This experience enabled these students to realize how in their small way they were able to change the lives of these people for the better. Their reflections suggest not only their commitment and dedication to help others, but also the strong sense of satisfaction and achievement as a result.

Participatory in Conduct. The interdisciplinary approach to a community-based service-learning requires the involvement of various stakeholders such as the faculty coordinators of various academic units, the participating students, and the cooperating community residents. Such tripartite relationship suggests the complexity of interaction among those involved. Although there is a program coordinator and a lead academic unit to facilitate the smooth implementation of program activities, decision-making has to be shared and every one is free to give opinions while others critique them. Therefore, a service-learning program must observe participatory conduct in all its undertakings in the academe as well as in the community. Collective decisions have to be arrived at after consultation and every one must also have a corresponding role to play in the realization of this decision. In other words, being participatory in the management of a service-learning program means the sharing of power and responsibilities toward the achievement of a common vision. It is not enough for participants to be involved only in planning. They must also be actively involved in the implementation of the plan. This also means that program coordinators do not only make the plan and let others carry it out. They must work together with all those involved to draw the plan or scrutinize proposals and suggestions. Several styles in participatory work are available which may be adapted to the work conditions and personalities of different people in the group.

Although an initiator is needed for things to start happening, those involved must be responsive to the invitation to join in the

deliberation of the plan. This implies that the success of this dynamic depends on the active involvement of participants of the program. It is imperative to develop the participants' creativity and encourage them to take initiatives which will contribute to the success of the project. This is true between program and faculty coordinators, between students and faculty coordinators, and between the cooperating residents and the students. In participatory work, no one remains merely a spectator who maintains a wait-and-see attitude without care whether the program will fail or succeed. Everyone is expected to be an initiator of new ideas as this ensures the continuance of the service-learning program even if the core group who started it is no longer around. The participatory approach in service-learning allows for a wide ownership of the program which is necessary for its sustainability. This is what the program of Silliman University aims to realize although it may take time.

Process-oriented and Goal-directed. A service-learning program may either be process-oriented or goal-directed depending on the financial and time constraints of the program. It has always been a debate whether the end will justify the means or whether shortcuts should be allowed in order to achieve the required results of the program. Questions such as whether the program should impose on the community what they need or should the faculty coordinators always tell their students what to do need to be addressed at the outset. Needless to mention, participants feel a sense of fulfillment in this working atmosphere when the goal is commonly shared.

Goal setting is thus a necessary precondition in any program in order for it to have direction. Nevertheless, if it is over-emphasized to the detriment of the democratic participation of all concerned, it will also undermine the expected positive results that may be derived in the process. Similarly, if the process is over-emphasized without a direction anchored on a certain goal, the whole process becomes a futile exercise.

In the community-based service-learning program,

particularly as practiced by Silliman University, the goals are to develop students to be skillful and become socially responsible and at the same time to empower the community to meet their needs. These goals can not be achieved overnight and it will take a long process until the impact of service-learning becomes more grounded. In balancing between the process to be observed and the desired goals to be achieved, the service-learning program must consider these merits. For the goals of the community-based service-learning to be achieved requires time, five years at the least, of sustained partnership with the community.

Community Empowerment. The ultimate aim of Silliman University's Service-Learning Program is to work with as many partner communities that need assistance. For this reason, it must take into account the ability of the cooperating residents to sustain the work as soon as the program moves out. To facilitate this, the program must recognize that the ability of the people to assume the responsibility to continue the program depends on the kinds of capacitating activities that have been earlier introduced and presently carried out.

The major initial projects of the community-based service-learning program of Silliman University revolved around community organization and mobilization. Providing support were a number of capability building activities aimed at strengthening the organizational dynamic and structure. The program has already made some gains to deal with these concerns through all its capacitating projects but much is still to be done during the succeeding years. It is here where the expertise of students in Social Work and those in Sociology and Anthropology becomes more relevant. For their part, the Business students provided the cooperating residents' livelihood projects with economic incentives thus encouraging the community to initiate more projects. The health care services provided by the students of the College of Nursing, the Department of Medical Technology, and the Physical Therapy Program were also geared towards motivating the community to take more active part and eventually be empowered

in matters concerning health. The student-teachers of the College of Education, on the other hand, helped to raise the awareness of young students about the importance of education and the significance of collective work and self-reliance.

Community empowerment is a pre-requisite for program sustainability. It is measured by the ability of the residents to decide what is good for them and to create and exercise whatever means they believe will satisfactorily meet their needs. This also signifies their ability to overcome socio-cultural and political barriers and utilize available human and material resources in their pursuit of the common good. For this reason, community empowerment is only possible when the capacitated residents have been organized and mobilized. The community-based service-learning program can only fully contribute to social transformation if community empowerment is achieved.

Instill Social Responsibility among Students. The Service-learning program aims to instill a greater sense of social responsibility among students while it also empowers the community at the other end. While it is true that service-learning is academic based and students may be more motivated by the grades they expect to get which are taken as measure of what they have learned, such should be coupled with the development of their sense of social responsibility.

It has been observed that when students were introduced to the concept of social responsibility either as a pre-requisite or a possible outcome during their orientation to the program, many of them performed their tasks in community work better and show stronger desire to serve. Some of them, however, developed such value only after they had been exposed to the community and had seen the situation of disadvantaged people. Such stories of how their worldview had been influenced after a close and personal encounter with real people in need are reflected in their individual journals, samples of which are included in the department reports in this collection.

For their part, the faculty coordinators must be keen

observers of the behavior of their respective students in the community in order to see their transformation. They also have to set the mood in which the students could easily develop the sense of social responsibility desired by the program. But to accomplish this, they first have to demonstrate to the students their own sense of social responsibility. As discussed in social psychology, modeling influences another person's behavior more than the use of suggestion or coercion which has only superficial impact when the source is not credible. Thus it would be difficult to instill the sense of social responsibility to students when the faculty coordinators do not possess it themselves.

The fact that the faculty coordinators of Silliman University accepted the invitation to be part of the pilot service-learning program is already a demonstration of their own sense of social responsibility. Their enthusiasm to be of service to others has served as inspiration for their students to do the same.

Institutionalization. All the foregoing depends foremost on the institutionalization of service-learning. This means that it has to have a place in the academic structure of the university, perhaps under the Office of Instruction, with a coordinator or a director. This office would be responsible for providing orientation and training to teachers on service-learning and in overseeing its practice by various disciplines. Moreover, this office should encourage teachers to explicitly integrate it into the curriculum of the disciplines where it is more appropriate and to be guided with a module or syllabus. This would make possible a harmonized and systematic conduct of activities in the community and the classroom and not simply in a sporadic way. Moreover, a standard procedure has to be installed that the academic units could follow when they make links with the communities and other agencies where they will send their students for service-learning.

It is also important that the university administration should allocate financial resources and remuneration or incentive of whatever forms commensurate to the efforts of teachers who would spend sometime in the community for service-learning. This

demands more time and effort on their part and the giving of reasonable incentives is just appropriate to sustain service-learning in the university. It is also presumed that once the institutionalization of service-learning is realized, this would further facilitate linkages with other institutions that ventured into it in the international academic community. This would then make possible the exchanges of experiences and resources with them and further improve the state of service-learning in this part of the world.

Glossary of Local Terms

Antipolo type- a traditional type of toilet without a bowl but with only a small hole situated directly above a pit covered with light materials

Barangay- the smallest political unit in the Philippines; also known as village

Barangay Captain- the elected political head of a village

Barangay Kagawad- an elected member of the Barangay Council

Barangay Tanod- a designated peacekeeper or police in a village

Buko- a young coconut

Hilot- a traditional midwife, either trained or not, who assists in child delivery

Kapunungan sa Kasakit- a voluntary association in the village created to provide mutual financial help during difficult times (i.e. the death of a family member).

Lagundi- five-leaved Chaste tree (*Vitex negundo* L.) whose leaves are boiled and used as medication for productive cough due to congestion and bronchitis (de Guzman-Ladion 1985: 19).

Nipa- a kind of palm growing in swampy land particularly near the coastal areas

Pakiramdam- feeling for the conditions or needs of others; empathy

Poblacion- the center of a town or municipality

Pulvoron- a local delicacy made from flour, powdered milk,

margarine, and sugar as basic ingredients.

Purok or sitio- a sub-unit of a village composed of cluster of houses.

Sangguniang Kabataan- a council created by law composed of the youth in every barangay aging 15 to 21 years old

Sirguwelas- *Spondias purpurea* L. Anacardiaceae

Starapple- *Chrysophyllum cainito* L. Sapotaceae

Tabu- a regular day for market within a designated place in a village

Tocino- a marinated pork either grilled or fried

Torta- a native bread or cake baked in a homemade oven

Tuba- a native wine derived from coconut sap