Service Learning as a Response to Disasters and Social Development: A Philippine Experience

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ABSTRACT
An estimated two to six million people are adversely affected every year by natural disasters in the Philippines. This article explains the roots of service learning and discusses how classrooms are effectively linked to communities by increasing student awareness and capability to respond to crisis situations. To sustain voluntary relief efforts by students, community development has been integrated in courses taught in many schools and universities. A case study of the Ateneo de Manila University’s ‘Theory and Practice of Social Development’ course established in the 1970s for relief and rehabilitation work in flood-prone areas, examines the contents and issues of service learning in the country.

KEYWORDS: Service learning, Disasters, Social Development.

JEL CLASSIFICATION: A22, L31, Q54

1 INTRODUCTION

The April 2011 Tohoku earthquake which primarily affected the northeast portion of Japan produced an innumerable human and financial toll on the country. It was estimated that more than 15,000 people died (Yamazaki, Minami, Sasaki, Sumi, 2011), and displaced around 300,000 households, and caused severe infrastructure damage, including more than 190,000 buildings damaged or destroyed and a significant reduction in power and transport (Norio, Ye, Yoshio, Kajitani, Shi, Tatano, 2011).

What was significant after the calamity was the magnitude of assistance made by socio-civic groups and voluntary organizations in order to assist those who have been adversely affected. As reported by the Japan Association of Charity Organizations, one of the largest civil society networks in the country, the Japan Civil Network for Disaster, composed of more than 500 organizations was established immediately after the earthquake to assist official rescue efforts, in which more than 400,000 individuals volunteered to assist in relief and rehabilitation efforts. In fact, Tatsuki (2000) noted that the rise of civil society groups in Japan have been caused by the response of people’s organizations following another similar calamity, the 1996 Kobe earthquake.

Less publicly, but nevertheless as important, is the work being undertaken by student groups and the youth in assisting those affected by the earthquake; for example, the Nippon Foundation (2011) had organized a team of college students coming from 38 universities to assist in the relief efforts in the affected area.

Like Japan and many other countries, the Philippines has been struck by numerous natural disasters; it has been estimated that around two to six million Filipinos yearly have been directly and indirectly affected by typhoons, earthquakes and landslides that frequently visit the country. The Philippine National Disaster Coordinating Committee and the World Bank (2004) estimated that from 1970 to 2000, there were 886 fatalities from various disasters (typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and...
But also similar to Japan, the responses by civil society groups and voluntary organizations have been significant. Philippine corporations have set up the Corporate Network for Disaster Response to coordinate philanthropic efforts undertaken by private firms to provide assistance for victims of disasters. Local voluntary organizations, like the Citizens Disaster Response Network, promote community-based approaches by undertaking awareness raising and disaster preparedness and response training. Voluntary efforts by students have also been significant; Tirol (2009) chronicled the work undertaken by university students to respond to the victims of Typhoon Ondoy (Ketsana) in 2009.

In order to sustain voluntary response by students in terms of post-disaster relief, many universities in the country have integrated community development responses in the different courses that they offer. This paper reviews the experience of undertaking ‘service learning’ in the Theory and Practice of Social Development (or Economics 177), a course taught by the Economics Department at the Ateneo de Manila University, a Jesuit-run liberal arts institution located in the Philippines, which grew out of the university’s experience in responding to disasters in the central part of Luzon island, the main northern island group of the country. This paper will briefly examine volunteerism as a student response to a 1972 flood, and discuss the process of its institutionalization as a service learning course; finally, the implications of setting up a service learning program is discussed.

2 SERVICE LEARNING

What is service learning? According to McGoldrick (1998) and McGoldrick and Zeigert (2002, 2008), service learning is a method of experiential learning that links the classroom with the community. It requires students to spend time in volunteer service and relate their experiences there to educational theories learned in the classroom. Reflection is a key component in service learning—it is the process by which the service experience is linked with academic learning. When learners reflect on their own learning processes they keep their learning on track and are able systematically to check their understanding. According to Daudelin (1996), reflection enables the learner to make sense of past experiences in order to affect and understand future experiences.

Service learning is also a strategy that builds character, spurs civic engagement, and applies content to abstract theories, allowing teachers to engage students as active participants in the learning process. Instead of simply asking students to open their textbooks, teachers using service learning engage students in a critical thinking exercise to examine their world. Students are guided to connect their interests and moral leadership to solve a problem, serve a need, or be of service to others. Pearson (2002) noted that once a focus for service is identified, students may apply skills such as data collection, documentation, problem-solving, charting and graphing, and persuasive writing to test theories, develop surveys, analyze data, inform community decision-makers, and practice communication skills.

The other rationale of service learning is along the pursuit of college and university mission statements that generally include research, educational, and service goals, although the importance placed on each area varies across institutions. In their academic work related to these goals, university faculty may keep the three activities separate—faculty have research, classes, and professional and community service activities—or combine them on a pair-wise basis. By incorporating formal research activity into the academic course in service to a specific community, the objectives of service learning is preserved while in support of the institutional mission to conduct useful research, provide quality education, and extend service to communities. This may entail very careful planning on the part of the faculty conducting research and teaching the course and in the selection of the communities in need of service.
There have been many service learning courses that have been offered throughout different countries in the world. Annette (2002) noted that in developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, these types of courses have been developed starting in the 1970s due to support given by major educational associations, and then followed through by governmental assistance. Service learning has been also been practiced in developing countries, such as Mexico, Brazil and the Philippines, and this has been integrated in many fields, including social sciences, engineering and the humanities.

Service learning has also been practiced as a response of tertiary institutions to natural disasters. Many of the examples are those undertaken by medical schools that respond to the health needs of those that have been affected by calamities (Steiner and Sands, 2000; Wondmikun, Feleke and Tafete, 2005; Leung, Liu, Wang and Chen, 2007) or engineering schools that undertake some technological innovation to respond to post-disaster needs (Brenner, Schroeder, Madey, 2007; Wilson and Jones, 2007). In these cases, service learning was undertaken both as a response of educational institutions to assist their immediate communities cope with the disaster and as a way for the students to better apply their knowledge and skills outside of the classroom setting. Many cases in service learning reported that students who participate in community relief and rehabilitation continue to provide more long-term assistance to communities even after the end of their academic term (Eyler, Giles and Braxton, 1997).

3 SERVICE LEARNING AND THE ECONOMICS 177 COURSE

3.1 History

The roots of service learning at the Ateneo can be traced to student volunteerism as a response to a devastating flood that affected the Central Luzon plains. This so-called July 1972 Floodwaters caused by continuous heavy rains that lasted for days significantly increased the water levels of the Pampanga and Agno rivers, two main river systems in the area, and consequently caused wide areas to be submerged under water for around two months. More than 370,000 individuals were rendered homeless, and 2.4 million were affected. Senior year students at the Ateneo launched relief operations to provide food and clothing to the homeless, but once flood waters receded, students had to assist farmers in order to develop livelihood, irrigation and agricultural reconstruction work to get them back to their feet (Jayme-Lao, 2005). Eventually, the assistance provided to farmers was eventually extended to labor unions and urban poor communities.

In 1975, the course ‘Theory and Practice of Social Development’ was first taught as offered by the Economics Department of the Ateneo de Manila University to provide academic credit to students who were undertaking relief and rehabilitation efforts in marginalized communities in Metro Manila and Central Luzon (Evangelista, 2005). The course focused on deepening the social analysis skills of students as a foundation for a deeper understanding of the roots of the problems in their assigned communities. While a Jesuit priest, Fr. Noel Vasquez, initiated the development of the course, by the early 1980s, course tutors were recruited from the Center for Community Services, the university extension office set up to organize workers, farmers and other poor communities to assist in longer-term social development efforts.

After the work in rehabilitating disaster-prone communities in the 1970s, the course throughout the 1980s not only focused on social analysis but also on longer-term social development efforts in poor communities. By the 1990s, the course, which by then was established at the Economics Department of the university, focused on familiarizing students with different types of social development projects and policies, and the techniques in developing, implementing and evaluating these. Around this time, an exposure requirement was integrated where students were required to undertake several trips to poor communities to assess the effectiveness of development interventions.
3.2 Coursework

The course is taught in a single academic term. Students who take the course are mainly economics and management economics majors, although there have been a few students majoring in other courses (i.e., development studies, management) who have been also taking the subject in the past several years. The knowledge and skills taught in class provide the foundation for students to undertake service learning activities; different types of activities are undertaken (see below) to help students apply what they have learned.

There are six modules that are covered in the course. The first three modules introduce the problem of poverty and underdevelopment and deepen their understanding of the causes, effects and analytical tools to measure these problems. Students are taught to examine poverty in a multi-dimensional way, not only relying on traditional quantitative definitions but also on qualitative descriptions of the community.

The last three modules of the course deepen students’ knowledge on the different anti-poverty programs that could be undertaken to solve the poverty related problems in the community. A discussion of the institutions (national government, local government, non-government organizations, people’s organizations, and cooperatives) is undertaken and the advantages and disadvantages of each organization as implementors of anti-poverty programs reviewed. The last module covers the assessment of anti-poverty programs, including a study of cost-benefit assessment and impact assessment techniques.

3.3 Service Learning Project

The focal requirement of the course is the service learning project. In the project, students are required to undertake different types of activities that would benefit a partner community and, at the same time, practice the skills that were introduced to them during the lecture sessions. The partner communities are chosen by the staff members of the Office for Social Concern and Involvement (OSCI), the university office in charge of college extension and service work. The OSCI investigates the suitability of the communities for project work and to ensure the safety and security of students during their stay. Since 2001, the communities have ranged from indigenous peoples communities to fisherfolk areas to farmers groups to urban poor groups in Metro Manila, where the university is located, and in provinces near the metropolis. Some of these include areas that have been affected by typhoon floods such as urban poor and farming communities.

The actual service learning project takes place in the middle of the semester when students undertake several trips to their partner community to implement their projects. Students undertake several methodologies in finalizing their project – including survey, focus group discussion and key informant interview techniques. Meetings with the leaders of the people’s organization in the partner communities are also undertaken. The highlight of the service learning project is a presentation to the communities about their findings. The presentations can be undertaken on the university campus or in the community itself. Community representatives and the OSCI staff are provided opportunities to ask questions regarding the paper; they are also requested to provide suggestions for the groups to improve their paper. Groups also submit a final draft of their service learning project after the presentation.

The service learning projects of students are varied but these are closely linked with the lessons discussed in class. These include the following:

a) Development of the socio-economic profiles of partner communities. These profiles will provide the basis of the implementation of project interventions in the communities, or to assess the practicability of the operation of certain types of activities. Student groups undertake survey interviews of around 30 to 50 families to get basic information on household characteristics and
incomes and expenditures, savings, access to physical infrastructure and natural resources, and membership in social organizations. These are used as bases for future project interventions in the partner communities. Some of the activities undertaken include the development of community profiles for indigenous people’s families in Capas, Tarlac, to assess their livelihood needs and for urban poor households in Pasig, Metro Manila, to pinpoint their shelter needs after Typhoon Ketsana.

b) Creation of an alternative project intervention. Another type is the development of a project that can help the community improve their welfare. Using the socio-economic data gathered from the community, the students identify possible project alternatives for the community. The project plan is then mapped out using a tool called the ‘logical framework analysis’ which identifies the quantitative targets that have to be observed in each stage of project implementation. Projects include the implementation of livelihood projects (such as handbag production for senior citizens in Quiapo, Manila, and milk production for farmers in Nueva Ecija), microfinance or credit project and health or nutrition interventions (such as supplemental feeding activities for indigenous peoples groups).

c) Assessment of the effectiveness of a project intervention. Some of the service learning projects undertaken by students are also evaluation of the economic effectiveness and efficiency of existing community projects. The lessons learned from project assessment are then integrated into project future design so that the community partners would understand the problems that constrain effective implementation. For example, the activities of selected social enterprises in Metro Manila were assessed in terms of improving their effectiveness in local communities.

Table 1 below summarizes the different types of service learning projects undertaken in typical targeted communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service Learning Project</th>
<th>Skill required</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Impact/ Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Profile Write-up</td>
<td>Data-gathering, data analysis</td>
<td>Profile of indigenous peoples communities; Profile of urban poor areas</td>
<td>Develop project interventions useful for community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of project intervention</td>
<td>Criteria to assess alternatives, logframe</td>
<td>Water system in fisherfolk area; Aeta community farm; Fishnet project in fisherfolk community in Batangas province</td>
<td>Translation into proposal for grant, loan funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project evaluation/assessment</td>
<td>Cost-benefit analysis, Project Management &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>Assessment of foreign funded assisted livelihood projects for indigenous peoples group, impact of social benefits of selected social enterprises</td>
<td>Realignment of project funds to more successful components</td>
</tr>
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</table>

4 ISSUES IN UNDERTAKING SERVICE LEARNING

There are several issues in the implementation of the course, and these mirror some of the issues explained in Zeigert and McGoldrick (2002) and other articles on service learning. The first two are the more practical issues, especially in the context of relief and rehabilitation of disaster affected areas, while the last is an issue of strengthening connections between the course content and the needs of the community. These are the following:

1. Safety and security of students in community sites. While the partner communities are investigated by the OSCI staff in terms of their safety and security, there have been several incidents in the past, including the evacuation of students that fall ill in the partner communities,
that have led the course lecturers to suggest a tightening of the procedures related to this. The OSCI staff accompanies students only during their immersion but this is not done during subsequent follow-up visits of the student groups; thus, on occasion, the lecturers accompany students during their field work. This is especially problematic in disaster areas where the calamity has not completely subsided; protocols are continually to be developed to ensure that students continue to be safe.

2. **Resources for service learning.** Service learning requires additional financial resources for implementation. In the Economics 177, the additional resources are necessitated by the need to prepare the groundwork the communities for them to accept the student groups to visit their areas, to accompany the students during their field work and be present during the student presentations to their partner organizations. The imprimatur and the support of university officials are important in undertaking service learning.

3. **Linking the objectives of the course with the needs of community.** This is an issue that is constantly faced in service learning programs, and oftentimes, a significant amount of time and financial resources is necessary to ensure a good leveling off is made. Thus, there is some trade-off in providing for the needs of the community and at the same time ensuring that students deepen their skills in development work.

4. **Strengthening the quality of student outputs.** There are several instances that students’ service learning projects have not mustered the minimum level of quality that communities and their partner NGOs require. This has constrained acceptance of service learning projects in many marginalized communities. The course lecturers have remedied this by increasing the number of consultations with students to ensure student groups are able to meet the desired objectives of their projects.

5. **Reflecting on their service learning experience.** Formulating the appropriate reflection methodologies necessary for students to assess their experiences in service learning is also needed. It has been assumed that students would be able to reflect on their experience through the development of the service learning project, but apparently they would need more guidance in locating their experience in service learning in the over-all context of their formation process as students in the university.

In the course of the discussions with other faculty, other issues, such as the need for more sustained involvement of students in service learning courses, strengthening the cross-disciplinary content of these courses, and developing a more comprehensive service learning culture in the university, were discussed. But this necessitates wider discussion and dialogue among the administrators and other faculty members in the university.

**5 CONCLUSION**

Service learning at the Ateneo through the Economics 177 course initially grew out of the objective to assist disaster prone communities, but later evolved towards responding to the longer-term social development needs of the community. At the early stages of its introduction, the course has already established strong service learning objectives for its students; after more than twenty years, the course had been standardized and continues to contribute to the research and extension activities of the university.

The main conclusion therefore of this article is that universities can evolve service learning in their respective institutions to assist communities beyond undertaking relief and rehabilitation. Service learning reinforces a deep learning process in the undergraduate education on the social sciences. Because of its distinct normative approach of “what ought to be” done in service communities, students logically found the relevance of understanding more deeply the “what is” of economics.
Also, as a conscious manifestation, service-learning in economics has reflected the university’s vision, mission and the goal of building society, and if we may add, the goals of socio-economic development.

6 REFERENCES


