The Show must Go On(line): A Virtual Storytelling Project through eService-Learning

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Abstract: Because of the pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had to redesign their courses and transfer their classes to remote or virtual spaces. Although teachers and students are generally able to adapt to Zoom, the nature of speech and theatre arts classes subject them to a more difficult transitionary challenge compared to most courses. This paper explores how the concepts and principles of Electronic Service-Learning (eS-L) was introduced and implemented for an online class that included a virtual storytelling project for P. Villanueva Elementary School (PVES) as a major academic requirement. For this project, students not only exhibited creative and technical prowess with their virtual storytelling performances, but also engaged in live meaningful discussions with PVES pupils and children's book authors. This pedagogical initiative springs from the Lasallian mission of encouraging students to remain mindful of their contribution to society building through creativity, camaraderie, and compassion even during a particularly difficult time. Most importantly, it hopes to emphasize how teaching online encourages theater arts educators to experiment and innovate, reflecting on what works and what does not. By viewing creativity as the only way to mitigate the crisis, and by viewing teaching as a creative act in itself, delivering a course online becomes as valuable a learning experience for the educator as it is for the students. Even within the pandemic, the arts can safely remain active within our educational institutions as long as educators are willing to transform norms and find new avenues to provide students and the community with opportunities they need.

Keywords: Online theatre; Virtual storytelling; eService-Learning; Community engagement

Prelude: The Project's Background Situation

De La Salle University (DLSU) adopted the definition of Service – Learning by Bringle and Hatcher (1995). Service-Learning is defined as a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students 1) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and 2) reflect on the service activity to understand course content while appreciating the discipline and enhancing personal values and civic responsibility. Service-Learning serves as a teaching and learning pedagogy that is curricular in nature and a form of social engagement opportunity for students. It allows them to connect to the community through a meaningful service activity that is responsive to the course requirement and relevant to its principles, concepts, and learning outcomes.

The four key elements of Service-Learning which seem to have inspired DLSU's adoption of this pedagogy are: 1) its course-based nature, which means that service afforded to the community is part

and parcel of the course; 2) its reflective component, which translates the Service-Learning experience to the Lasallian core values; 3) its organic reciprocity, which allows all stakeholders to benefit from the whole process in which social responsibility is concretized by the students, faculty members, Service-Learning specialists and partner organizations who collectively plan, implement, and evaluate a service-driven endeavor; and 4) its mantra, which is civic education, foregrounds serving the community as an educative tool for students to learn the course content, while embodying the value to serve. Thus said, Service-Learning situates students in an academic environment that transcends serving to learn and learning to serve.

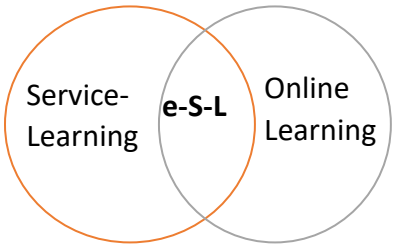
DLSU incorporates Service-Learning in its strategic plan and mandates all academic programs to incorporate Service-Learning in all levels. Moreover, it has become an integral part of DLSU's education as reflected in its teaching, research, and social engagement thrusts. All colleges have been responding positively with the mandate, and a significant increase in the number of courses incorporating service-learning components in their syllabi has been observed.

The unprecedented lockdown of schools in the Philippines amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions to transition from conventional learning (face to face) to online learning. Remote delivery of courses is DLSU's response to the restrictions on movement brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Various online platforms were used such as Animospace, Zoom app, email, and Facebook among others to continue with the learning process, whether through synchronous or asynchronous arrangements.

The COVID19 pandemic had forced Higher Educational Institutions to recalibrate its syllabus into online learning and has now become the new context. Consequently, DLSU has implemented Electronic Service-Learning (eS-L) as a manifestation of mindfulness in one's role in society while fluidly adapting to the new normal while pursuing social engagement.

What is eS-L? E-Service Learning, according to Waldner, et al. (2012), occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online.

Figure 1 shows the intersection of service-learning and online learning describing the focus of most literatures on e-S-L.



In the illustration, the intersection between the traditional Service-Learning and On-line Learning is eS-L.

The concept of eS-L has promoted the continuous implementation of Service-Learning in DLSU. It has been acknowledged even by faculty members as an effective mechanism to deepen their courses despite the limitations brought by the pandemic. Furthermore, some Service-Learning faculty practitioners have suggested continuing the practice of eS-L even with the easing of restrictions or the resuming of face-to-face classes. In fact, online learning has revealed itself to be a facilitator rather than a barrier to service-learning. E-service-learning holds the potential to transform both service-learning and online learning by freeing service-learning from its geographical constraints and by equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement (Waldner, et al.).

Currently, 82% of courses and programs at DLSU have incorporated Service-Learning or Electronic Service-Learning engagement in the syllabi. This has been implemented and in collaboration with more than a hundred partner communities, non-government organizations, local government units, and faith-based and people organizations.

The Stage Goes On(line)

The pandemic has either forced or inspired theater groups and performing arts companies to go online with their productions. These artist-run performances were usually limited yet free and open to the public. While it is true that online theatre might have struggled to maintain its artistic profundity, theatre had to surrender to technological mediation (Phelan, 1993) and eventually metamorphose into an online product while the cast, crew, and audience are in lockdown.

However, despite all kinds of setbacks, the performing arts community is endlessly creative — and it is undeniable that there is room for

exploration of theater and performing arts in the digital space. The pandemic has changed many aspects of people's lives, but the arts can safely remain active within our institutions as long as we are willing to transform norms and find new avenues to create valuable learning experiences and provide young people with unique opportunities. From digital galleries to cinematic theater, these new avenues of creation, performance, and presentation are driving our student successes during this most challenging time.

Because of the pandemic, concurring with an energized social justice movement, an urgency was sparked among many arts organizations about how they approach audience interaction and issues of inclusivity and equity. Indeed, new patterns — meaning new opportunities — are emerging, such as the diversity of new audiences. Digital events, many free of charge, are attracting audiences from lower income groups and different levels of education. Most of those enjoying digital arts offerings had not visited an arts institution in a long time since the pandemic began, so they are now hungry for artistic stimulation — perhaps as a way to regain a sense of agency, expression and enjoyment in such a time of uncertainty (Sterngold, 2020). Without the pandemic and its demand for a reassessment of equity and inclusivity in the performing arts, the young students of P. Villanueva Elementary School would not have had the chance to be an audience to such a storytelling project — they would not have been able to broaden their concepts of literacy and arts outside their classroom. Likewise, the students in charge of the project would not have been able to reach such audiences, those living far from the city where centers of education and culture are located, and enlightened about the unique potential of their passion for theatre without this opportunity.

Act One: Virtual Storytelling Meets eService-Learning

Virtual storytelling involves using a mixture of content and digital media to bring a narrative to life (Mazzoccone, 2021). It is an effective pedagogical tool rich in technical, communication, collaborative, oral speaking, creativity, visual and sound literacy, and project management skills (Daviz, 2020). Since the pandemic is causing educators to rethink how arts organizations approach everything from audience interaction to inclusivity and equity (Flynn, 2021), they seemed to have successfully transitioned from live to virtual storytelling performances and workshops. The flexibility of storytelling to provide educational content through a variety of the online modality makes storytelling training readily available to teachers and educators around the globe (Stephen, 2018). Consequently, teachers continue to take advantage of these virtual opportunities as professional development opportunities that will not only enhance their own practice but also employ storytelling as a teaching tool.

On the other hand, storytelling practices in the classroom also positively affect students because their 21st century technological know-how is harnessed and developed. Young people are digital natives, with the online world as their natural habitat; they know what they want, where the resources they need are, and how to access them efficiently. This approach encourages resourcefulness in students and, highlighting the applicability of skills they learn outside of school that is relevant to their generation, provides an opportunity for them to feel like they have an important role — a beneficial counterbalance to teachers' common inclination to underestimate their students (Li,, Li, & Han, 2021). By involving students, teachers not only lead, but create, develop, guide, and facilitate the learning process, as a result cultivating an improved sense of agency and creativity in the student experience.

Although the online platform seemed to easily blend in with storytelling, one major goal of the project was to use reading as a tool for fluency and comprehension gains (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009) among the students of P. Villanueva Elementary School. This means that, Zoom as the online storytelling room has to go beyond keeping children together virtually (Kozma, 1991). It has to establish and sustain children's interest as they listen, participate, and understand the storytelling performances. Because storytelling is both visual and auditory, the Zoom performances needed to include screenshots of the pages, subtitles of the dialogues from the story, background music and sound effects. Integrating these online media extends children's reading experience to concepts of new literacies that can be developed and learned through the use of technology (Gee, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Richardson, 2006).

For student performers, the implementation of online activities in theatre arts may achieve simultaneous exploratory environments, providing flexibility and efficiency to experience learning in terms of time and location (Li, Li, & Han, 2021). In the class, the process of

preparation and presentation proved to be a new experience — no doubt, certain real-life interactions standard in performing arts education was felt, but as an experiment in efficiency, conveniences such as consultations with the teacher and collaboration with group members on online platforms was seen to have potential in advancing the field. Indeed, students from the storytelling project were able to have a unique learning experience where they worked together to integrate their technological skills (video editing, voice recording, etc.) with theatrical elements (acting, interacting with audiences, etc.), in the end able to succeed in presenting the material assigned to them in the most dynamic and impactful ways. Likewise, teaching online also encourages performing arts educators to experiment, innovate, and reflect on what works and what does not, gaining experiences as they go along. Researchers in this study consider how this kind of hybrid learning, as opposed to being merely a tool for adjustment, marks a new stage for performing arts education.

With online technologies, eService-Learning has become manageable and ideal because students are able to realize that they could be of help to the community even when at home (Schmidt, 2021). It highlights the importance of young people being aware of the avenues, now accessible like never before because of online platforms, where they can use their talents and passions for the betterment of society. In addition, eService-Learning teaches students life lessons and skills that are only achievable beyond the four walls of the classroom — in other words, it bridges the gap for students who have the skills to contribute to their communities but don't typically encounter the opportunity to. Hence, it can be said that virtual storytelling and eService-Learning blend well for a situation that necessitates giving and taking.

Act Two: The Kids are Okay

The virtual storytelling project titled "Kami naman ang Taya: Kuwentuhan Kasama Si Ate at Si Kuya" (It's Our Turn: Storytelling with Big Brother and Sister) was organized and implemented by BSED Major in English students who were enrolled in Speech and Theatre Arts (SPTHART) for selected students of P. Villanueva Elementary School. SPTHART is a service course handled by the Department of Literature for English majors. As of date, SPTHART is not yet officially tagged as an eService-Learning (eS-L) course; however, for two years now and with the guidance of the Center for Concern and Social Action (COSCA), it has been taught using the eS-L framework. COSCA coordinated with both the class and the partner organization from planning to implementation of the eS-L project. After online class discussions and activities on theatre arts were conducted, students created storytelling performances for "At Nabuhay ang mga Magagandang Salita*"*by Genaro Gojo Cruz and "How Long till September" by Tanya Katrina Simon. Mr. Gojo Cruz and Ms. Simon are children's book authors and faculty members of the Department of Literature at De La Salle University. The class was divided into two groups, and each group assigned their own cast and crew. The separate storytelling performances were edited into a single pre-recorded video file thereafter. The pre-recorded performances lasted for about ten minutes each; however, the entire online event ran for one and a half hours, which included opening and closing ceremonies, transitory activities, and conversation with the authors.

To make sure that children in the Zoom meeting are engaged during the storytelling performances, the students made sure that pre-, during, and post-reading activities such as open-ended questions, trivia, and simple recall. The PVES pupils actively participated during these activities; some even turned on their cameras and microphones when answering questions while others with low internet bandwidth stayed involved by typing their answers and ideas in the Zoom chat box.

Another interesting feature of the project was a live question and answer portion with the Zoom audience and the authors. Mr. Gojo Cruz and Ms. Simon joined the online activity and answered questions from the children, which were very perceptive such as 'What difficulties do you encounter when writing a book?', 'Why should we wait for a pandemic to bring back beautiful words at home?', 'What inspires you to write children's books', and 'What advice would you give kids like us who also want to become writers?'. The Zoom room was full of heart reactions from SPTHART students and DLSU and PVES faculty and staff because of how the PVES students enthusiastically and sincerely participated in the Q and A.

Copies of the books of Mr. Gojo Cruz and Ms. Simon were sent to PVES Elementary School and will be distributed to the children who attended the event when face-to-face classes resume.

Lastly, SPTHART students were asked to write a reflective essay to articulate what they learned and how they felt during the entire eService-

learning experience. This is a required component of eS-L classes, which closely followed the Lasallian reflection framework: *Masid-Danas* (See-Experience), *Suri-Nilay* (Analyze-Reflect), and *Taya-Kilos* (Commitment-Action). At the outset of the term, COSCA conducted an eS-L orientation with the students including representatives from the partner organization. In addition, it was explained to the participants that: 1) extracts from their reflective essays may be used in a COSCA research that could possibly spring from the eS-L project; 2) there are no risks in consenting to include their essays in a research project, which may be presented in a conference or published in its proceedings; 3) their names will not be used in the research; and 4) their grades will not be affected if they do not consent to include their essays. Extracts from reflective essays of students who gave their consent were included in this paper. Lastly, PVES faculty members who attended the virtual storytelling were invited to share impressions and insights after the performances, and through COSCA, they consented to have their recorded messages included in the paper if the researchers would find them relevant.

Debrief: Challenges and Elucidations

Some students in class were shy, intimidated by the thought of performance, or reluctant to risk making a mistake in front of the class. This is why a dramatic activity in class should be a voluntary activity. There is nothing that turns something playful into a chore more than being forced to participate (Taylor, 2003). Nonparticipation in the performances were not considered as nonperformance but as a performance itself. Students who choose not to take acting roles did very well in the technicalities and documentation. More importantly, following the performance, the class discussed what worked and did not work in the production. The debrief provided an excellent opportunity to explore dramatic activity fundamentals, establishing class norms for doing theatre online and giving direction to other online class requirements.

> "I think I worked on the video editing for two days. It was challenging, but knowing that the show's success depends on my work pushed me to give it my best. I would say that visualizing the audience who are kids, inspired me to finish the editing on time" (Student A).

As argued by Gee (2003), Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004), and Richardson (2006), students of the pandemic have overcome the complexities of technology. They are naturally adaptive with computer applications for virtual shows, which seem to prove the intermediality of theatre and technology. In the same way, viewers of theatre that have become virtual bring expectations of performances that collide well with their gadgets and the world wide web.

> "We prepared a script, but we did not expect that the kids would respond so actively. They were overflowing with eagerness and energy. We asked follow up questions right then and there, depending on the kids' questions and insights" (Student B).

In the same vein, Sterngold (2020) opines that students who make theatre as well as those who watch theatre have been craving for artistic doses since the outset of the pandemic. These creative processes of performing and spectating have provided opportunities for students to gain a sense of ownership, genuine enjoyment, and sustainable camaraderie during extraordinary times.

Just the same, students admitted that they had a hard time pre-recording and editing their performances due to unreliable internet connectivity. They also felt that class interaction was very limited, and they constantly mentioned in class that the experiences could have been better if they were done face to face.

Behind the Curtain: Finding Key Takeaways

Surprisingly, participants from PVES responded actively insightfully even when online. They were always ready to ask and answer questions and seemed to have adjusted with computer-mediated interactions as well. On the other hand, SPTHART students performed efficiently in accomplishing online tasks. As mentioned in their reflective essays, they appreciated flexibility and control over the time and place of their requirement (Schmidt, 2021).

As observed by the SPTHART course instructor, students submitted their AnimoSpace assignments on time. Alongside rehearsals and finalization of the visual performances, students were constantly conscious of their individual deadlines as well. The once-a-week synchronous

sessions allowed them to learn and discuss theatre concepts in class while the asynchronous sessions were considerably enough for coaching and rehearsals.

> "We were able to pre-record our performances when we were ready. Instructions and directions were clarified before we rehearsed on our own. This allowed us to maximize group rehearsal time that resulted in smooth recording sessions" (Student C).

This seems to coincide with Li, Li, and Han's (2021) argument on online theatre arts activities as highly probing; thus, the process of transferring theatre making from the face-to-face to the online platform gives them a safe space for trial and error or learning by doing. As can be deduced from the extract, students appreciated how they are given independence as long as tasks were given beforehand and explained fully.

> "We were able to record our performances in the comfort of our homes. We used minimal costumes that are available in our wardrobe. Our rooms transformed into tiny rehearsal spaces and limitless virtual stages that made our theatre experience real and memorable" (Student D).

As affirmed by Schmidt (2021), the conduct of eService-Learning has blended well with online technologies. Although students may not be able to physically immerse themselves into a specific community, the virtual platform allows them to realistically implement a project that is beneficial to the community.

> "The activity has inspired our students to learn by reading especially during the pandemic. It is very apparent that our students enjoyed the performances from start to end. We are always thankful to De La Salle University for community engagement projects such as this. The PVES family enjoyed this collaborative work" (PVES Faculty Member).

The extract corresponds to what Phelan (1993) affirms in regard to online theatre that is possibly left on the verge of losing its essence on a synthetic platform. Then again, it is further argued that even with the intervention of technology, theatre may transgress its virtuality in order to allow the audience to experience performances collectively produced by a real cast and crew.

Moreover, SPTHART students claim that they have improved coping mechanisms by taking advantage of an opportunity to make a difference and engage meaningfully with the community. Most importantly, the partner organization confirmed that students were surprisingly hands-on while immersing themselves in a series of instruction and reflection that enhanced the learning process (Walder, McGorry, and Windener, 2012).

It can de deduced that although online teaching and eService-Learning may have undergone a trial-and-error phase since the outset of the pandemic, teachers, university personnel, and community workers continue to creatively collaborate in order to strengthen a sustainable pedagogy that is communal, student-centered, and meaningful.

A sequel, anyone?

As regards employing virtual storytelling as a community engagement project, further investigations may focus on whether benefits from students' and partner organizations' experiences give the same benefits as they do from the face-to-face set up. Similarly, an evaluation tool to assess impact on students' learning vis-a-vi course objectives, effectiveness of the social engagement with partner POs and the Lasallian Values achieved in the whole process and experience may be developed. With a tailored evaluation tool, the Service-Learning endeavor may be objectively assessed alongside its possible impact to students in view of the Expected Lasallian Graduate Attributes (ELGA). Evaluation results can also be utilized to develop and enhance the Service-Learning program. Teachers, students, and support staff must imagine the university they most want to be a part of, and work towards an authentic educational practice, which cannot have gone extinct because it never fully existed. Moreover, researchers, administrators, and policymakers must enable and support more effective, interesting, and engaging ways to teach students through hybrid paradigms developed specifically to support learning modes that nurture meaningful connections with communities.

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