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Why the Experiences of Service-Learning Instructors Should be Studied

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Abstract: Service-learning has been studied extensively from the perspective of students. On the other hand, there is a lack in data on how service-learning instructors view their experience. This gap in research literature is a critical area that needs to be discussed in order for us to have a better and more holistic understanding of service-learning. The main goal of this paper is to justify the need to study the experiences of service-learning instructors. This will be accomplished by synthesizing and identifying gaps in research literature on service-learning. A method on how the essence of the experience of service-learning instructors could best be captured is also proposed.

Key Words: service-learning; instructors; learning experience; phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning has been well-documented to develop students' personal, moral, social, and civic development as well as their motivation for school-work (Lovat & Clement, 2016).

As instructors in a university that practices service-learning, we are eye-witnesses to the beautiful transformation that students go through as they experience service-learning. Seeing these benefits first-hand has led us to wonder how other service-learning instructors view their own experience – whether it is fun and fulfilling or is it downright bothersome and pointless? Surprisingly, we have found that there is very limited data chronicling the experiences of service-learning instructors despite the glaring advantages it potentially provides for students.

This paper looks at service-learning, identifies gaps in existing literature on the experience of service-learning instructors, and culminates in a proposal on how to best capture the essence of the experiences of service-learning instructors.

2. SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in

activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.” (Jacoby, 2003, p.3). Service-learning is service that sufficiently meets the needs of a community whilst at the same time is learning that satisfies the academic goals of a course or subject brought about by in-depth analysis and reflection of their service experiences. This merger of service and learning into one unique whole is a peculiar characteristic of service-learning. There are similar related ideas but there is none that combines these two aspects into one meaningful whole.

One such similar idea would probably be community outreach projects where individuals “help” by performing activities that aim to meet the needs of the community. Unlike service-learning, community outreaches are not linked to academic goals of the students. Of course there is absolutely nothing wrong in doing community outreach projects. In the academia where learning is given optimum value, community outreach projects are valued but is recognized to be missing out on so much potential for learning because these activities are not tied together with academic/course goals and objectives.

Another idea on that some may relate with service-learning would be practicum experiences where students take part in meaningful career-



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related experiences that are clearly tied with the goals and objectives of their degree, course, or subject. This idea of learning from meaningful academic-related experiences is what we are looking for in community outreach projects but what practicum experiences lack is exactly what outreach projects provide: the fulfillment of community needs. Unlike service-learning practicum is limited because the students are mere observers, and depending on their practicum site, some students may not even be working in a community but in an office or site where there are no apparent community needs begging to be met. Looking at practicum with the same lens of academia that we used to look at community outreaches, it considers practicum of much value and yet understands that there is so much more that the students could learn only if what they were doing were not only relevant academically, but also relevant to the community.

Indeed, service-learning is unique in that only in it can we see the union of relevant service that meets real needs of the community and meaningful learning that cements the skills, knowledge, and abilities of students. As an experienced service-learning instructor, Jacoby (2003, p.5) notes that service-learning is a program, a philosophy, and a pedagogy. It is a program since it is focused on the accomplishment of tasks that meet individual and community needs; it is a philosophy because it is hinged on reciprocity as the guiding purpose of conducting such activities; and it is pedagogy utilizing experiential learning reflection to achieve academic/curricular goals. The service-learning instructor plays a key role in the effective and efficient delivery of service-learning. It would be most beneficial to service-learning instructors if they could gain insights from the experiences of other service-learning instructors. Learning about the experiences of being a service-learning instructor can help guide other service-learning instructors into becoming a better one or perhaps may even inspire those who are non-service-learning instructors to be one.

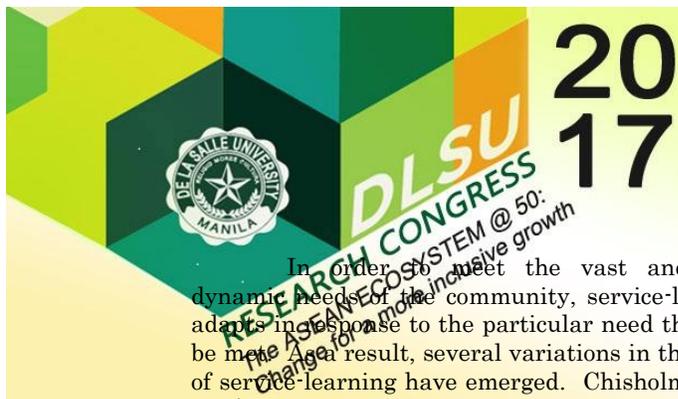
2.1 Service-Learning is a program

Service learning is a program of the university or school focuses on the accomplishment of tasks to meet community needs (Jacoby, 2003, p.5).

The needs of communities are as diverse as the people that make it up. In recent studies, some service-learning activities that have been conducted are counselling (Bialka & Havlik, 2016), tutoring (Barnes, 2016), health care services (Dalmida, et al., 2016), care for children in

orphanages (Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016), assisting elementary school teachers (Williams, 2016), hearing screening and assessments (Krishnan, et al., 2016), converting plastic into sustainable liquid fuel (Seay, et al., 2016), monthly visits to older adults (Fair & Delaplane, 2015), working with non-government organizations (Chang, Chen, Wang, et. al., 2014), mentoring at-risk youth (Weiler, 2013), developing a new information system housed in Microsoft Access database (Chuang & Chen, 2013), and escorting homeless individuals to various booths providing health care, housing assistance, identification cards, job training, and legal services in a one-day community event (Knecht & Martinez, 2012). This list is not meant to be an exhaustive one, but is meant to convey the idea that the needs of the community are so diverse that the service-learning activities that are done to meet those needs are to be just as diverse. As service-learning instructors, we wonder what experiences other service-learning instructors go through as they help their students meet the needs of the community. Perhaps relaying those experiences can help others become better service-learning instructors.

Service-learning activities have been documented to meet the needs of individuals and communities. These individuals and communities whose needs have been met include local high schools (Bialka & Havlik, 2016); the homeless, victims of violence, and migrant farm workers (Dalmida, et al., 2016); orphans (Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016); Native Americans (Jones, Hof, & Tillman, 2016); rural Southern Indians (Seay, et al., 2016); a South African community whose certain members have chronic illness such as HIV/AIDS (Davis, 2016); aborigines in Australia (Bennet, et al., 2016); communities in Zambia (Krishnan, et al., 2016); non-government organizations (Chang, Chen, Wang, et al., 2014); local retirement communities (Fair & Delaplane, 2015); homeless shelters, soup kitchens, church “resting” centers, shelters for abused women, children, and run-away teens (Groh, et al. 2011); and various communities in the Philippines such as fisherfolk in Batangas (Tuaño and Pacardo, 2013 in Dela Cruz, 2013). Service-learning is relevant to the community because it meets the real needs of real people. Students find fulfillment and meaning as they see themselves being the very instrument that brings relevant and lasting changes in the lives of the community members. Having such a diverse community base, service-learning instructors are sure to have meaningful experiences to share as they witness these community needs met.



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In order to meet the vast and often dynamic needs of the community, service-learning adapts its response to the particular need that is to be met. As a result, several variations in the forms of service-learning have emerged. Chisholm (2002, p.63) identifies as many as seven variations of service learning: first would be variations in its timing and nature; second, would be choosing whether to work individually or in a group; the third variety considers the sequence – whether service and learning is done concurrently or alternately; the fourth variation chooses between optional or required service-learning; the fifth variation considers whether service-learning is year-specific or ongoing; the sixth variation allows service-learning to be offered either locally, off-campus, or international; and lastly, the intensity of learning and service also varies. With the number of available variations of service-learning, we wonder which would best fit a particular school? The experiences of service-learning instructors would be a big help in answering this question.

Service-learning has indeed come a long way since its inception. There are now many ways and forms that service-learning programs can respond to the varying needs of the community. Because community needs are never static, service-learning programs should also be able to move in conjunction with the community. As college sophomores in an American University put it: “service-learning should stem from a need in the community and should allow students to practice their learning in authentic settings” (Williams, 2016, p.7). Service-learning should always be in response to fulfilling a specific need of the community. If a service-learning experience does not meet this criterion, it ceases to be service-learning and becomes practicum instead.

2.2 Service-Learning is a philosophy

Service-learning must have benefits to the community recipients as well as students (Dalmida et al., 2016, p. 520). Service-learning is a program that focuses on the needs of a community being met and service-learning is a philosophy that guides us in that it is not only the community that should benefit from the experience, but the students as well. This is what differentiates service-learning from doing outreaches. Outreaches have the idea of a ‘helping’ group and a ‘helped’ group. In service-learning, there is no such identified grouping of individuals. Both the students and the community members ‘help’ and ‘are helped’ at the same time. To help in ensuring the mutual benefits of the service-learning experience, Ling (2016, p.619) suggests that all stakeholders should be heard and

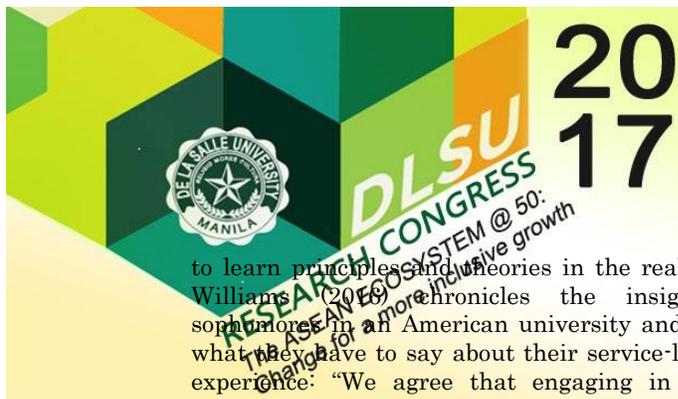
be “equitably involved”. This is another point where the experience of service-learning instructors may play a role in ensuring that this philosophy of reciprocity (Jacoby, 2003, p.5) is carried out properly.

In talking about having benefits not only for the community but for the students as well, a myriad of service-learning providers have Service-learning has been studied in a vast spectrum of students and professionals that include grade school students (Scott & Graham, 2015; Fair & Delaplaine, 2015); high school students (Myers, 2016; Hoover, 2016); community college students (Robinder, 2012); university students (Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016); graduate students (Jones, et. al., 2016); postgraduate students (Harris, 2012); health (Lim & Babar, 2016) and military professionals (Ling, 2016); counsellors (Davis, 2016), nurses (Dalmida, et al., 2016), and teachers (Schlesselman et al., 2015; Maddrell, 2014; Shek and Chan, 2013a; and Shek and Chan, 2013b). With such a variety of service-learning providers, the experience of service-learning instructors in ensuring that benefits are mutual and reciprocal would bring a better understanding of the process.

2.3 Service-Learning is pedagogy

In recent years, service-learning has been utilized by service-learning instructors coming from a variety of academic disciplines as a teaching methodology: humanitarian engineering education (Smith, et al., 2016); counselling (Bialka & Havlik, 2016); teacher education (Williams, 2016); nursing education (Kohlbray, 2016); health professions (Lim & Babar, 2016); values education (Lovat & Clement, 2016); arts education (Bennet, et al., 2016); speech language and pathology (Krishnan, et al., 2016); chemical and mechanical engineering education (Seay, et al., 2016); occupational therapy (Sanders, et al., 2016); public administration (Gerlach & Retnagel, 2016); pharmacy (Schlesselman, et al., 2015); psychology (Blankson, et al., 2015); marketing (Martin, 2015); electronics and communications engineering education (Chang, et al., 2014); information systems education (Chuang & Chen, 2013); political science (Harris, 2012); and management (Casile, et al., 2011). It is most worthy to note that all of these researches save one (Schlesselman, et al., 2015) study service-learning from the students’ perspective.

Service-learning is anchored on the dual-process of experiential learning and reflection as inextricably linked aspects of the service-learning experience. Experiential learning allows students



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to learn principles and theories in the real world. Williams (2016) chronicles the insights of sophomore in an American university and this is what they have to say about their service-learning experience: "We agree that engaging in service learning strengthens relationships. The real truth is we had to take initiative and build relationships of multiple levels in order to complete our service-learning project" (p.6). The experience of taking part in service-learning allowed them to arrive at that particular realization. If it had not been for that particular experience, they may not have an understanding as real as what they were able to achieve.

Furthermore, they also assert: "We agree that reflection following each visit was an essential component of our learning" (p.6). The experience is only one side of the coin, the other half is being able to reflect on the experience. Krishnan (2016, p.2) cautions us that when students are not asked to reflect, there is a smaller chance of them learning. Sanders (2016, p.73) report that students who wrote structured reflections significantly increased in personal growth and self-efficacy compared to those who wrote using non-structured reflections. Although reflections need not only be done in writing as Williams (2016, p.6) note that when students share their authentic experiences with their small-group team members, it allowed them to demonstrate and deepen what they have learned. Studies therefore show that reflection aids in learning whether it is done verbally or in written form. It does matter that students are given the opportunity to reflect on their experience and what they have learned from the experience. The process of having students reflect is an experience of the service-learning instructor that is worth sharing to others so that there may be a better understanding of how it is to be done.

In recent years, several studies have looked into the use of service-learning to teach students certain concepts or skills. Particular aspects of service-learning in terms of attitudes and competencies in participants that have been studied are: social competencies (Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016); views about schools and teaching (Barnes, 2016); participatory citizenship (Myers, 2016), intercultural development (Jones, Hof, & Tillman, 2016); cultural competence (Kohlbray, 2016); academic and civic learning (Krishnan, et al., 2016); personal growth and community self-efficacy (Sanders, et al., 2016); inter-professional education collaborative competencies (Sevin, et al., 2016); service motivation (Ho-Tang, et al., 2016), social justice (Tinkler, et al., 2015); empathy and community engagement (Scott & Graham, 2015);

civic responsibility (Blankson, et al., 2015); leadership skills and social justice (Groh, et al., 2011); world view, stereotypes, and personal values (Bamber & Hankin, 2011); management tasks (Alexander & Khabanyane, 2013); and spiritual development (Welch & Koth, 2013). With the variety of concepts and skills that can be taught or developed using service-learning as a teaching methodology, relaying the experience of service-learning instructors in doing so could provide better understanding of how things are to be done.

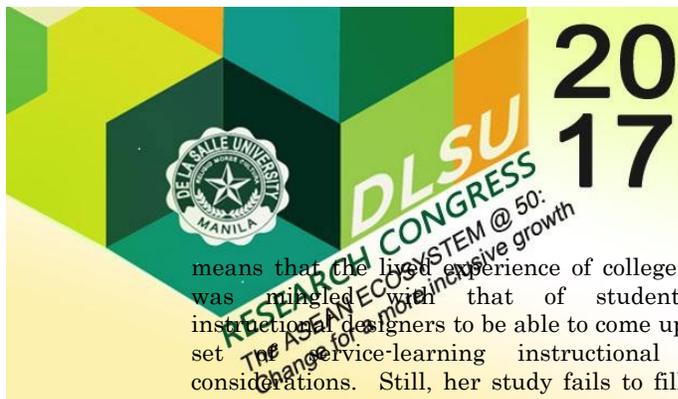
3. WHY THE EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE-LEARNING INSTRUCTORS SHOULD BE STUDIED

There are several aspects of service-learning that can be better understood by appreciating the experiences of service-learning instructors. Knowing how to conduct service-learning may be achieved from books available, but currently, there is no available research that allows us to look into the experiences of service-learning instructors.

Being a service-learning instructor is not just a matter of how to be a service-learning instructor, but also getting a sense of inspiration on being one. This sense of inspiration is something that may not be gained from reading a book on how to deliver service-learning programs, but reading stories on the experiences of a service-learning instructor may help.

Looking at recent studies on service-learning, only a handful of studies even consider the perspective of service-learning instructors. These are the works of Schlesselman et al. (2015), Maddrell (2014), Shek and Chan (2013a) and Shek and Chan (2013b). We are grateful for the information that their studies have given but their studies are lacking in certain aspects.

Schlesselman, et al. used an online questionnaire to survey faculty members regarding certain aspects of service-learning. Meanwhile, Shek and Chan (2013a) and Shek and Chan (2013b) used focus group interviews to understand the views of teachers regarding service-learning. All three studies give us a general perception about service-learning but does not go into detail about the experience of a service-learning instructor. The work of Maddrell (2014) does use a qualitative phenomenological interview approach to explore the service-learning experiences of the participants, however, her study did not solely focus on college faculty (n=13) but also involved instructional designers (n=3), and college students (n=3). This



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means that the lived experience of college faculty was mingled with that of students and instructional designers to be able to come up with a set of service-learning instructional design considerations. Still, her study fails to fill in the gap in existing literature that gives us information solely about the lived experience of college faculty who engage their students in service-learning.

4. HOW WE CAN BEST CAPTURE THE EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE-LEARNING INSTRUCTORS

Service-learning has been studied through various methodologies such as phenomenology (Bialka & Havlik, 2016; Maddrell, 2014; Veeder, 2011; Breunig, 2014); mixed methods (Jones, et al., 2016); case study (Seay, et al., 2016); interpretive study (Tinkler, et al., 2015); quasi-experimental (Blankson, et al., 2015); longitudinal design for qualitative data (Fair & Delaplane, 2015); linear regression (Weiler, et al., 2013); focus group (Shek & Chan, 2013b); field experiment (Knecht & Martinez, 2012); ethnography (Bamber & Hankin, 2011); and narrative inquiry (Robinder, 2012).

The works of Bialka and Havlik (2016), Veeder (2011), and Breunig, (2014) though all using phenomenological methods in studying service-learning, still do not give us information about the college instructor's experience because all three studies are studied with a focus on the student's experience.

Of the number of research methodologies that have been used to study service-learning, we argue that the method of study that could best capture the experiences of service-learning instructors is phenomenology. Phenomenology "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p.76). Other methods of study, no matter how rigorous, would fail to arrive at the distilled essence of the experience of service-learning instructors. It is only through a phenomenological study can the experience of service-learning instructors be truly understood and appreciated.

Shek and Chan (2013b) talk about allowing teachers to "develop a sense of joy in the process" (p.392) of engaging their students in service-learning. They recommend that a "systematic documentation of the success experiences of teachers" (Shek and Chan, 2013b, p.392) would be key in allowing teachers to develop joy while being a service-learning instructor. A phenomenological study would best allow the researcher to study these aspects.

More so, Shek and Chan (2013b) identified that because the interview sessions were done in groups, not everyone was free to speak their mind as they might get into trouble for doing so. They recommend that "supplementary information collected through individual interviews will be helpful" (p.392) in allowing the teachers to honestly share what they think and feel without having to worry of getting into trouble for what they are saying. They also recommend that "instead of the one-shot data collection, it would be helpful to collect more qualitative data over time" (p.393). All these suggestions made by Shek and Chan (2013b) can only find their fulfillment in a phenomenological study.

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