E-Service-Learning in DLSU:
Experiences, Challenges, and Adaptation Strategies

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Abstract: With the unprecedented closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remote delivery of courses is DLSU's response to the restrictions on movement to ensure health and safety, particularly of students and faculty. However, some courses require students to interact with the communities and extend service such as those with a service-learning component. Service-Learning is an integral part of DLSU's education as reflected in its teaching, research, and social engagement. To continue learning while students pursue social engagement, the electronic Service-Learning (e-S-L) was introduced and adopted. Electronic service-learning, according to Waldner, et al. (2012), occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online.

It is against this context that these research questions are raised: What are the experiences of students, teachers, and partner organizations in engaging in e-S-L in DLSU during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the challenges they faced? What adaptation strategies were applied? The online surveys were administered among the 32 undergraduate students taking CSRGOVE, 5 faculty members, and 10 partner organization representatives who participated in e-S-L in Term 3, AY 2019-2020.

Results of the study revealed the faculty and students were successful in implementing e-S-L projects with their partner organizations. This was due to the recalibration of the syllabus to e-S-L and applying synchronous and asynchronous learning methods during consultation meetings, project development, and implementation. Challenges were experienced in the use of online technology, virtual communication, coordination, and course design.

Keywords: service-learning; electronic service-learning; online learning; COVID-19 Pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

The Lasallian education is a mission and ministry at the service of God, the Church and society, and directed towards integral human and Christian development and liberation (La Salle Provincialate, 2009). As set forth in its vision and mission, the De La Salle University (DLSU) hopes to become "a leading learner-centered and research University bridging faith and scholarship, attuned to a sustainable Earth, and in the service of Church and society, especially the poor and marginalized" (www.dlsu.edu.ph). To realize this, both curricular and co-curricular programs in the university are geared towards providing the foundation for lifelong learning by developing students' capability to use the knowledge and skills to effectively participate in various developmental pursuits in the community, the country, and the world. This is achieved through various forms of social engagement activities where students are exploring, experiencing, and actively participating in life and work in communities and organizations outside the school (Guanzon, 2020).

One form of social engagement that DLSU deeply adheres to is Service-Learning. Service-Learning (S-L) is a teaching and learning pedagogy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, USA, 2005). In DLSU, S-L is

embedded in the university educational mission and strategic plan where all academic programs are required to incorporate S-L at all levels (DLSU Strategic Plan 2012-2018).

Service-Learning is done through students' close interaction with the people from partner organizations and communities, reflection on the local situation, and implementation of projects based on identified community needs. However, on March 16, 2020, the entire of Metro Manila was placed on lockdown due to the spread of coronavirus or COVID 19 resulting in a pandemic. Education institutions all over the country were closed. With this, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) implemented the "Flexible learning" for higher education institutions which involves a combination of digital and non-digital technology, which CHED says doesn't necessarily require connectivity to the internet (https://www.rappler.com/nation/ched-says-ready-open-classes-august-2020). The universities offered to faculty members in the country free training on how to conduct "flexible learning."

In adherence to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education, DLSU ensures an inclusive learning opportunity for its students during this time of sudden educational disruption. To continue with student learning, DLSU transitioned from conventional learning to online learning to safeguard the health and safety of the entire Lasallian community. Faculty and staff were required to work from home and access to campus was restricted.

Courses with S-L components were discontinued as it highly depends on face-to-face interaction with the people from the community. In response, the Service-Learning Program (S-LP) of the Center for Social Concern and Action (COSCA) offered the faculty members and colleges to adopt electronic service-learning starting on the third term of Academic Year (AY) 2019-2020.

E-Service-Learning

Electronic Service-Learning or e-S-L occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online (Waldner, et al., (2012, p. 125). Waldner added that E-service-learning frees service-learning from place-based access or geographical constraints. Bennett and Green (2001), cited in Waldner, et al, suggest that service-

learning and online instruction can have a "symbiotic educational relationship" (p. 491) because an online course allows many individuals who could not otherwise come to class to engage in service-learning.

The literature review revealed that e-S-L generally occurs in a hybrid model, with some aspect of instruction and/or service occurring online, and extreme e-S-L which means 100% of the instruction and service are done online (Waldner, et. al., 2010). With pure online mode, internet connection is paramount and the use of technologies such as smartphones and tablets, and computers are very important.

The COSCA-SLP team helped the S-L practitioners and faculty to recalibrate their syllabus from the traditional face-to-face S-L into e-SL using synchronous and asynchronous learning methods. The remote delivery of service to select partner organizations and communities was done. Consistent with the Lasallian Reflection Framework or LRF, e-SL students undergo these three stages of implementation. The first stage is see-experience (*Masid-Danas*) where students attend synchronous or asynchronous e-S-L briefing and partners' orientation. Partner organizations share PowerPoint presentations, and some presented virtual tours of their community for better appreciation of their living condition. The second stage is analysis-reflection (*Suri-Nilay*) in which students reflect on the current situation of the partner organization and develop a project proposal based on the identified needs. At the end of the project implementation, reflections on the e-SL experience were shared virtually while others submitted their journals and posted blogs. The third stage is commitment and action (*Taya-Kilos*) where students implement their online project. Some examples of projects developed are donation drive for the purchase of food packs, hygiene supplies, and learning materials; conduct of webinars; crafting of marketing and promotional materials; website development; conduct of tutorials, and among others. At the end of the term, a post-e-SL activity evaluation was administered to faculty, students, and partner organizations using a Google form.

E-service-learning is something new to DLSU, especially to students, faculty, and partner organizations. There is a dearth of information that describes how e-SL is being done and its effects on the stakeholders. While dealing with the anxiety, physical and mental health challenges brought about by the

coronavirus scare, Lasallians and partner organizations also deal with the issues on online technology, communication and coordination, and course design. It is against this context that these research questions are raised: What are the experiences of students, faculty, and partner organizations in engaging in electronic service-learning in DLSU during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the challenges they encountered? What adaptation strategies were applied to address these challenges?

This research covers only the e-SL activities managed by COSCA-SLP and does not reflect the e-SL efforts done by other classes.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative and qualitative research design that involved the use of an online survey. This study selected convenience in distributing the tool providing ease of distribution and retrieval. However, the results cannot be generalized as convenience sampling was used.

The researcher was able to retrieve responses from 32 CSRGOVE (Corporate Social Responsibility and Governance) undergraduate students, five (5) faculty, ten (10) representatives of the partner organizations who all participated in e-SL in Term 3 of AY 2019-2020. Since it is the first time that e-SL was implemented in the university and it was only in its initial stage, there were only a few faculty members who adopted and incorporated e-SL component in their course. Also, select partner organizations who took part in the online service-learning were included in the survey.

Using a Likert Scale, the respondents were asked to rate each statement describing if they Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The respondents were also asked to share their comments and recommendations at the later part of the questionnaire.

Before accomplishing the online survey, respondents were asked to complete a consent form on data privacy which is integrated in the Google form.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the results of an online survey. It also describes the answers to the research questions related to the e-S-L experiences, challenges, and adaptation strategies.
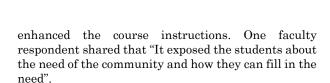
Survey Result

Based on the results of the online survey, 69% of the total student respondents strongly agree that e-SL is relevant to the course they are taking. About 50% of the students strongly agree that they were able to see and to understand the situation of the community virtually through synchronous partners' orientation and virtual tour. About 66% of the respondents strongly agree that their online project with the partner organization is appropriate to their needs.

For the faculty members, 100% strongly agree that S-L is relevant to the course they are teaching. About 60% of them strongly agree that classroom discussion was enhanced by the e-SL experience. About 80% strongly agree that e-SL helped them achieve the course objectives. And 60% strongly agree that the course with e-SL helps in the learning process of their students.

In the case of partner organizations, 50% of the respondents strongly agree that their organization can deliver online class orientation. One hundred percent (100%) of the respondents strongly agree that they received technical assistance from COSCA coordinators in preparing for their online presentation materials. Exactly 70% strongly agree that they were able to impart their community situation through their online presentation and discussion. The 60% of respondents strongly agree that the students' e-SL/online project/activity addressed their organizational and community needs.

These survey results show that e-SL as an innovative approach to adapt to the current situation proved to be a welcome development as learning and service continue despite the physical closure of the campus. It allowed the students to understand community situations and apply the knowledge discussed in class. It also gave them the chance to make connections by implementing projects benefiting their partner organization. Similarly, the faculty members, who first felt that e-SL is not as effective as compared to the traditional S-L, testified that e-SL has

enhanced the course instructions. One faculty respondent shared that "It exposed the students about the need of the community and how they can fill in the need".

For the partner organizations, it is not only about the project extended by the students that matter, but it is their working relationship also that was built. One respondent emphasized that "The program enhanced community and student relations; though through virtual you can feel the eagerness and initiative of the students to (be) involved and left good impacts to the community and organization".

Experiences

Waldner, et al., (2012) summarized e-SL experiences into three categories: technology, communications, and course design. Applying these categories, the following discussions describe further the experiences of e-SL students, faculty, and partner organizations.

Technology. Faculty members were trained on Animospace (Canvas) a learning management system through ASIST (Academic Support for Instructional Services and Technology). Blended learning has long been introduced to the faculty even before the pandemic, but because of the health crisis, they were compelled to shift drastically. Likewise, COSCA partnership coordinators trained select community leaders and organizational representatives on the use of various online communication platforms (i.e., Zoom, Facebook video call, etc.) so they could participate in virtual meetings and activities. Simulation activities and trial runs were done before live sessions. Recorded video orientation materials were uploaded in Animospace or Google drive for students' self-paced access.

Communications. COSCA-S-LP provided a briefing to partner organizations about e-SL, assigned class, course objectives, and the number of students they will handle. Virtual meetings with students and faculty for rapport building, planning, feedbacking, etc. were done through teleconferences. The class was divided into small groups to work on a group project and to encourage full student participation. Each group assigns a leader who will closely coordinate with their partner organization representative. Aside from te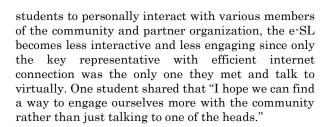leconferencing, other communication venues were utilized such as chat groups, emails, and phone calls for regular feedbacking on project progress.

Course design. The faculty member maintained their course syllabus content but incorporated the S-L component delivered through synchronous and asynchronous methods. The e-SL class orientation was done virtually with the partner organization and COSCA staff doing the briefing. For the asynchronous, presentation materials were uploaded in the Animospace for student's access in their own time and schedule. The type of e-SL projects done online were mostly advocacy and promotional materials which could be uploaded to partner's social media platforms. Webinars were organized on the topics selected by the partner organizations with some groups even invited resource speakers. Other projects include video tutorials, website development, online marketing materials, and others. As a guide in student reflection, a list of questions was provided. Reflections were done either through e-journals, blogs or through virtual sharing. At the end of the term, COSCA administered online post-activity evaluations among students, faculty, and representatives of the partner organizations.

Challenges

The lack of reliability in hardware or software represents the most significant limitation in e-service-learning instruction (Waldner, et al., 2012). The same was experienced by DLSU students, staff, faculty, and partner organizations as they struggled with the sudden malfunction of the device and other technical concerns like poor audio and video quality. This is on top of the unstable connections everyone has felt. The technological gap and capacity between students and partner community is another limitation because students are more technologically knowledgeable and equipped as they are born and raised in the digital age while most members of the partner organizations have limited knowledge on the use of technologies and online applications.

Communication and coordination challenges were also experienced as reported by some students that there were delays in the partner organization response time while others are unresponsive in email and text messaging. The coordination work created an additional load to students who are also dealing with the requirements of their other courses or subjects. Unlike the face-to-face service-learning that allows the

students to personally interact with various members of the community and partner organization, the e-SL becomes less interactive and less engaging since only the key representative with efficient internet connection was the only one they met and talk to virtually. One student shared that "I hope we can find a way to engage ourselves more with the community rather than just talking to one of the heads."

It is also noteworthy that while the students, faculty, and organizational representatives experienced the technological and communication challenges, they also experienced personal challenges while attending online classes or working from home. Students juggle with their schoolwork while attending to their family chores. On the other hand, the faculty and community coordinators multitask at home as they perform their responsibilities as an employee/faculty, a spouse, a child, or a parent. Delineation of tasks is not clearly defined in this kind of setup.

Adaptation Strategies

Limitations faced during e-SL implementation in the time of pandemic did not deter the stakeholders to pursue their social connections but rather, it was sustained and enhanced through various adaptation strategies in the pursuit of valuable learning and relentless service. The succeeding discussion presents the strategies used to adjust to the current situation.

Survey of partner organizations. Prior to engaging with the partner organizations, an online survey was administered to learn about the situation of the members of the partner organizations during the pandemic. The organizations were asked about the effects of lockdowns and quarantines, possible Lasallian response, the status of internet connectivity, availability and access to communication devices, and willingness to take part in online service delivery. The result of the survey serves as the basis to better understand their situation and find ways to ease the impact of the pandemic through e-SL.

Recalibration of the course syllabus. The syllabus content and structure were retained in the online course format. It is only the learning and service methods that were recalibrated from the traditional face-to-face S-L into online S-L. Faculty members included the principles of remote delivery through the conduct of synchronous and asynchronous e-SL activities. Individual sharing of reflections and project output presentations were done through pre-recorded videos and virtual reporting. Online meetings with partner organizations and the COSCA-SLP coordinator were incorporated into the class schedule.

Technical training. Key representatives of the partner organizations who are involved in the e-SL activities were trained on the use of online video conferencing platforms specifically Zoom, Google Meet, and Facebook. Internet etiquettes were discussed to ensure proper online behavior is observed while engaging with students. Faculty members and students were also trained with the use of Canvas (Animospace) for their virtual classroom. This helped the students and faculty to keep in touch with one another, submit assignments and other class outputs, as well as take exams.

Technological support. For efficient online communication with the partner organizations who have limited internet access, a connectivity support was extended through the provision of electronic loads for the use of the mobile data of their smartphones. The telecommunication gadgets like pocket Wi-Fi were also provided to key representatives of the organization.

Design of e-S-L projects. With the absence of a face-to-face community engagement, students were very creative in the design and implementation of new S-L projects for the organization. Students developed online promotional and marketing materials (i.e. infographics, websites, etc.), conducted webinars, video tutorials (i.e. Urban gardening, wellness exercise, etc.), developed organizational guidelines and manuals, learning materials, and conducted donation drives. Project outputs such as the digital materials were submitted through emails while other physical outputs were delivered through a courier.

Virtual communications. Effective communication is key in any collaborative endeavor. Students, faculty, and partner organization agreed on common video and audio-conferencing platforms such as the use of Zoom and Facebook. Regular use of these conferencing applications made everyone more comfortable and competent in using them resulting in a more efficient communication line. Chat groups through Facebook and Viber messaging applications were also utilized for immediate correspondence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Nothing compares to the interpersonal interaction between students and community members. This is where personal relationships are nurtured and strengthened creating a better social connection with one another. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made people disconnected. It has suddenly forced the Lasallian community to adjust to the new normal of teaching and learning through purely online delivery of courses. This is done to protect the well-being of students while making sure that they have access to continued learning and at the same time conforming with the SDG on education.

The need to adapt to this form of social connection has revealed how students, faculty, and partner organizations gained new experiences, challenges, and strategies to carry out its educational mission of being at the service of Church and society.

The e-SL serves as an innovative solution in this time of the pandemic. It is something new to the university that has gained freshly found experiences in using 100% online instruction and 100% online service. Additional skills on the use of various online communication applications and social media platforms were learned. Despite the social isolation, e-SL paved the way to another form of borderless social connections. Dealing with personal anxiety brought about by this health emergency, the transition from face-to-face to online learning also posed challenges on the use of technology, communication, and coordination work. Nonetheless, measures to mitigate these challenges through the provision of technological support, training, redesign of the syllabus, and creative projects proved to be very promising.

In conclusion, this research has uncovered the valuable experiences and intricacies of doing e-SL in the new normal. Many things have been learned and documented so that guidelines in the conduct of e-SL can be developed as a future guide in the implementation of remote social engagement and service-learning. Further research on online learning and service to document varied experiences and practices is vital.

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