

Dilemmas in Service-Learning: (Missed) Opportunities for Transformative Partnership

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Abstract

Although there have been growing concerns on how service-learning can accentuate the power differences between the server and the served, service-learning can foster transformative partnership by recognizing the contributions each can offer for a better society. Using participant observation and discourse analysis, this case study examines the perceptions of third-year undergraduate students of a health-related degree in a Philippine-based Jesuit university about their school-community collaboration in a primary healthcare setting. Despite apprehensions at the start of service-learning, students saw themselves confronted with the challenge to overcome personal barriers from authentically encountering the urban poor, whom they served in the community. However, establishing transformative partnership in service-learning was not without its share of dilemmas. Such findings can contribute to discourses on service-learning, informing practitioners how to support social transformation in university-community collaboration.

Keywords: service-learning, experiential learning, transformative learning, critical reflection, social transformation



Institutions of higher education in North America and some parts of the world have increasingly used service-learning as a method of teaching to prepare students for their chosen profession as well as to promote the practice of community service. Defined by Kaye (2004) as “guided or classroom learning . . . deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired” (p. 7), service-learning has gained the interest of a number of faculty and academic institutions due to its idealistic goals and practical uses (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). While “making unique contributions to addressing community, national, and global needs,” service-learning not only cultivates critical thinking among students but “the combination of community service, academic knowledge, and reflection can [also] help students develop an understanding of the root causes of social problems” (Jacoby, 2003, pp. 1–2).

In developing countries, such as the Philippines, where a fifth of its 110 million population live in poverty, service-learning has gained momentum as a method of teaching among institutions of higher education. Many in academe have regarded service-learning as a strategy to take part in community engagement and fulfill their role in society. In fact, this method of teaching, for some institutions of higher education, has become integral to the implementation of Republic Act No. 9163, otherwise known as the Act Establishing National Service Training Program, which mandates undergraduate students to render service to indigent communities in the country (Anorico, 2019; Custodio et al., 2016).

In contrast to volunteering and other forms of experiential learning, reciprocity is essential in the way service-learning is carried out. Herein both the university and community mutually benefit from the community service rendered (Jacoby, 2003). That is, the students are able to better appreciate

their chosen discipline as they apply classroom learning to real-world situations, and the community gains in return for having their identified needs met and their untapped assets utilized (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Lieberman, 2014). Ideally, the voice of the community is heard throughout the planning and implementation of service-learning. This would signify the university's intent to form and build a reciprocal partnership with the community.

Transformative partnership happens when there is "a deeper and sustained commitment" between the community and university, as represented by students and faculty (Enos & Morton, 2003, p. 24). Growth is nurtured and new relationships, identities, and values may develop because of shared goals and openness to collaborative efforts (Clayton, Bringle, Senior, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Enos & Morton, 2003). From this partnership, not only are individuals but also the wider society is transformed (Enos & Morton, 2003).

Unfortunately, not all service-learning can lead to transformative partnership. Enos and Morton (2003) suggest that most service-learning initiatives are transactional, whereby there are mutually rewarding exchanges between the university and community. Such service-learning takes place within existing structures and is rather task-oriented. Commitments among the students and the community are usually limited and, as a result, not much has changed. Additionally, service-learning, as Clayton et al. (2010) point out, can likewise demonstrate "one-sided relationships that fall short of transactional and in some instances are even exploitative" (p. 8). Such relationships are characterized by the incurring of more costs than benefits either for the university or the community because decisions are made in isolation and without consideration of the other. Change may happen for the worse and a sense of dissatisfaction may arise.

For this reason, there have been growing concerns on how service-learning can accentuate power differences between the server and the served. The university, in many instances, is seen to occupy the realm of solution, whereas the community is relegated to the domain of problem (Yappa, 1999). Instead of focusing on the strengths of a community, the university is looked to not only to fill in the deficits of the community it serves but also to fix what is

perceived as broken (Lieberman, 2014). A paternalistic relationship and dependency ensue and these, in turn, disempower the people in the community from contributing to a transformative partnership.

Most research on service-learning has highlighted best practices in community engagement, often glossing over the challenges and issues encountered in such university-community partnerships. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how undergraduate students, as part of the university, are hindered from forming a transformative partnership with individuals in a given community. Using Mezirow's (1991) transformation theory as a lens to understand students' perceptions of their experiences, we specifically looked into the process by which their perspectives (i.e., habits of mind and points of view) are challenged during service-learning. We hypothesize that transformative learning, which is essential for transformative partnership in service-learning, can occur if critical reflection is facilitated among the students and if they are guided properly by their teachers as they confront the unfamiliar. However, dilemmas in service-learning can arise if there is resistance to transformative learning, which can come from participants' being unprepared to undergo changes in their perspectives. As we point out dilemmas encountered in service-learning and examine missed opportunities for transformative partnership, this study aims to draw up recommendations that will enable service-learning to be true to its nature of reciprocity and to live up to its potential for personal and social transformation.

Literature Review

Transformation theory can provide a model to understand the process by which adults learn in different cultural settings (Cranton 1994; Mezirow, 1991, 1994, 1996). Influenced by the works of Habermas, Siegal, Freire, and Gould, Mezirow's (2009) transformation theory can make sense of adult learning, particularly in "cultures experiencing rapid social change in which old traditional authority structures have been weakened, and in which individuals must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own" (p. 222).

Transformative learning, as defined by Mezirow (2009), is a "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to

make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). It involves a “process of effecting change in a frame of reference . . . [or] structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). These frames of reference “selectively [shape] and [delimit] perception, cognition, and feelings by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). They essentially filter the way we understand what we experience, influencing “the way we define, understand, and act upon our experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 61). They consist of habits of mind, which are “habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by [cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological] assumptions” and points of view, which are specific articulations of our habits of mind in the form of concepts, beliefs, values, judgments, feelings, and attitudes (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Habits of mind “refer to the structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42), whereas points of view constitute and represent one’s habits of mind (Mezirow, 1991, 1997). In contrast to points of view, habits of mind are more durable and less accessible to feedback and awareness-raising (Mezirow, 1997).

Adult learning occurs when existing points of view are elaborated, new points of view are established, points of view are changed, or habits of mind are changed (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1997). Rote learning or learning within the structure of acquired frames of reference and preexisting categories of meaning can occur when existing points of view are elaborated or further differentiated. Rote learning also somewhat takes place when new points of view are established because this form of learning does not involve change of perspectives and such learning is still consistent and compatible with prevailing frames of reference. However, emancipatory learning can happen when points of view are changed as a result of reflecting upon the premise of deeply held assumptions. Transformative learning, on the other hand, can come about when premise reflection triggers a change in habits of mind (Cranton, 1994). These transformations in frames of reference, as Mezirow (1997) points out, can take place through “transformation of a habit of mind, or they may result from an accretion of

transformations in points of view” (p. 7). However, transforming a habit of mind in an instant is more difficult to achieve and therefore less common to occur (Mezirow, 1997). It may take severe dissonance or discrepancy from one’s experience and existing habit of mind for transformative learning to occur (Robinson & Levac, 2018).

Frames of reference can be transformed, according to Mezirow (1997), “through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (p. 7). Critical reflection is usually prompted when there are discrepancies between one’s beliefs and experiences (Mezirow, 1994), because we tend to “make a tacit judgment to move toward a way of thinking or behaving that we deem more appropriate to our new situation” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 191). This involves looking back at one’s own experience, taking into consideration different points of view, and imagining alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 1998) so as to challenge deeply held assumptions of one’s prior learning (Mezirow, 1990) and to change one’s structures of meaning (Mezirow, 1991). It entails validity testing through making taken-for-granted situations problematic (Mezirow, 1991), such as making preconceived notions explicit and questioning the sources and validity of these assumptions previously held by individuals or by groups (Cranton, 1994; Naudé, 2015).

Perspective transformation starts with a disorienting dilemma, then proceeds to self-examination, evaluation of previously held assumptions, recognition that others likewise undergo similar discontent, exploration of options, planning a course of action, acquisition of competencies to carry out one’s plan of action, provisional trying of new roles, (re)negotiation of relationships, building of self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and reintegration of the new outlook into one’s life (Mezirow, 1994, 2009). However, this process leading to transformative learning may not necessarily be sequential or stepwise. Backsliding or getting stalled in one phase may also happen (Mezirow, 1978a). Nevertheless, changes in attitude and behavior often indicate that transformative learning has occurred (Mezirow, 2000).

In service-learning, a disorienting dilemma, as Naudé (2015) observed in her study of five cohorts of postgraduate psychology students assigned to a rural community

in South Africa, involves boundary crossing, such as when the students faced a new environment, a new community or culture, new linguistic requirements, or new roles and responsibilities, and it entails going through dissonance; for the students, this meant their “existing worldviews and beliefs [were] inadequate to explain puzzling or surprising experiences” (p. 86). Most of these students were unprepared for transformative learning during the initial stage of service-learning, and a significant number of them seemed self-absorbed as they showed little interest in understanding the situation of those in the community. However, in the end, the majority of them were able to change their habits of mind and form relationships with those from the rural community they were assigned to, realizing, through the process of reflective sharing, that they were the same in many aspects.

In Kiely’s (2005) longitudinal study of undergraduate students deployed to Nicaragua to examine health and social problems in resource-poor communities, encounters of boundary crossing also preceded experiences of dissonance during service-learning. However, as shown by these students from New York, experiences of dissonance or disorienting dilemmas tend to vary. Dissonance from adapting to a new environment and unfamiliar conditions seemed to fade immediately, whereas the disorienting dilemma from witnessing severe forms of hunger seemed to persist and evoke powerful emotions, which led most of them to reexamine and change their previously held assumptions about poverty, among others.

Experiencing of disorienting dilemmas seemed also to vary based on where the service-learning took place and what sort of service was rendered to the community. Furthermore, questioning of deeply held assumptions and changes in habits of mind were most likely to occur if a personal relationship was established with those in the community. These findings were reported in the study of Shor, Cattaneo, and Calton (2017) on the essays of 41 students participating in service-learning either at a homeless shelter or a tutoring facility as part of the course “Community Engagement and Social Change.”

As shown above, personal transformation can arise if there is self-critique of taken-for-granted assumptions (Taylor, 2009). This involves posing and solving problems

as well as negotiating one’s purpose, values, and meanings (Mezirow, 1996) through critical evaluation of psychological or cultural assumptions that constitute an individual’s beliefs and experiences (Mezirow, 1998). Personal transformation can turn into social transformation if critical reflection includes one’s own and other’s beliefs, values, judgments, and feelings; collective frames of reference are recognized; and best judgments are collaboratively arrived at for contested assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). This is also likely to happen when perspectives of others are taken (Mezirow, 1978b), when personal assumptions and the social structures that support these are examined (McNaughton, 2016), and when critical reflection is more oriented toward ideological critique, where individuals, as Taylor (2009) suggests, “develop an awareness of power and greater agency (political consciousness) to transform society and their own reality” (p. 5).

For transformative partnership to come about in service-learning, we argue that transformative learning has to be fostered during the teaching-learning process. That is, students have to be supported in examining the premise of their deeply held assumptions so that points of view and, most importantly, habits of mind, that hinder them from relating authentically with individuals in the community, can be transformed. As seen in the study of Adarlo (2017) on students assigned to birthing clinics for their service-learning, this involves teachers providing prompts for journal writing, instructional guidance through mentoring, and opportunities for dialogue through reflective sharing, among others. In doing so, transformation, as observed by Kiely (2004), as well as by Bamber and Hankin (2011) in their study about the kinds of transformative learning in service-learning, can ensue in the political (expanded sense of social responsibility), moral (mutual respect, care, and solidarity in relationships), intellectual (questioning of origin and nature of assumptions), cultural (questioning of Western thinking), personal (rethinking of self-concept and lifestyle), and spiritual (deeper understanding of self, purpose, society, and greater good) domains in order to disrupt students’ taken-for-granted understandings of self and society.

However, resistance to transformative learning can take place while students are participating in service-learning. As

observed by Jones, Gilbride-Brown, and Gasiorski (2005), this stems from a “perceived threat to the [students’] position of privilege and power and the subsequent need to maintain these positions” (p. 9). When these students come across discrepancies and inconsistencies between their experience and existing frames of reference, they are usually ill-prepared to undergo the process of examining and changing their previously held assumptions (Jones, 2002). Most often, they are unwilling to go out of their comfort zone as they encounter the unfamiliar (Jakubowski & McIntosh, 2018). However, these claims need to be supported by further studies since little literature exists on why students resist undergoing perspective transformation during service-learning.

Methodology

To examine the barriers to perspective transformation among undergraduate students taking part in a service-learning initiative within a primary healthcare setting, a qualitative research methodology was applied in this study because it can be appropriate for exploring a group or population in which variables cannot be easily measured (Creswell, 2013). It can be suitable as well to inquire about “life-worlds” where “researchers focus on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to experience,” such as those in service-learning (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 20).

Research Design

Specifically, a case study was employed to understand a social phenomenon within important circumstances and to “look for the detail of interaction with its context” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). This research design allowed us, as described by Yin (2009), to look into “a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Typically, a case study starts with identifying a specific case, which may be an individual, a group, an organization, a community, a partnership, a decision process, or a project (Creswell, 2013). As service-learning can be considered an educational intervention that student participants were exposed to, this case study design somewhat resembles a preexperimental research inquiry with one-group-only posttest design wherein, as Edmonds and Kennedy

(2017) illustrate, “there is only one designated observation with no comparison groups or multiple observations within subjects” (p. 121). A case study can suggest cause-and-effect relationships through observational data despite having no control group or pretest evaluation (Creswell, 2009; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). However, this research design cannot entirely rule out plausible alternative explanations since the study participants were self-selected and nonrandomly assigned to an educational intervention (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Setting and Study Participants

This particular case study was set in a Philippine-based Jesuit university and its partner community in Marikina City. The university aims to contribute to nation-building through teaching, research, and service to the community. It seeks to form its students not only as experts in their chosen profession but also as life-long learners who are critically rooted in their culture, proactive in the global context, imbued with the scientific spirit, and strongly oriented to faith and justice. Its partner community, Marikina City, is one of the cities comprising the capital of the Philippines. It is a first class, highly urbanized city with approximately half a million population of which 12% live in poverty. It has 17 healthcare centers that cater to the healthcare needs of the indigent population for free (Marikina City, n.d.). Its programs for a healthy population include maternal and child healthcare, communicable disease control, noncommunicable disease control, environmental health and sanitation, oral health, disaster management, and health education and promotion (Marikina City Health Office, n.d.).

After obtaining ethical approval and institutional clearance to carry out this research, study participants were recruited and approached face-to-face from the 78 third-year undergraduate students who were taking service-learning in a primary healthcare setting in Marikina City from January to May 2016 as part of their curriculum for a health-related degree from the above-mentioned university. They were purposively sampled for this study because, as Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) remark, they “share particular characteristics and have the potential to provide relevant and diverse data pertinent to the research question” (p. 352). All students

gave their informed consent to be part of this research, and no one eventually withdrew their participation. Hence, no student was excluded from the study.

The service-learning initiative mentioned above formed part of the discipline-based formation program that the university seeks to provide its students, making concepts discussed in classes such as “The Health Professional as Scientist or Investigator” and “Philosophy of the Human Person” more meaningful and relevant because of its practical approach. Specifically, weekly classroom sessions for “The Health Professional as Scientist or Investigator” were geared toward rational inquiry into events, phenomena, and interventions in the health sector, whereas “Philosophy of the Human Person” provided opportunities for students to reflect on the various aspects of being human. By assigning 78 students to render community service in 14 healthcare centers in Marikina City during the second semester of school year 2015–2016, the service-learning, according to the faculty responsible, not only was meant to prepare students for the role of healthcare professionals in public health but also aimed to give students the opportunities to contribute to the delivery of primary healthcare to the urban poor. Their once-a-week community service involved retrieving medical records, taking the vital signs of patients from their designated healthcare centers, and getting medical histories, among other tasks.

Data Gathering and Analysis

To get familiar with this service-learning situated in a primary healthcare setting, the three researchers carried out participant observation in several instances as student participants attended weekly classes and went to the healthcare centers for community service. Social events (i.e., interactions, discussions, and group presentation) that were directly observed were recorded as field notes (Yin, 2016) to provide context to this study, because any aspect of the context can affect the meanings ascribed to one’s experience (Gee, 2011a). To make the process of observation uniform among the three researchers, an observation protocol was used wherein descriptions of the events were recorded as descriptive notes, whereas insights, learnings, and hunches about the events that transpired were logged as reflective notes. To limit omission of details from the participant observations, we filled

out the field notes, which contained the descriptive notes and reflective notes, immediately after the observation. We also conferred with one another to bring together our field notes and, in effect, we were able to increase the use of findings and gather a comprehensive understanding of the events that occurred (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). To limit misinformation, details about what had been observed were verbally and informally provided to the student participants through conversational interviews (Patton, 2002).

To systematically analyze the observational data, we initially read the field notes together so that, as Lune and Berg (2017) explain, any themes or hypotheses developed during data gathering could be reinforced and themes or hypotheses previously unrealized could be generated. This process of open coding was then followed by axial coding, wherein data coded were organized through finding patterns and developing category systems that best described the information gathered (Creswell, 2013; Lune & Berg, 2017; Patton, 2002).

To support the data gathered from participant observation, the reflection papers submitted by student participants during their service-learning were collected after they were graded so that more insights could be gathered on how these students perceived their service-learning experience. We particularly reviewed the volumes of submitted reflection papers because, as Mezirow (1991) points out, words may represent one’s frames of reference, and meanings can be created and shared through language. To examine the barriers to a transformative partnership with a given community and to look into the process by which students’ perspectives (i.e., habits of mind and points of view) were challenged during service-learning, the submitted reflection papers underwent discourse analysis, which can be useful in studying the use of language to convey situated meanings (Gee, 2011a, 2011b). We, as multiple coders, employed discourse analysis in this study by writing memos (i.e., key concepts and ideas that occurred to the researchers) along the margins of the submitted reflection papers, organizing the gathered data into text units using a tabulated form, and manually describing, classifying, and interpreting these data into codes. In some instances, the codes were prefigured from related literature (i.e., a priori coding). But there were

also instances when codes were derived from the exact words of the student participants so as to better reflect the views of the study population (i.e., in vivo coding). The process of coding and recoding was carried out by the three researchers until the texts were coded the same way (i.e., intercoder agreement) and until data saturation or no new meanings were observed from the data (Creswell, 2013). Before reporting the findings, the analytic coding was shown to the student participants for their comments and feedback (Richards, 2005).

To ensure the reliability and internal validity of this study's findings, we followed several steps that Creswell (2013) and Lune & Berg (2017) suggested. First, data were gathered from a variety of sources, such as from observation notes and submitted reflection papers (i.e., data triangulation). Second, data, as shown above, were gathered and analyzed by three researchers (i.e., investigator triangulation). Third, a master list of data gathered was developed so that information could be easily located and identified. Fourth, member checking was performed to solicit the student participants' views on the interpretation of gathered data. Fifth, reported findings included details that researchers expected to find before the study as well as information that was not expected and was unusual or interesting. Sixth, selected texts were quoted from the submitted reflection papers in order to support the assertions of this study. Finally, findings were presented in coding tree and tabulated form to create a visual image of the information. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, findings from this case study of students taking part in service-learning within a primary healthcare setting were reported using pseudonyms.

Representation and Reflexivity

Recognizing that researchers should be "conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that [they bring] to a qualitative research study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 216), we need to disclose who we are and what we represent. All of us are experienced researchers and service-learning practitioners from the university being researched in this study. The first researcher is female and has completed the degrees doctor of medicine and doctor of philosophy in education. The second researcher is also female and has a graduate degree in community develop-

ment. The third researcher is male and holds a doctor of medicine degree. Both the first and second researchers were teachers of the student participants for their class "The Health Professional as Scientist or Investigator," whereas the third researcher was these students' program director. We demonstrated an emic perspective, which may have influenced how we gathered and analyzed the data from this study. Nonetheless, this insider perspective does not discredit the trustworthiness of our findings since, similar to the study of Adarlo and Marquez (2017), voluntary participation of the student participants did not have a bearing on their final grades for the classes being studied, and the trusting relationship between the researchers and students was likely to elicit candid responses from these student participants as they wrote their reflection papers. We also underwent debriefing from impartial peers so that, as Lune and Berg (2017) emphasize, we could come to understand that we are part of the life-worlds we seek to investigate. Such self-awareness is important in helping us position ourselves as researchers of a qualitative study (Patton, 2002).

We also acknowledge that "writing a qualitative text cannot be separated from the author, how it is received by readers, and how it impacts the participants and sites under study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 215). That is why we held ourselves accountable as we proceeded with the study. We were careful in informing the student participants about details of the study when we got their informed consent, and we exercised reflexivity by member checking (Creswell, 2013; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). When necessary, we also wrote in the first person, active voice so that we would be more conscious of our role in the inquiry. We were likewise mindful to provide rich description, organize our writing in thoughtful sequencing, use appropriate texts to support our findings, and be clear on our role as researchers so that we would not disenfranchise our study participants and our readers (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Findings

All of the 78 students enrolled in the classes "The Health Professional as Scientist or Investigator" and "Philosophy of the Human Person" for the second semester of school year 2015–2016 were included in this study. The age of these student participants

ranged from 19 to 21 years. By sex, 46% (36) of them were male, whereas 54% (42) were female. Most of them came from upper middle to high-income families, meaning that they held a position of power and privilege relative to those in their service-learning community. Furthermore, 29% (23) of these 78 student participants were expected to graduate with academic honors. None of them were new to rendering community service. In fact, they were familiar with Marikina City, as all of them during their second year in undergraduate education had their National Service Training Program in one of its neighborhoods. Based on their performance for this compulsory civic welfare training service as described by their teacher, only 10% (8) were able to reflect thoroughly about their personal experience in this particular school-community collaboration. Almost all of them had difficulty in relating their experience in community engagement to bigger issues faced by the Philippine society. They also struggled in coming to terms with how they will continue benefiting from their unearned privilege and how these privileges can (un)wittingly marginalize those who do not have the same privileges.

Findings from the analysis of field notes and submitted reflection papers revealed not only several dilemmas that were encountered in service-learning but also (missed) opportunities for transformative partnership in service-learning. These aspects are explored in detail below.

Dilemmas in Service-Learning

Days before deployment to the healthcare centers, students were oriented about the purpose and nature of their service-learning. Most, if not all, were anxious about what their service-learning would entail from them. Reactions included feeling apprehensive of what would lie ahead, but also feeling excited because, according to Sophia, “[they will] be able to apply what [they have] learned from the past semesters. At the same time, [they] can enrich [their] previous learnings by learning new things.” Some students felt overwhelmed because it appeared they would “have to allot so much of [their] time for the healthcare center.” Since service-learning does not seem to be among their usual academic requirements, students, such as Isabella, also felt “presured knowing that [their responsibilities for service-learning] are quite a lot and

are heavy.” These responsibilities involve taking the vital signs of patients; delivering lectures to promote health and wellness; retrieving, filing, and arranging patients’ records; and measuring the length and weight of infants for vaccination, among other tasks. As a result, Emma, for instance, sensed there is more for them to learn so that they can “be able to greatly contribute to the community.”

This perceived need to acquire certain competencies for service-learning is an understandable reaction among the students. However, we did not want them to let their overwhelmed feelings take hold of them and incapacitate them from engaging with those from the community they were assigned to. Based on reflective accounts of students about their orientation to service-learning, we have also identified a number of barriers that may hinder students from undergoing transformative learning and building transformative partnerships with the community. These include the students’ tendency to become self-centered and their notion that people from the service-learning community are different from them in many aspects (Figure 1).

Such egocentrism among students was made apparent when their teachers asked the class to group themselves for the service-learning. In general, students chose to be with the peers they considered familiar and “useful” to them. Caitlyn, for example, chose to be in a group where she could have a “sense of security as well as comfort.” Similarly, many students chose to be with those they are comfortable with, with whom they would not encounter any difficulties. In the case of Matthew, he would rather belong to a group of students who “can do a great job and be able to work in any kind of conditions” because “[his] grades depend on [them].” Ava, on the other hand, would prefer someone who has a car as part of her group so that “[they] can all comfortably travel” to the healthcare center.

Because some groups had more individuals than the required size, the teachers requested the students to regroup themselves. However, a number of students, as described by Ryan and Sarah, did not want “to step out of [their] comfort zone” and “were adamant that they assembled themselves first, and thus, were unyielding and unwilling to rearrange themselves.” For Ava, she even volunteered as one of the 14 leaders so that the group she and her friends formed would

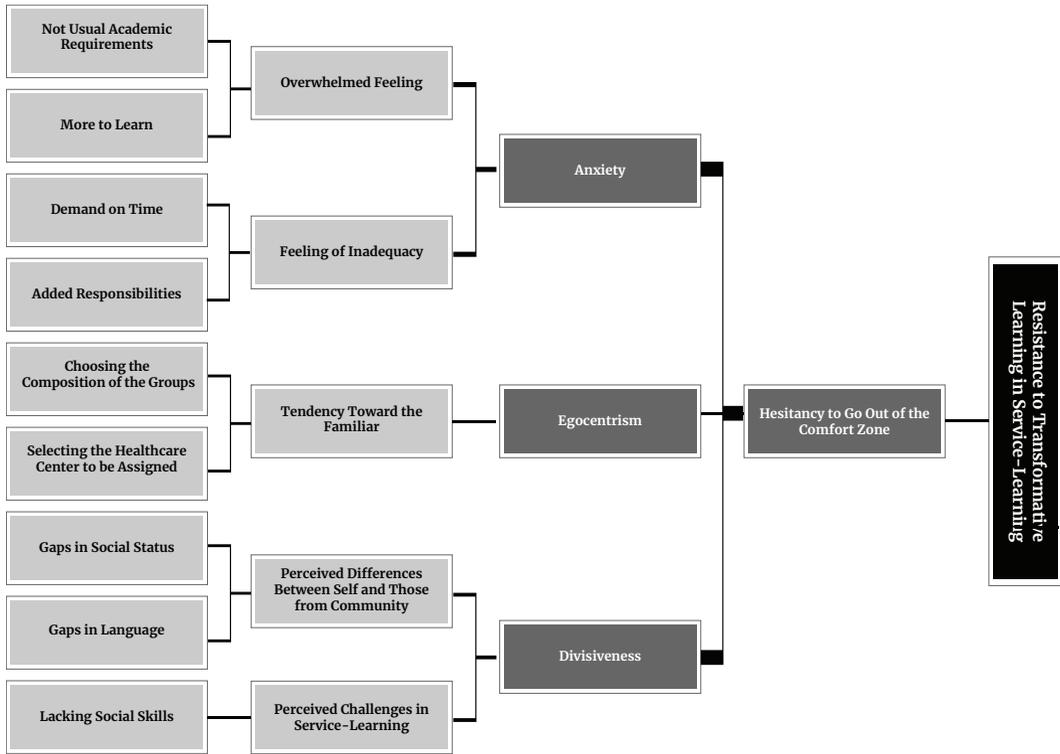


Figure 1. Barriers to Transformative Learning in Service-Learning

remain together. This self-centeredness can be a hindrance to transformative relationships because, as Sophia realized, it prevents them from being sensitive to others and being “open to working with people who are not in [their] circle of friends.”

When the groups were then asked by their teachers to decide which healthcare center they would be assigned for their service-learning, “everyone,” as Hannah observed, “tries [again] to put their own interests first.” Most students, like Mia, would “want to be assigned in the nearest and most accessible venue of all.” “Some groups,” according to Sarah, “were plainly keen on avoiding the hassle of a long commute.” As for Ryan, among others, they took into account the time they have “to wake up to be at the healthcare center by eight in the morning and the time it would take for [them] to get back to school so [they] would have enough time to study for [their] other classes.”

Eventually, some students, with the instructional guidance from their teachers, learned to negotiate their preferences and give way to others. As their teachers guided them to take into account the standpoints of others (i.e., probing the students to reveal the reasons for choosing a particular

healthcare center) and challenged them to go beyond themselves (i.e., encouraging the students to put others first by being sensitive and showing empathy), they came to understand the importance of considering the circumstances of other groups and the welfare of the class. For example, two groups gave way for another group when they learned most of the students from the latter resided far from Marikina City and it would therefore be practical for them to be assigned to the nearest healthcare center. In listening to others and, as termed by Hannah, “setting selfishness aside,” resistance to transformative learning can be overcome.

Perspective transformation and, in effect, transformative partnership can likewise be hindered by perceiving that there are divisive differences between oneself and the people from the service-learning community. As explained by Lauren, “[they] feel that [service-learning] will be more challenging when it comes to communication because the people, who are there are not the usual people that [they] talk to.” In fact, the thought of interacting and conversing with unfamiliar people made Anna, among others, nervous because they were asked “to go out of one’s comfort zone.”

Table 1. Range of Adult Learning in Service-Learning

Level of Adult Learning	Characteristics	Findings
Rote learning	New points of view are established. Existing points of view are elaborated.	New points of view were gained from current understanding as student participants interacted with others from different backgrounds, experiences, and realities. Existing points of view about those in the community were elaborated as previously held assumptions of student participants were reinforced.
Emancipatory learning	Points of view are changed.	Points of view were modified as the taken-for-granted assumptions of student participants about those from the community were challenged during their service-learning.
Transformative learning	Habits of mind are changed.	Habits of mind were disrupted as a number of student participants made personal resolutions to be in solidarity with the less privileged.

However, such a disorienting dilemma prompted some students, like Samantha, to “allow [themselves] to ‘be one’ with the community . . . [and] to go beyond [their] comfort zone in terms of communicating with others and building relationships.” This would include, as Sarah suggested, “[having] to improve [their] social skills in order to successfully build relationship with all the diverse people that [they] will be interacting with.” In doing so, not only would transformative learning be facilitated but transformative partnership would also be made possible.

Opportunities for Transformative Partnership in Service-Learning

As students spent their Wednesdays in their respective healthcare centers, service-learning provided them opportunities, according to Sophia, “to know more of the society [they] seek to create a difference in.” New points of view were established (See Table 1) as they were “able to interact with mothers, who have different backgrounds and experiences.” Rachel, for example, “was

able to open [herself] to new perspectives because of [their service-learning] encounters.” This is because, as Victoria narrated:

It’s not just the one-time encounter where [they] get the length and weight of the babies then never see them or their parents again. [We] actually remember them, [we] recognize their faces and sometimes even recall their names. [We] share stories with them, especially when they’re waiting in line for their turn.

New points of view were also formed (Table 1) as students got to interact with the healthcare workers. They learned, as stated by Julia, how “to build rapport with the healthcare workers, to be in good terms, and to work comfortably with each other.” Ryan and Mia, among others, were given opportunities to gain insights about the healthcare workers’ personal experiences in the Philippine health sector as well as their “dreams and aspirations in life.”

Most students also found the classroom sessions helpful in making sense of their service-learning experiences. They were able to gather new points of view (Table 1) since their Saturday sessions, as pointed out by Sarah, “provided an opportunity where the students can synthesize their experience by sharing amongst themselves what happened during their [service-learning] . . . and seeing the similarities and differences among the different healthcare centers.” These reflective sharing sessions on Saturdays, as Michelle remarked, “opened [her] mind to the problems that the healthcare centers in their country usually face. It showed [her] different realities of the healthcare centers and how work in a healthcare center was harder than it seemed.”

There were likewise opportunities for emancipatory learning as some students’ points of view were changed during service-learning (Table 1). Hannah, for instance, realized that she “can never really judge something at first glance since service-learning was not merely something [they] were ‘obliged’ or required to do.” It essentially entailed a choice from them because “how [they] treated the patients was up to [them], how open [they] allowed [themselves] to others was up to [them], and how they integrate [themselves] to the community was up to [them].” Jen and two other students initially thought that they would not make an impact on the community, but they were soon shown otherwise. As Jen recounted:

When [they] got out of the tricycle, one mother recognized [them] immediately. . . . She even went out of her way to greet [them] and chat with [them] before [they] headed back to the healthcare center. [They] didn’t expect that the mothers [they] interact with actually remember [them]. . . . [They] didn’t expect these mothers, who only stayed in the healthcare center for around 15 minutes or so would remember the faces of students, who measured the length and weight of their babies.

At that point, she came to realize those “small talks” can be a step toward “a relationship, which was deeper and more personal.”

Although not as common, opportunities for

transformative learning were documented as well in this service-learning (Table 1). A number of students demonstrated changes in their habits of mind, as they were able to come up with personal resolutions on how they should proceed from here onward. For example, Emma at first saw service-learning as “a requirement that would make [her] wake up at six in the morning just to commute to the healthcare center.” But, later on, her perspective about service-learning changed, wherein “little by little, dreadfulness became excitement and requirement became service.” Similarly, Ryan no longer considered service-learning a task to accomplish but a form of service for the community. As a result, he has planned “to join sector-based organizations [in school] because [he wants] to interact more with marginalized sectors of society.” As for Mia, she has resolved to “make an effort to know about the community more” by focusing less on self-fulfillment and more on “how the people in the community feel.” Hannah, on the other hand, has decided to carry on “everywhere, especially in the future when she [becomes] a doctor,” the attitude of reaching out and establishing relationships with the less privileged.

Such perspective transformations, for the most part, involved the political (expanded sense of social responsibility), moral (mutual respect, care, and solidarity in relationships), and spiritual (deeper understanding of self, purpose, society, and greater good) domains of these student participants. Perspective transformations of intellectual (questioning of origin and nature of assumptions) and personal (rethinking of self-concept and lifestyle) domains occurred occasionally. Perspective transformations of the cultural (questioning of Western thinking) domain were rare.

Nonetheless, there were missed opportunities for transformative partnership in service-learning despite instructional guidance from the teachers (i.e., posing questions to students and challenging them to reflect on their taken-for-granted assumptions, put on hold their judgment about others, and be open to the unfamiliar). Instead of taking on a different attitude toward service-learning, students’ existing points of view were elaborated. In the case of Michelle, there “was no Wednesday that [she] didn’t find [herself] having a hard time to wake up since it was the earliest activity [she] had

for the whole week.” This predisposition for personal convenience was also evident in Ava, who frequently complained of the commute to and from the healthcare center using the public transportation system:

On the way to [the healthcare center], it was not yet that hot and there were less people commuting. But on the way back to [school], it is already almost noon and it is just so hot and all the [public utility vehicles] are full so it’s very tight inside.

Another student, James, was not able to have meaningful and relevant experiences in service-learning as he continued to perceive the patients in the healthcare centers as “not so glamorous” and the tasks he had to perform on Wednesdays as “very monotonous.”

Furthermore, most reflective accounts of these student participants did not consider the differences in power and privilege between themselves and those from the community they served. As a result, their efforts in service-learning may have fallen short of bringing about social transformation.

Discussion

Such missed opportunities, for the most part, have stemmed from unresolved dilemmas in service-learning: Participants put self-preservation and self-interest first instead of taking into consideration the common good, and differences rather than similarities were emphasized when relating to others.

These missed opportunities for a transformative partnership in service-learning occur due to distorted assumptions or premises that direct an individual, according to Mezirow (1991), “to view reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing, or does not facilitate an integration of experience” (p. 118). These are, as Cranton (1994) describes, errors of learning since “what we have learned, how and where we grew up, and how we see ourselves” have remained unquestioned and unexamined (p. 30). Resistance to transformative learning in the context of service-learning can bring about such errors of learning.

Distorted assumptions or premises take

place because individuals, for the most part, are unaware how certain social norms legitimize the distribution of power and privilege in society (Cranton, 1994). Furthermore, individuals have the tendency “to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Thus, we usually block out unwanted aspects of our realities, or we simply do not focus on them so as not to get anxious about the changes that accepting them may bring to us (Cranton, 1994).

In this study, lack of critical awareness and an inclination to adhere to the familiar may account for the unresolved dilemmas and missed opportunities in service-learning. In many ways, these factors may have limited some of the students’ openness to personal and social transformation (Cranton, 1994). Instead of transformative learning, existing points of view about themselves and others were elaborated further in some student participants. However, for most students, new points of view were established and existing points of view were changed because of their service-learning. A number of student participants also exhibited an incremental change in their habits of mind as a result of accumulated changes in their points of view.

There are likewise several factors that can affect transformative learning. A trusting relationship between a teacher and a student, value-laden course content, intense experiential activities, occasions for journal writing and premise reflection, mature cognitive development, and recent experiences of critical incidents are more likely to bring about transformative learning. Theoretical orientation of the educator and prior life experiences of the learner are likewise contributory to transformative learning, inasmuch as temporal constraints and emotional issues are unfavorable to perspective transformation (Taylor, 2009).

Because various factors were at interplay, differing degrees of transformative learning were seen among the students included in this case study. Course contents were value-laden, journal-writing time was allotted in class activities, and reflective sharing was provided on several occasions in class; however, teacher-student relationships, maturity of students, capacity for reflection, experiences at healthcare centers, and biographies of these students varied. As also

shown in this study, not all personal transformation can turn into social transformation, as implications to society were not prominent among the students' reflections.

Thus, there has been a growing need to intensify opportunities for critical reflection during the teaching–learning process. These opportunities include prompting students to go beyond self-critique and to examine, as Smith (2011) points out, “the uniqueness of our ‘individual’ positionality within social systems” (p. 213). Educators, as Mezirow (1991) points out, should “encourage learners to choose freely from among the widest range of relevant viewpoints” (p. 225), not only so that alternative perspectives are taken into consideration but so that distorted frames of reference can also be further challenged. Additionally,

the [teaching–learning process during service–learning] should be purposeful and heuristic, power should be confronted, differences should be taken up, imagination should be involved, learners should be led to the edge, and teachers and other persons supporting the [teaching–learning process] should be aware that they function as models. (Illeris, 2014, p. 93)

However, it is important that educators gently prompt students to step out of their comfort zone because resistance may happen when students are forced to confront the unfamiliar. As seen in how Jakubowski and McIntosh (2018) carried out their service–learning, educators should meet the students “where they are” (p. 50). They should be able to create a safe space for students to be open and willing to undertake transformative learning during their service–learning.

To facilitate perspective transformation and uphold a transformative partnership in service–learning, reflective writing and reflective sharing are essential components of the teaching–learning process. Reflective writing can challenge “learners to both recall from memory and verbally articulate [their] reflective moments” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9), and reflective sharing can “validate commonly held meanings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 63). Educators should emphasize to the students at the outset the purpose of reflective writing and reflective sharing: that is, to decenter oneself and to engage with

the world. This would involve reflecting not only on one’s thoughts and actions but also on interaction with others and the ethical, social, and political contexts (Smith, 2011).

Because students in a class do not necessarily have the same prior experiences, cognitive development, and reflective ability, educators also have to take into account these diverse needs of learners in carrying out service–learning. Timely scaffolding, as Ryan (2013) suggests, is vital to guide students to take a proactive rather than a reactive stance to their experiences, as transformative learning entails both a decision and an action for personal and social change. Doing so requires educators to provide an atmosphere of acceptance and support so as to nurture a trusting relationship between themselves and their students (Cranton, 1994). This kind of support would also have to involve the educator joining students as a learner during the teaching–learning process (Marmon, 2013).

Conclusion

Transformative partnership is essential in service–learning. There are, however, barriers that hinder transformative partnership taking place during service–learning. This study examines how undergraduate students, as part of the university, are held back from forming a transformative partnership with individuals in a community. Based on field notes from participant observation and discourse analysis of students’ reflection papers, barriers to transformative partnership in service–learning include students’ tendency to become anxious and self-centered when they encounter the unfamiliar and their tendency to perceive those from their service–learning community as different from them in many aspects. But through reflective writing about experiences in service–learning and through instructional guidance from their teachers, some students were able to become aware of these tendencies and were able to establish new points of view, alter their existing points of view, or change their prevailing habits of mind. Nevertheless, a number of students did not undergo perspective transformation during their service–learning in a primary healthcare setting. Resistance to transformative learning occurred because of unresolved dilemmas. As a result, their existing points of view or habits of mind persisted despite teaching–learning opportunities to examine distorted assumptions

and premises. Such resistance to transformative learning may require not only timely scaffolding but also a differentiated approach from teachers.

These findings can represent the contextual richness of educational settings such as service-learning, since case studies allow researchers to “get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires)” (Bromley, 1986, p. 23). However, findings from this study should be considered in view of a number of limitations that were encountered. First, these findings may be specific to the situational context of this study. Further research in a similar setting is needed to confirm the findings reported in this case study. Second, one academic semester may not be enough for transformative learning to take place. A longitudinal study may be warranted to examine transformative learning in detail. Third, student participants might have given socially desirable responses, knowing that their reflection papers would be graded and that they were observed by their teachers while in service-learning. This study (and similar studies) would have benefited from an extended and

in-depth interview of student participants so that accounts from their reflection papers could be verified and multiple meanings could be gathered from triangulation of data. Fourth, issues of reflexivity are typical of qualitative research. Studies of this kind require researchers to be mindful of certain assumptions that they may have and how these assumptions may have affected the research approach. Member checking and peer debriefing were carried out to minimize these issues of reflexivity.

Despite these shortcomings, this case study not only offers “an experiential understanding of action and context” (Stake, 2010, p. 48); it can also provide “the views and perspectives of study’s participants” (Yin, 2016, p. 9). Its findings have implications for educational practice, as barriers to and teaching-learning opportunities for transformative partnership in service-learning were examined. Findings from this study can inform educators on how to proceed with service-learning as a method of teaching and as a form of university-community collaboration: That is, not only should critical reflection be deliberate and purposeful but instructional guidance should also meet the students where they are by addressing their different and various learning needs.



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