Elevating Community Voices to Reexamine Student Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptability in Electronic Service-Learning (e-SL)

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Abstract

This study investigates how communities perceive students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability in electronic service-learning (e-SL) programs, focusing on Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. Employing qualitative methodology that incorporates online in-depth interviews and surveys, the research fills a gap by concentrating on community perspectives and not solely on student experiences. Although communities regard Ateneo students as culturally sensitive, the study uncovers complex factors shaping these perceptions. These factors include the dual role of Ateneo's institutional reputation, the effectiveness of digital platforms balanced against the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interactions, and the importance of nuanced communication skills. These findings offer actionable insights for educators, administrators, and community coordinators, urging them to consider cultural and technological factors deeply when implementing e-SL programs. The study is timely due to the increasing digital transformation in educational settings and holds implications for refining and enhancing e-SL practices.

Keywords: e-service-learning (e-SL), community perceptions, cultural sensitivity, cultural adaptability, Philippines

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Cultural sensitivity and adaptability are valuable and essential skills in an interconnected world across geographical boundaries. This imperative has gained added complexity with the COVID-19 pandemic, which spurred a sudden and significant shift from traditional service-learning (SL) modes to the extensive application of electronic service-learning (e-SL). The ubiquity of e-SL raises new questions about managing cross-cultural interaction effectively and sensitively in a virtual environment. Although ample research has examined the cultural sensitivity and adaptability of students in traditional SL programs (Amerson, 2010; Chen et al., 2012; Short et al., 2020), there is a dearth of studies that explore how these attributes are perceived by partner communities, particularly in an e-SL context. This study aims to fill this signifi-cant gap by examining the central research question: How do partner communities perceive students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability in e-SL settings? Furthermore, what is the specific manifestation of cultural sensitivity and adaptability of students at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines?

The uniqueness of the e-SL context in this study deserves special attention. Unlike traditional SL, which involves face-to-face (f2f) interactions, e-SL occurs virtually (Faulconer, 2021; Waldner et al., 2012). This change in the medium could influence how cultural sensitivity and adaptability are demonstrated and perceived. Although e-SL offers the advantage of bypassing geographical borders, it also introduces challenges in building trust and rapport among the SL stakeholders, who play crucial roles in cultural sensitivity and

adaptability. Thus, we conduct the study in this specific and nuanced setting.

For this study, taking inspiration from the cultural intelligence framework of Earley & Ang (2003), "cultural sensitivity" is defined as the awareness, understanding, and respect students display toward their partner communities' cultural norms, values, and expectations. Similarly, "cultural adaptability" is the students' flexibility and willingness to adjust their behavior, timing, and methods to align with these communities' cultural expectations and practical needs. We investigate both of these operational definitions as we pose three subquestions. First, do partner communities believe that students involved in e-SL programs exhibit understanding and respect for their local culture and norms? Understanding and respecting local culture and norms are foundational in ensuring that any initiative is effective and sensitive to the community's inherent values and practices, fostering a more collaborative and harmonious engagement (De Weger et al., 2018). Second, do these communities find the scope and timing of the students' implementation of e-SL projects to be culturally sensitive and adaptable? Here, it is pertinent to note that notions of time and the acceptable scope of project activities are deeply ingrained in many cultures and can influence perceptions of respect and adaptability (Deal et al., 2003; Suda, 2007). Lastly, how does the level of trust and communication between students and partner communities influence perceptions of students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability? Effective trust and communication are cornerstones for mutual understanding, influencing how cultural efforts are perceived and adapted to by both parties (Taras et al., 2021). Thus, these subquestions illuminate the core research question and help operationalize the concepts of cultural sensitivity and adaptability within the study's framework.

The implications of this research extend beyond academia to the real-world design, ethical considerations, and effectiveness of e-SL programs. By incorporating the perspectives of partner communities, this study aspires to bring about more equitable dynamics in e-SL, which could lead to more effective engagements. This article commences with a literature review, elaborates on the conceptual framework and methodologies, discusses the findings, and concludes with actionable recommendations.

The study offers theoretical and practical insights and aims toward a broad audience—ranging from academic researchers and educators to community leaders and policymakers. Ultimately, it seeks to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in enhancing cultural sensitivity and adaptability within the unique context of e-SL.

Literature Review

SL has evolved as an essential pedagogical tool that fuses academic learning objectives with community engagement, aiming to enrich the learning experience while fostering civic responsibility and strengthening communities (Block & Bartkus, 2019). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paradigm has rapidly shifted to adapt to the necessities of remote engagement, giving rise to the ubiquity of e-SL (Dapena et al., 2022; Schmidt, 2021). The evolution of SL into e-SL presents a new set of complexities and opportunities, warranting holistic scrutiny of existing academic discourse to identify gaps that this current study aims to fill.

One core focus threaded through the fabric of SL literature is the essential collaboration of stakeholders, particularly between academic institutions and community partner organizations (CPOs). Suckale et al. (2018) suggested that extended course sequences, rather than one-off classes, lead to more meaningful service, highlighting the need for long-term engagement. Building on this premise, George-Paschal et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of institutional support and alignment between stakeholders in fostering reciprocity in SL, a principle underscoring mutual benefits for community partners and academic institutions (Darby et al., 2023; Karasik, 2020). However, although the literature emphasizes the benefits of collaboration, it often overlooks the potential power dynamics and conflicts that can arise between academic institutions and community partners. For instance, d'Arlach et al. (2009) highlighted that unequal power relations can hinder genuine reciprocity, suggesting the need for more balanced partnership models. Thus, research consistently affirms the need for a mutual exchange of resources, knowledge, and advantages, with many studies highlighting that ensuring equitable and reciprocal interactions for all parties involved constitutes the essence of effective SL collaborations (Willingham & Darby, 2023).

Furthermore, Geller et al. (2016) contended that community organizations are not just service recipients but entities with organizational capacities and visions that can actively optimize the benefits gained from SL.

Building on collaboration between stakeholders, the role of faculty members stands out as pivotal. Their involvement bridges the gap between academic and community objectives, fosters SL partnerships, and profoundly impacts the outcomes of SL projects (Compare et al., 2022; Karasik, 2020; Karasik & Hafner, 2021). Faculty members play a crucial role, and the literature often assumes they possess the necessary skills and commitment to manage these partnerships effectively. However, Karasik (2020) and Abenir et al. (2020) argued that faculty may struggle to balance academic responsibilities with community engagement without proper training and institutional support, potentially leading to suboptimal SL outcomes. Thus, researchers argue for more communication and proper engagement training between faculty and community partners to avert partnership failures (Abenir et al., 2021; Darby et al., 2023; Karasik, 2020). This observation connects to another prevalent theme in SL literature, which delves into the motivations and benefits propelling community partners to join these initiatives. Darby and Willingham (2022) noted that positive interactions with students often translate into memorable experiences that effectively sustain community engagement. Similarly, Cronley et al. (2015) found that motivations such as organizational capacity and the joy of mentoring can drive community partners to engage further in SL initiatives.

Although there is abundant research on SL's benefits and operational aspects, there is an equally compelling body of work on the ethical considerations involved. Matthews (2019) foregrounded the critical concern of power imbalances, contending that community partners frequently experience marginalization or disempowerment during initial project phases. In response, Mtawa and Fongwa (2022) advocated prioritizing "the four Rs"—respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection—to cultivate more equitable and sustainable partnerships. The practical implementation of these four Rs can be seen in the studies of Doran et al. (2021), which demonstrated how respecting community sensibilities and ensuring reciprocal benefits can lead to more effective and lasting SL partnerships. For instance, Doran et al. suggested adopting a relational approach to ethics in SL through structured reflections that accentuate social justice and community partners' ownership of decision-making processes. Implementing such an approach allows students and community partners to continuously assess and align their goals, fostering mutual understanding and sustained engagement.

Integral to all these facets of SL is the undercurrent of effective communication. Scholars like McCrickard (2011) have emphasized that listening to and acknowledging community perspectives deepens the quality of engagements and fosters trust and mutual respect. Despite its recognized importance, cultural and linguistic barriers often challenge effective communication, especially in diverse global SL or other international electronic educational settings. Studies by Hawes et al. (2021) and Toprak and Genc-Kumtepe (2014) illustrate how miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings and reduced project efficacy, highlighting the need for tailored communication strategies. Thus, Kindred (2020) suggests that projects built on practical communication foundations tend to have longer lasting impacts, solidifying the partnership over time.

The scholarly discourse pivots toward digital adaptability and resilience in transitioning from traditional SL to e-SL, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Barker et al. (2021) underscored the necessity of adaptability for fostering resilience, especially in crisis scenarios such as a pandemic. They argued that resilience is instrumental in sustaining partnerships and crucial for ensuring ongoing value to community partners amid challenges. To this end, Barker et al. advocated for SL initiatives to prioritize resilience-building through specialized training or other preparatory steps. Expanding on this theme, Pellerano et al. (2023) and Walker et al. (2021) explored the changing roles and capacities of community partners in an SL environment, whether virtual or f2f. These studies emphasized the significance of recognizing community partners as coeducators and incorporating them into planning and assessment processes. We should view community partners not as passive recipients but as active contributors to student learning outcomes, warranting their integration into the pedagogical

process for mutual benefit (Goldberg & Atkins, 2020; Vizenor et al., 2017). Couillou et al. (2023) provided a relevant examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted community-based learning, suggesting that flexibility, technological agility, and robust communication systems are crucial for navigating such challenges.

Furthermore, comparative studies from Asia, such as those by Xiao et al. (2022) in Hong Kong, Shek et al. (2022) in mainland China, Choi et al. (2023) in South Korea, Abenir et al. (2023) in the Philippines, and Bardus et al. (2022) in Lebanon, highlight unique cultural dynamics and challenges in implementing SL programs. These studies reveal that cultural norms and technological infrastructure significantly influence the effectiveness of e-SL initiatives, offering a more global perspective that complements the predominantly American- and European-focused literature.

The transition to e-SL opens new avenues for inquiry, particularly concerning cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Although previous studies have shown a positive correlation between student engagement in f2f SL and heightened cultural awareness (Amerson, 2010; Chen et al., 2012; Short et al., 2020), the shift to e-SL, accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, tests this correlation. There is a notable gap in the literature concerning community partners' perceptions of students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability in e-SL settings. As the emphasis on using e-SL programs extends globally, transcending geographical barriers, this gap becomes increasingly significant. Additionally, incorporating perspectives from non-Western contexts can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural sensitivity and adaptability are perceived across different cultural landscapes, thereby enhancing the universality of SL practices. Addressing this research gap is thus vital for ensuring that e-SL initiatives are operationally effective and culturally resonant with the values and expectations of the communities they try to assist in the current times.

Conceptual Framework

The present study anchors its theoretical foundation in two crucial frameworks: "Cultural Intelligence" by Earley & Ang (2003) and Paulo Freire's (1968/2018) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. These frameworks are instrumental in guiding our exploration of the central research question: "How do partner communities perceive the cultural sensitivity and adaptability of students in e-SL settings?"

Earley & Ang (2003) posited their concept of cultural intelligence by understanding effectiveness in cross-cultural settings through three dimensions: cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. The cognitive aspect covers understanding different cultures' norms, values, and beliefs. The motivational aspect is the drive and confidence to engage with diverse cultural contexts. The behavioral aspect involves adapting actions and communication methods in culturally appropriate ways. In the context of this study, cultural intelligence offers an analytical lens for dissecting the different facets of cultural sensitivity and adaptability exhibited by students. It provides a theoretical foundation for evaluating not just what students know about a culture (cognitive) but also their interest and confidence in engaging with it (motivational) and their ability to adapt their behaviors accordingly (behavioral). Within this framework, cultural sensitivity aligns with the cognitive and motivational elements of cultural intelligence, whereas cultural adaptability aligns with the behavioral facet. By employing the lens of cultural intelligence, we can dissect the varying respects in which students are culturally sensitive and adaptable and how the community stakeholders perceive these qualities in e-SL contexts.

Paulo Freire's (1968/2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a transformative approach to education and community engagement founded on dialogue, critical thinking, and the cocreation of knowledge. Freire argued that for any form of education to be liberating, it must be a mutual process involving both the "teacher" and the "learner" rather than a top-down dissemination of knowledge. Informed by Freire's pedagogy for this study, the approach to e-SL recognizes that partner communities are not merely recipients of services. Instead, they act as coeducators and vital stakeholders. Drawing inspiration from Freire, this study suggests including these communities' perspectives to better evaluate an e-SL program's effectiveness. Thus, the central research question reflects an intrinsic Freirean ethos by seeking to understand the communities' perceptions, thereby democratizing the evaluation process.

The interlacing of these theories allows us to confront the research question from both an operational and a moral standpoint, exploring not only the "how" but also the "why" and "wherefore" of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in e-SL programs. This study assumes that cultural sensitivity and adaptability are integral for successful and meaningful e-SL engagements. Our hypothesis therefore posits that the communities' perception of students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability will significantly shape the efficacy and overall impact of e-SL projects.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research to investigate the complexities surrounding students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability in e-SL engagements, particularly as perceived by CPOs. The qualitative approach enables us to dig deeper into these community partners' nuanced experiences and perceptions, thus enriching our understanding of the dynamics at play.

Recognizing the pivotal role educational institutions hold in sculpting such programs, we selected Ateneo de Manila University (Ateneo) as our case study due to the robustness of its SL initiatives. Ateneo's Office for Social Concern and Involvement (OSCI), established in 1975, actively fosters positive change in marginalized communities across various academic disciplines (Nebres, 1981). Notably, Ateneo pioneered the Philippines' first SL course, Theory and Practice of Social Development, also in 1975 (Sescon & Tuaño, 2012). Prodded by developments in national policies for a K-12 curriculum compatible with a tertiary or university curriculum, and partly as a response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Ateneo adapted its college curriculum—particularly for the third year of study—to offer integrated e-SL experience. This new curriculum combined two core courses: the National Service Training Program 12 (NSTP 12), also known as Bigkis, and Social Science 13 (SocSc 13), a course titled The Economy, Society, and Sustainable Development. Ateneo formators oversee NSTP 12, which focuses on the hands-on facets of community engagement. In contrast, faculty members from the School of Social Sciences primarily teach SocSc 13, which lays the academic foundation for concepts of economics and sustainable develop-

ment (Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, 2020). The intentional pairing of NSTP 12 and SocSc 13 aims to fuse theoretical rigor with real-world community involvement, epitomizing Ateneo's ethos of shaping students into "persons for and with others" (Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, 2020).

The study targeted key contact persons from a diverse array of CPOs as participants, including government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs; e.g., civil society groups, faith-based organizations, cooperatives, and people's organizations). The research team chose these individuals for their capacity to provide nuanced insights into the University's SL programs, especially within the intertwined NSTP 12 and SocSc 13 framework. Since these respondents directly engaged with Ateneo from January to December 2022, they added a rich and multifaceted depth to the qualitative data.

In-depth online interviews formed the core of data collection, using a specially designed research instrument: the Community Organization Interview Questions (COIQ), adapted from Barrientos (2010). The COIQ aligns with specific subinquiries: first, it assesses the partner communities' perception of Ateneo students' respect for their culture both before and after e-SL activities; second, it evaluates the timing and scope of e-SL project implementation concerning cultural expectations; and third, it seeks to understand the community's trust level and communication dynamics with Ateneo students, delving into their influence on perceived student cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Each subquestion within the COIQ aims to draw out detailed insights from community perspectives. Qualitative feedback from the Community Impact Feedback Questionnaire (CIFQ) supplements the primary research for a more comprehensive data analysis.

The CIFQ, a tool validated by Lau and Snell (2021), quantitatively assesses the perceived outcomes of SL projects shortly after they conclude. For this study, only the qualitative responses underwent examination. Respondents provided these responses when prompted to give additional comments and suggestions for enhancing Ateneo's SL program. To cater to those who prefer communicating in Filipino, the COIQ and CIFQ underwent professional translation and validation.

The University Research Ethics Office granted ethical clearance. Before participation, all participants received a comprehensive briefing about the study, their rights, and procedures to ensure they gave informed consent. Interviewers recorded the interviews with the respondents' prior permission and later transcribed them. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999/2017), thematic analysis processed the qualitative data from the COIQ and CIFQ. The thematic analysis involved several steps, including familiarization with the data through repeated readings of transcripts, initial coding to identify significant segments related to cultural sensitivity and adaptability, and the development of themes through the constant comparison of codes across different interviews. Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis tool, was utilized to systematically organize and manage the coding process. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, two of the researchers independently conducted initial coding, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. This analysis method facilitated the continuous comparison of emerging themes, adding depth to the study's findings. To further validate and provide nuance to the findings, forums with Ateneo's partner communities and other stakeholders took place. These forums served as a form of member checking, allowing community partners to review and provide feedback on the preliminary themes identified during the analysis. The primary objective of these sessions was to refine and validate the interpretation of qualitative data, ensuring it genuinely reflects the experiences and perspectives of community partners. This process ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Results

Demographic Profile of Research Participants

The COIQ featured interviews with 22 participants, 15 females and seven males, representing a mix of governmental and nongovernmental organizational affiliations. The timing of these interviews ranged from 2 to 3 months after two distinct durations: January–May 2022 and August–December 2022. Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour to a maximum of 1.5 hours.

From the CIFQ's more extensive data set, 101 out of the targeted 129 key contacts responded, representing 46 of Ateneo's 51 CPOs. Most respondents hailed from NGOs, making up 74% of the sample. In contrast, the remaining 26% came from local and national government organizations. A notable 61% of these CPOs had already established SL and community engagement collaborations with Ateneo before the School Year (SY) 2021–2022.

A variety of e-SL projects emerged from the data. Direct services such as online training and tutorials ($n = 63$) were predominant, trailed by research activities ($n = 47$) and other indirect services like content creation ($n = 42$). Respondents say these projects catered to a spectrum of community requirements, from ICT development and educational assistance initiatives to health and wellness drives.

Insights from the COIQ interviews illuminated the manifold advantages of e-SL projects. Benefits ranged from educational milestones like computer literacy and academic aid to health-centric results, encompassing COVID-19 awareness and mental health interventions. The data also revealed contributions to business expansion and artistic endeavors. The results demonstrate a broad spectrum of advantages derived from e-SL projects, highlighting their versatility and relevance in meeting diverse community needs.

Furthermore, the researchers conducted a comparative thematic analysis to explore potential differences in perceptions between governmental and nongovernmental organizations. However, no significant differences were identified, indicating that the perceptions of cultural sensitivity and adaptability were consistent across both types of organizations.

Community Views on Ateneo Students' Observance of Local Norms and Values

Ateneo's reputation as an elite institution presents advantages and challenges when its students collaborate with community partners. How do the communities perceive the degree to which students involved in Ateneo's e-SL programs exhibit understanding and respect for local culture and norms, particularly in virtual settings? Our research delves into the complexities and contradictions that arise during these interactions.

The Double-Edged Sword of Prestige

The reputation of Ateneo as an elite university that primarily caters to the privileged in Philippine society often precedes its students when they engage with community partners. Although the institution's prestige can create a positive initial impression, it also raises questions about the students' ability to genuinely comprehend these communities' lived experiences. One community partner described their initial awe: "When they are from Ateneo, I am like, 'Wow!'. . . and my students were like, 'Oh my gosh ma'am, really? We are engaging with students from Ateneo?'" (COIQ Transcript 01, translated from Tagalog).

However, this sense of prestige—which often implies excellence in capabilities—also fosters skepticism about whether Ateneo students can genuinely empathize with the challenges the partner communities face. One such community member summed up this concern:

> Our perception is that if you are an Ateneo student, you are rich and influential. Unlike in an urban poor community, we do not have influence. So, aside from them being wealthy, they might not understand our situation because they have never experienced poverty. (COIQ Transcript 09, translated from Tagalog)

Ateneo prestige is then a double-edged sword. Although it may open doors and create initial enthusiasm, it can also be a barrier that spawns skepticism, which students must actively overcome.

Virtual Sincerity—More Than Just a Screen

Despite the virtual interactions in the SL program, community partners have reported a noticeable change in their initial perceptions of Ateneo students. One interviewee shared an insightful perspective:

> Despite the challenges brought about by the virtual setup, the Ateneo students sincerely try to understand our community. They are not just asking questions; they are genuinely trying to put themselves in the shoes of our community leaders to understand our challenges. (COIQ Transcript 19)

This change is not an isolated observation but has confirmation from other community members. Another participant shared:

> At first, I had reservations. I wondered how much could be accomplished through a screen with Ateneo students, but after our online interactions, I see that it is feasible. Limitations are there, but the sincerity [of the Ateneo students] comes across. (COIQ Transcript 20)

However, it is crucial to note that most survey respondents, according to the qualitative responses from the CIFQ, expressed a preference for in-person interactions with Ateneo students once it is safe to do so, as one noted: "Actually, it would be more effective if service-learning engagements are face-to-face" (CIFQ Respondent 24). Another respondent further explained:

> There should be actual on-the-ground participation by the students after COVID-19. Face-to-face training would help the community more because sometimes the internet connection is unstable, hindering learning. (CIFQ Respondent 3)

These observations indicate that the physical presence of students is perceived to have a more significant impact on the effectiveness of the SL program than remote or virtual engagements.

Language as a Bridge—Breaking Stereotypes

When one considers the overarching sincerity of Ateneo students, it is worth noting that they also make concerted efforts to be culturally sensitive, particularly in using the vernacular to show respect for the lingua franca of communication in their assigned areas. One community partner expressed this shift in perception eloquently:

> We initially thought they would primarily speak English and maybe even look down on us, but they really tried their best to speak Tagalog. It was endearing. They showed respect rather than flaunting their English proficiency. (COIQ Transcript 13, translated from Tagalog)

This dedication to linguistic use of the vernacular, demonstrating cultural sensitivity, is further emphasized by another statement: "They do not speak in English even if they sometimes find it hard to speak in Tagalog, but they still make an effort to

converse in Tagalog" (COIQ Transcript 17, translated from Tagalog). Such efforts have served to break existing stereotypes about higher class university students refusing to speak in the daily conversational Tagalog, thus rendering Ateneo students more relatable and approachable.

In summary, communities increasingly view Ateneo students as courteous and respectful, demonstrating a profound grasp of the cultural norms and values of the communities with which they collaborate. A statement from a community member encapsulates this sentiment: "Most of your students are profoundly respectful" (COIQ Transcript 01, translated from Tagalog). This sentiment gains further weight from observations highlighting the genuine attempts by several students to bridge cultural differences through the use of local language.

Inconsistent Engagement and Missed Opportunities

However, there are moments of disconnect in cultural understanding that become apparent. For instance, one community key contact person mentioned an episode that caused discomfort among her public school learners:

> One Ateneo student was caught on camera with her feet raised during the engagement. This incident alarmed some of my students who told me, "Ma'am, it seems like she is too comfortable, as if she is just at home." (COIQ Transcript 01, translated from Tagalog)

Furthermore, although students often start the SL program with elevated enthusiasm, engagement wanes as the program progresses. A community member highlighted this concern: "Halfway through, some students become less engaged, perhaps due to academic pressures. While understandable, this does impact the quality of their involvement" (COIQ Transcript 03, translated from Tagalog).

The communities also expressed concerns about the students' pacing and presentation styles. As one interview respondent pointed out: "There was one session where I was expecting a somewhat longer presentation, but theirs was too direct to the point and very short" (COIQ Transcript 10).

Although these incidents are not directly related to cultural understanding, communities might interpret them as examples of mutual communication breakdowns between students and community partners due to differences in communication styles and unspoken expectations. Furthermore, communities anticipate engaging storytelling, but students primarily direct their efforts toward posing questions to community members. One interview respondent echoes this sentiment:

> We want stories. In our organization, we value storytelling. If even one student wrote [or talked] about their experience with us, that would be the story we are looking for. We want to hear [from them] why these engagements matter to us [in the community] and why it matters to them and Ateneo. (COIQ Transcript 18, translated from Tagalog)

Furthermore, a thematic analysis of survey qualitative responses from the CIFQ indicates a strong inclination among community partners toward extending the duration of SL engagements. The underlying reason is that a more extended period would facilitate a more in-depth examination of pertinent issues, leading to richer and more impactful experiences. One survey respondent succinctly stated, "Provide a somewhat longer time for engagement to maximize collaboration" (CIFQ Respondent 89). Another respondent mentioned, "Longer time for the students and our organization for the service-learning activity allows us to cover more topics and gather more information" (CIFQ Respondent 22).

In summary, the partner communities generally perceive Ateneo students as respectful and understanding of their cultural norms and values. There is, however, room for improvement in maintaining consistent engagement levels and meeting the communities' desires for deeper, more narrative-based interaction. Overall, although virtual interactions have proven effective to a certain extent, communities look forward to more meaningful, in-person engagements in future collaborations.

Cultural Fit: Scope and Timing in Ateneo Students' Implementation of e-SL Projects

When CPOs collaborate with student groups for e-SL projects, they seek volunteer complements and quality engagement, considering

their unique needs and cultural background. This part of the study aims to bring forth the community's voice in assessing how well Ateneo students have performed regarding cultural sensitivity and adaptability, specifically in the scope and timing of the implementation of their e-SL projects. Through firsthand accounts from community members, we investigate whether the e-SL projects meet the community's expectations and align with their cultural norms and needs.

Navigating Community Needs Through Sensitivity and Flexibility

A recurring theme from the community partners' feedback emphasizes the importance of a consultative approach in planning. The partners laud the students for not merely imposing a one-size-fits-all project but actively engaging with the community to understand their specific needs and cultural nuances. For example, one community member shared, "The students consulted with our community partners regarding the schedule of activities, so it is not just done whenever they feel like it" (COIQ Transcript 02, translated from Tagalog). Another participant echoed the sentiment by highlighting how the projects were not generic in design but customized based on community needs:

> As for the scope [of the e-SL project], I think it was based on what we said we needed. They [students] met those needs. It was not like a generic project applied by the students to every community. (COIQ Transcript 05, translated from Tagalog)

The Value of Being Adaptable

In addition to cultural sensitivity, the study also examines how adaptability is crucial in successfully executing e-SL projects. "Adaptability" refers to accommodating the ever-changing and often complex circumstances the community partners may be experiencing. One respondent specifically appreciated this aspect, stating:

> Yes, our online engagements with students are scheduled on Saturdays. Sometimes it is pleasing because we, as a Cooperative, also have responsibilities that we need to address . . . the students are very accommodating of our real-world commitments. (COIQ Transcript 05, translated from Tagalog)

Another participant noted the timely nature of the students' involvement, explaining:

> We were already working on our own, but having the perspective of the students when we needed to review [our work systems] was good. It was really timely and provided fresh perspectives that we had not previously considered [in our organization]. (COIQ Transcript 03, translated from Tagalog)

Collaboration Through Mutual Negotiation

The quality of the interaction hinges not just on what students offer but also on their flexibility in adapting to the community's needs and circumstances. Negotiating the scope and duration of the projects grants a level of customization that community partners highly appreciate, suggesting improved planning in future collaborations. One partner illuminated this sentiment, stating:

> Everything can be negotiated with the students if all the parties agree. So, whether the students can only commit for a short term, we will adjust our programs accordingly. Likewise, if they can stay longer, we create longer-term projects they can immerse themselves in. (COIQ Transcript 12)

Room for Refinement: Timing, Preplanning, and Skill Matching in Student Engagements

Although much of the feedback praises the efforts and qualities of Ateneo students, some areas could use refinement, such as the spacing of the engagement protocols. One community partner suggested that there should be more time allocated for preplanning and logistics to ensure that the projects genuinely meet the community's expectations:

> Planning could be earlier, maybe while Ateneo is on break or at least before the new semester starts, so we can already begin planning [for the coming term]. These are the things that should have been discussed more. (COIQ Transcript 03, translated from Tagalog)

Moreover, a thematic analysis of qualitative survey responses from the CIFQ underscores the community partners' strong preference

for enhanced alignment between student skills and organizational needs. This sentiment is captured succinctly by a survey respondent:

> There should be more careful matching of the needs of the organization and the courses offered by the University through having a clear orientation or leveling-off, especially in terms of the course scope and the potential contributions of the class for a semester. (CIFQ Respondent 50)

In summary, partner communities generally perceive Ateneo students' e-SL projects as culturally sensitive and adaptable. However, enhancing engagement timing protocols and skill-matching can ensure closer alignment with community needs and cultural norms. Addressing these aspects allows students to fine-tune their approaches, leading to e-SL projects that resonate profoundly and exhibit genuine cultural sensitivity.

Unveiling the Dynamics of Trust and Communication

Our research aims to unravel the complex dynamics of trust and communication between Ateneo students and their community partners in e-SL programs. We seek to address the research objective: How do these crucial elements influence the communities' perceptions of students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability? Our exploration uncovers a range of strengths and areas for enhancement. The subsequent discussion delineates these thematic findings comprehensively.

Effective Communication: The Bedrock of Trust

A significant factor contributing to successful e-SL engagements is effective communication. Ateneo students demonstrate an outstanding ability to prepare and communicate in ways that ease project implementation and foster trust. One community partner noted:

> Communications are generally smooth. Whenever we have questions or need clarifications, they are quick to respond. Furthermore, they are prepared and impressively adaptable, as if they are always ready. They have all the documents, PowerPoint presentations, everything. Moreover, even if there are last-minute changes or unexpected

issues, they adjust without causing problems. (COIQ Transcript 01, translated from Tagalog)

These observations indicate that the students' adeptness in agile communication positively impacts the trust they cultivate with their community partners.

Technological Limitations: A Barrier to Smooth Partnership

Although the students are effective communicators, technological hurdles present considerable barriers. The need for more reliable internet access and crucial digital equipment is an impediment to seamless engagement. A community partner remarked:

> The internet connection is a challenge for us. Some of us do not have laptops or smartphones. Even those who often do not have their own devices struggle to connect during meetings, so sometimes our communication with them is delayed, affecting the flow of our projects and discussions. (COIQ Transcript 04, translated from Tagalog)

Such observations highlight how technological limitations can interrupt what might otherwise be a smooth collaboration.

Building Trust: It Is a Long Game

Sustained engagement and time are pivotal in fostering profound trust between Ateneo students and the community partners. One CPO, reflecting upon over 3 years of collaboration with Ateneo students, shared:

> We really trust the Ateneo students; there are no issues, and this is mutual. We have built this trust over the years through various activities and meetings, so the level of trust is high. We share updates transparently and make decisions together, no problem. (COIQ Transcript 12, translated from Tagalog)

In essence, prolonged interactions have solidified this mutual trust, positioning it as a foundational aspect of their partnership.

Beyond Lip Service: Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptability in Action

Ateneo students exhibit a profound grasp of the cultural intricacies of their community partners, which is crucial in nurturing trust.

A representative from the Aeta community conveyed:

> They have our trust because they truly engage with the Aeta community. This is not just a superficial engagement. They understand Aeta culture and are sensitive to our issues. The way they interact is very respectful and understanding, which makes us trust them even more. (COIQ Transcript 15, translated from Tagalog)

The dedication to genuinely engage with communities, recognizing distinct aspects of their context, like the Aetas' Indigenous background, lays a robust groundwork of trust for sustained partnerships.

Apart from cultural sensitivity, adaptability stands out as a defining attribute. Students display an exceptional capacity to tailor their approach in alignment with the specific requirements of community partners, bolstering mutual trust. One community collaborator commented:

> What is pleasing is their confidence to handle situations without being disrespectful. They are not stubborn. They listen and adjust according to what the community needs. They are not a "one size fits all" type of group. (COIQ Transcript 20, translated from Tagalog)

The Irreplaceable Value of Physical Interaction

Despite intense levels of trust and effective communication, the irreplaceable value of physical interactions remains notable. A community partner shared:

> We do not have any trust issues, but we wish there could have been at least one in-person meeting. It is not that we do not trust [the students], but a different connection is formed when you see someone face-to-face. (COIQ Transcript 16, translated from Tagalog)

In summary, the study affirms that effective communication, long-term engagement, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability are integral in shaping an elevated level of trust between Ateneo students and community partners. While ever-present, challenges like technological barriers and the lack of physical interaction reveal areas for poten-tial refinement. These findings validate the effectiveness of existing e-SL engagement practices and confirm avenues for continued development and enrichment.

Discussion

In addressing the central research question, our study offers a multifaceted perspective. One of the most intriguing elements is the dual nature of institutional prestige, serving as both an asset and a barrier in e-SL engagement. Our results show that the reputation of Ateneo offers students a degree of cultural capital, facilitating more straightforward access to community initiatives (Aizik et al., 2017; Coelho & Menezes, 2021). However, this prestige also poses challenges, necessitating careful navigation by the students to ensure meaningful engagement. The implication is that although an institution's reputation can act as an initial driver for engagement, it is not a self-sustaining force. This finding ties back to existing literature emphasizing the importance of institutional alignment with community goals and stakeholders for the ultimate success of SL endeavors (d'Arlach et al., 2009; George-Paschal et al., 2019).

Our research also delves into the effectiveness of online platforms for SL. The results confirm that e-SL can be a viable alternative to f2f community engagement (Dapena et al., 2022; Waldner et al., 2012). This observation is particularly critical given the limitations imposed by global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where physical engagement was not an option (Barker et al., 2021). However, our study also finds that online interactions should only partially replace f2f community interactions. Both have their merits, and the ideal approach is a hybrid one that combines the benefits of both modalities (Brooks, 2020; Lee et al., 2011).

Effective communication, especially linguistic fluency in the use of the local language by Ateneo students, is instrumental in altering community perceptions and fostering a more inclusive and relatable form of engagement. Using the vernacular is a matter of linguistic proficiency and cultural diplomacy. Communicating effectively in the community's native tongue is an essential bridge, often dissolving initial misgivings or discomfort and facilitating deeper engagement. The findings contribute significantly to our understanding of effective communication in e-SL, particularly

its role in trust-building. Ateneo students' adeptness in clear, prompt communication proves crucial for streamlining project implementation and fostering trust. Such a perspective resonates with scholarly work emphasizing the role of effective communication as a cornerstone for successful SL projects (Kindred, 2020; McCrickard, 2011).

The observed inconsistency in student engagement levels over time also echoes concerns in the existing literature about the necessity for long-term, sustainable relationships in SL (Mitchell, 2008; Suckale et al., 2018). Moreover, it is not merely the duration but the engagement quality that matters. Our data reveals a community inclination for a more engaging narrative. Researchers can situate this preference within the expansive academic discourse on motivations that lead community partners to participate in SL initiatives. Research suggests that positive interactions and memorable experiences often underpin sustained community engagement (Cronley et al., 2015; Darby & Willingham, 2022). Such a perspective aligns with findings where communities articulate a need for narratives that encapsulate the heart of the engagement, making the collaboration both memorable and potentially enduring. This perspective also brings us to the broader conversation of sustained relationships and reciprocity, emphasizing that both parties should benefit from the engagement (Darby et al., 2023; Jacoby, 2014).

Our findings also underscore the importance of respecting community sensibilities. Cultural missteps, such as a student's casual posture during an e-SL session, serve as cautionary tales. Such instances draw attention to the broader, critical issue of respecting community perspectives and power dynamics in SL contexts (Doran et al., 2021; Matthews, 2019; Mtawa & Fongwa, 2022). Such moments are educational opportunities to revisit and reinforce the importance of cultural awareness in e-SL programs.

We also must recognize the technical barriers that emerged during our study. Although Ateneo students showed strong communication skills, technological limitations hindered the fluidity and trust integral to these e-SL engagements. This finding resonates with Couillou et al. (2023), who stressed the importance of technological agility in community-based learning initiatives. The study adds nuance by highlighting the tension between solid communicative abilities and the technological barriers that may obstruct such interactions. This finding suggests that even the most promising e-SL initiatives may falter without the necessary digital infrastructure; thus, technological agility becomes increasingly relevant as educational initiatives transition into digital realms (Couillou et al., 2023).

Finally, given the focus of the study on e-SL, a form of SL accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to digital adaptability and resilience becomes critical (Barker et al., 2021; Pellerano et al., 2023). In our findings, communities expressed concerns about pacing and presentation styles, signaling a need for resilience and adaptability in e-SL settings. However, despite the strengths in communication, trust-building, cultural sensitivity, and cultural adaptability of students, the study consistently emphasizes the irreplaceable value of physical interactions in e-SL engagements. The literature needs to adequately delve into this aspect within the e-SL context, and we believe that the insights provided here may serve as a basis for future research and program development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study's central research question is how partner communities perceive students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability in e-service-learning (e-SL) programs at Ateneo. Although evidence broadly suggests that community partners perceive Ateneo students as attuned to local customs, values, and power dynamics—factors that foster more meaningful and enduring partnerships—findings unveil multiple critical dimensions that shape these community perceptions.

First, we observed that Ateneo's institutional prestige, although generally considered advantageous, carries a complex duality. Even as it catalyzes initial community engagement due to its inherent cultural capital, it can also hinder establishing genuine, sustained relationships. Such insights indicate a necessity for educational institutions like Ateneo to adapt their community engagement strategies, potentially integrating sensitivity training that educates students about the implications of their institution's reputation within the community.

Concerning the technological aspects, our study affirms the effectiveness of online platforms in fostering community engage-

ment. Nonetheless, the research also highlights the irreplaceable value of f2f interactions. This juxtaposition makes the case for a hybrid approach that affords the benefits of both digital and physical spaces, maximizing the advantages of both modalities. For administrators and policymakers, these insights offer a strong case for revisiting and potentially overhauling the design and execution of e-SL programs.

Effective communication emerges as a cornerstone of successful engagement. The students' use of the community's local language deepens engagement and acts as a form of cultural diplomacy. To further this advantage, educational planners might consider implementing local language and cultural studies within e-SL curricula.

However, our study also reveals that technological limitations, such as poor internet connectivity and inadequate digital capacities of partner communities (e.g., lack of devices), pose significant challenges. These technological barriers underline the importance of bolstering digital infrastructure that can support the needs of both students and partner communities. Educational institutions can seek partnerships with tech companies to provide necessary IT resources so that technology is an enabler rather than an obstacle.

Additionally, both the level and type of student engagement have notable effects. Differences in commitment and the community's preference for engaging narratives play a significant role in the long-term sustainability of partnerships. These insights emphasize the importance of equipping students with an understanding of the value of service and skills in storytelling and maintaining engagement, among other competencies.

Despite its contributions, this study has its limitations. The research focuses solely on Ateneo and its partner communities, potentially limiting the broader applicability of the findings. Additionally, although the study examined the impact of several factors such as (1) the dual role of institutional prestige, (2) the effectiveness of e-SL platforms, (3) the importance of effective communication, (4) consistency in the quality of student engagement, (5) respecting community sensibilities, (6) technical barriers in e-SL, and (7) digital adaptability and resilience, it did not investigate the long-term outcomes of community perceptions nor deeply explore the other technological aspects that impede e-SL experiences.

However, the study's strengths lie in its unique focus on community viewpoints in e-SL, an area often overshadowed by predominantly focusing on the perspective of students. Moreover, given the increasing digital transformation trend in educational settings, the study is timely. The results offer pivotal insights for administrators, educators, and community coordinators striving to optimize e-SL practices, especially within the Philippine milieu and countries with comparable contexts. These findings stress the importance for stakeholders to deeply understand community expectations, cultural norms, and technological preparedness during the planning and execution of e-SL projects.

Researchers should extend the findings from this research study to other educational institutions and community structures. By doing this, they can test the insights' applicability and scalability. Further studies should also explore the impact of technological factors from the community's perspective, an area yet to be thoroughly examined. Conducting longitudinal research will give a deeper understanding of how community perceptions change over time and highlight factors that either support or undermine long-term e-SL initiatives.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests, financial or otherwise, related to the current work.

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