INTEGRATION OF FLEXIBLE SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAM (E-SLP) IN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION GRADUATE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

Service learning integrates students' experiences into the curriculum for students to become change agents. Due to COVID-19, the School of Education Graduate Studies program adopted Flexible e-service Learning (FeSLP) in collaboration with Xavier Ateneo's Service-Learning Program and Bukidnon Mission Schools. The study determined how FeSLP was integrated into the Graduate studies curriculum during the new normal. The study used participatory action research. Purposive sampling was used with 18 Masters and 9 Ph.D. students. The Graduate students had brainstorming sessions on how to address the community's needs. Conducting a webinar and providing modules, were then implemented. Findings revealed that FeSLP is beneficial in integrating students' academic and social formation. Students have internalized the objectives of the program, which helped them achieve the learning outcomes. However, some challenges were observed in courses that need in-depth interaction and immersion in communities for meaningful engagements. Nonetheless, the community was grateful for the provisions of materials that helped their instruction during the pandemic. Graduate students also shared that their experiences had helped them become more reflective about the significance of the course and their role in the contextual application. Their collaboration enlightened their perspectives toward their work and studies as agents of change.

Keywords: flexible e-service learning; curriculum development; social development

INTRODUCTION

The university's teaching processes were altered when educational activities were abruptly disrupted due to the COVID-19 health crisis. These changes prompted the institution to implement "Flexible Learning" to protect students' safety without jeopardizing their academic and social development.

As part of the university's social development programs and as an educational pedagogy, service learning has constantly been implemented as a form of experiential education where students are involved in the process of immersion, reflection, and action.

The Xavier Ateneo Service-Learning Program (SLP) is an integrative pedagogy that integrates academic instruction, practical service, and critical reflective views to facilitate student learning and civic responsibility in the subject`s learning competencies, anchored by structured classroom instruction and local community participation.

Adjusting to the changes, the social development office of Xavier Ateneo piloted "flexible service learning" starting the school year

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2020-2021. Together with the School of Education Graduate Studies programs, the flexible service-learning model was utilized. Although the flexible service-learning model limits face-to-face interactions that can occur in traditional onsite community engagement, it is a format that has been adopted by other universities to ensure that community needs are met through service rendered by students under the mentorship of their faculty. The engagement is done through an online platform with a set curriculum and a customizable blended learning delivery method. As defined by Malvey et al. (2006), the flexible e-service learning model uses the Internet and cutting-edge technology to enable students, faculty, and community partners to collaborate in organized, focused, experiential, service-learning activities. Similarly, Dailey-Hebert et al. (2008) establish the notion of service eLearning, where the service or instruction is offered partially or completely online, commonly in a blended manner.

In this study, flexible service-learning was done through the existing partnership of Xavier Ateneo's Service-Learning Program and the Bukidnon Mission Schools particularly Fr Leoni Memorial School (FLMS) and Pangantucan Community High School (PCHS). Following the service-learning format, the community expressed a desire to train their faculty in curriculum building, particularly in light of distant learning and changes in instruction and delivery. The assessment of community needs was done through virtual meetings and group consultations with the guidance of the Faculty and Service learning (SL) formator.

Service learning, despite changes in delivery and constraints on students' experience in communities, continues to benefit students' social formation.

The figure below shows how community engagement, classroom instruction, and community development are all integrated. Skills learned in the classroom are more valuable if applied to community development which should be considered strategically, and interventions may address the expressed needs of the community.
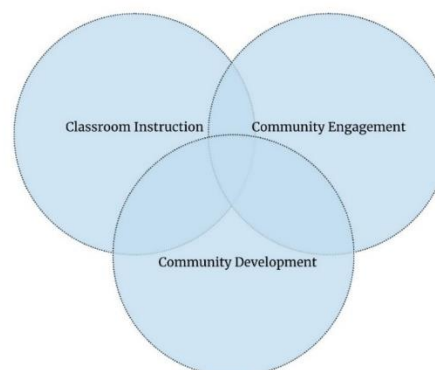

Figure 1. Service-learning framework

This will help the academics, Bukidnon mission districts, and the LGU to support development. Students and Faculty provide SLP services in community engagement based on their fields and expertise and to match community needs. Students are engaged in dialogue education by actively participating in their learning. It also supports students who pursue higher education and promotes social change by allowing them to transform their communities through their respective areas of expertise.

Among the three facets of the service-learning framework, classroom instruction highlights its linkage to the curriculum. When teaching methodology meets content and skills, academics come alive. Students gain knowledge through the process of making explicit connections between subject matter and application. This motivates students to want to learn content and needed skills. It is similar to learning and practicing clinical skills and techniques. The service informs the curriculum and the curriculum informs the service.

Another important factor presented by the SLP framework is community engagement/involvement. Students and Faculty provide SLP services in community engagement based on their fields and expertise and to match community needs. Moreover, students are engaged in dialogue education by actively

participating in their learning. It also supports students who pursue higher education and promotes social change by allowing them to transform their communities through their respective areas of expertise.

The last factor presented in the framework is Community Development, which is also very important and should be considered strategically. Interventions may address the expressed needs of the community. This will help the academics, Bukidnon mission districts, and the LGU to support development.

In this study, e-service learning was integrated into the School of Education (SOE) Graduate studies during the onset of the pandemic, when educational institutions transitioned to online learning. All facets of education, including the service-learning program, looked into how to efficiently accomplish the program's outcomes in a virtual setting and considered the alignment of these to the course-learning outcomes in Graduate studies.

The e-service learning program (e-SLP) was implemented and integrated into both the undergraduate and graduate courses to create a positive impact on academic learning. As for the graduate studies, the integration of the service-learning program has already reached its 5th year with 2 years in the virtual setting. The e-SLP is a good avenue for the student's ability to apply knowledge in practical settings and to engage in online activities that address human and community needs. With the online setting, students can take the time they need and set their schedules and create personalized learning accessibility and social collaboration.

Even during the face-to-face service-learning program activities, the students are prepared to be responsive to community issues, to foster a sense of citizenship and promote community development. The e-SLP is a good innovation because the students can explore how they can make use of the virtual platforms to share feelings and experiences, specifically through the discussion board, live conferencing, etc. Moreover, because e-SLP has to be aligned to the course learning outcomes expected to be achieved by the graduate students, the students have to be able to Identify academic meaning for the service-learning

and through their experiences, they will be able to promote critical inquiry, and reflection through shared dialogue by translating theory into practice.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to determine how a flexible service-learning program was effectively integrated into the Graduate studies curriculum in the new normal. Specifically, it sought to 1) determine the flexible service learning program or e-slp contribute to the attainment of the course learning outcomes; 2) evaluate the challenges and opportunities of the conduct of a flexible service learning program as integrated into the school of education curriculum; 3) determine how the e-SLP contribute to community and social development; and 4) analyse how the e-SLP enhance students' social formation in the process of engaging with partner communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study used descriptive design within a Participatory Action Research approach to determine how a flexible service-learning program was effectively integrated into the Graduate studies curriculum in the new normal. The descriptive aspect of this action research addresses the research questions on how the e-SLP contributed to the achievement of the course learning outcomes, how it contributed to the partner communities as well as the students' social formation in the process of community engagement. It also explores the challenges and opportunities experienced during the implementation of the e-SLP activities.

Participatory Action Research is an approach to the inquiry which involves the researchers and participants working together to understand a certain problematic situation, find solutions, and take action. This approach is context-specific and follows an iterative cycle of research, action, and reflection (Institute of Development Studies, 2022).

The participants of this study are 18 Master of Arts in Education students under the course Curriculum Development and 9 Doctor of

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Philosophy students from the course Filipino Society. The assessment of the community needs was done through virtual meetings and consultations with the Faculty and Service Learning formator. After a series of brainstorming sessions, the community highlighted the need for faculty and curriculum development, especially with remote learning and the changes in instruction and delivery. The Graduate students had a series of brainstorming sessions on how to address these needs. Conducting a webinar and providing a module that will guide the teachers were then implemented. After the conduct of the program, the students underwent processing sessions and post-SLP evaluation. Consent forms were given to the participants before the conduct of the study and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The participants were also informed of the plan for the study to be published. Research ethics clearance was applied before the data-gathering procedure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Flexible service-learning programs contribute to the attainment of the course-learning outcomes

Participants in the flexible service-learning program said the experience helped them become more reflective about the importance of the course and their specific roles in the contextual application of the lessons, as well as their civic responsibility to engage in meaningful activities that enlightened their perspectives on their work and studies, even in the flexible learning setting. According to research, connecting service to curriculum objectives led to a higher mastery of knowledge and skills compared to non-service learning courses and stronger academic outcomes. (Sandaran, 2012).

The post-SLP evaluation conducted also revealed that the participants had a general feeling that they were able to connect the concepts that were learned in class to actual practice. This conclusion backs up the findings of a comparative study on service learning in higher education undertaken by Lee, et al. (2018). Participants of that study reported that service-learning enabled them to discover the closer link between being in

"service" and of "learning," thus enabling them to see societal issues and practice critical thinking in situations where they are called to be actively involved. The flexible service-learning program allowed participants to internalize certain lessons and processes in their graduate courses, giving them a venue to deepen their understanding of the community's context and needs while also completing tasks and achieving the competencies required for the courses. As Mikelic Preradovic (2015) puts it, relevance is achieved through the integration of service and curriculum. This is also affirmed by Eastern et al. (2021) in a similar study conducted which reported that students who have undergone service learning showed significant changes in their behaviors, ability to connect to the concept of learning and the course content, as well as other personal changes brought about by the experience of being in a service-learning class. Overall, the findings of this study align with the findings of Littlefield et al. (2016) that reported that students who engaged in service learning see the experience as a way of augmenting their understanding of the course lessons.

2. Challenges and opportunities of the conduct of a flexible service-learning program as integrated into the school of education curriculum

The transition to flexible learning created numerous opportunities for the School of Education Graduate Programs to engage in significant and collaborative partnerships across borders by utilizing various technologies that allowed graduate students to continue their online learning no matter where they were in the world. The flexible service-learning setup required faculty to reevaluate the course structure to support ongoing learning and adapt course outcomes and deliverables so that students and partner communities could still access them remotely.

Among the challenges that the participants cited are the following: first, the online setup made it difficult to connect and engage with the community because of the internet connection issues on the part of the graduate students and the partner schools. This is hardly surprising given that

statistics from The Inclusive Internet Index (3i), a study commissioned by Facebook and created by The Economist Intelligence Unit in 2021, showed that the Philippines ranked 68th out of 120 nations. Moreover, not being able to visit the community and immerse firsthand to be able to see the real context made the engagement less personal.

On the other hand, the shift to flexible service learning forged more opportunities for the school to engage with the partner communities. It made planning and communication much easier because the groundwork could be done online. Transitioning to an online setting also caused graduate students to become more aware of societal challenges and reconsider their roles as community participants.

E-service learning provides opportunities as Strait and Sauer (2004) note that access to a community partner becomes a moot point in an online environment in cases where the service component occurs online. E-service-learning can also engage groups that might not otherwise be able to take part in a service-learning activity, such as rural populations, people without access to higher education institutions nearby (Strait & Hamerlinck, 2010), or even shy or introverted individuals (Seifer & Mihalynuk, 2005). When place-based restrictions are removed, e-service-learning could involve local, national, or even international partners for service projects (Malvey et al., 2006). Future research should take into account questions like whether they miss out on significant networking opportunities, organizational dynamics, and other learning opportunities accessible to students performing their service physically on-site. Malvey et al. (2006) made the valid point that students participating in e-service-learning "would likely miss out on the spontaneity and thrill of events by not being physically onsite."

Four different types of SeL courses are listed by Waldner et al. (2012): Type I (instruction is fully online and service is on-site), Type II (instruction is fully on-site and service is fully online), Type III (instruction and service may be both on-site and online), and Type IV (instruction and service may be both on-site and online) (instruction and service are fully online). The flexible service-learning program used in our context is Type III, where both instruction and service are conducted online. It has both benefits and drawbacks. The identified types of courses bring various advantages (e.g., independence of time and space) and various limitations (e.g., technological challenges, communication barriers, and teacher workload).

3. Contribution of e-SLP to the community and social development

The partner communities have shared their feedback after the conduct of the webinar and received the modules as their guide in the implementation or application. The data gathered show that the FeSL implementation was successful with an overall mean rating of 4.33 described as Very Good. Specifically, the partner communities rated the highest on the following indicators, specifically on "online meetings and consultations between XU SLP and partner were deliberately planned" and even "the SL formator's safety and protection were ensured during their area visits" Moreover, the indicators with the second highest mean rating of 4.60 also described as excellent, including how "some SL projects can be worked on virtually or remotely," "how the work plan for the FeSL engagement was followed," how the partner schools made the needed data, materials, and resources, accessible for FeSL engagements, and that "feedback mechanisms wear clear during the whole FeSL implementation" and that "the service learning projects are beneficial to them." Other indicators which were also rated as "Very Good" include: Our school provided the students with the necessary orientation for their SL engagement (x=3.80); The terms of service/projects between the university and our school are well-defined in the MOU (x=4.20); Our school's expressed needs were appropriately addressed by the students' FeSL outputs (x=4.20); The signed Memorandum of Understanding establishes institutional partnership and clear implementation guidelines (x=4.40); The ability to build partnerships was not restricted by online engagement between students and school community members (x=4.40); We were guided by the semester's FeSL calendared activities (x=3.80); The FeSL outputs matched our

expectations (x=4.00); The FeSL outputs will benefit the advancement of our school (x=4.40); We gain a better understanding of the operational guide content (x=4.40);

We are satisfied with the FeSL implementation (x=4.40), and We received adequate orientation and training on the project's final output (x=4.20).

On the other hand, there are two indicators with the lowest rating of 3.60, described as "Good" and thus, need to be improved in the next implementation. These include the internet use of the partner communities and the time allocated for the students and community to gather data. This was observed because there are instances where the schedule needs to be in the morning as advised by the partner schools to have a better internet connection. The virtual meeting between both the partners and the students was also carefully planned, because of the limited schedule of the students and the need to adjust to the availability of the faculty members from the partner schools.

Furthermore, Table 1 shows the responses of the partner schools, as represented by their administrators and some faculty members, regarding the program effectiveness, communications, and organizational engagement, and project implementation and transition.

Table 1
Focused group discussion with representatives from partner schools

Questions	Responses
Program Effectiveness How well does the FeSL program meet your specified needs?	• It was really great that this program has been brought to us to make our work easier and productive. • They give more ideas and opportunity

Communications Management
How successful were the informational materials/mechanisms of the online/remote engagement?
	• It was good and very useful.
	   • it gives direct engagement
	   • It was still successful even if we have internet problems

Organizational Management How timely and effectively were the FeSL program concerns addressed?	• It can easily transact and process the needs of individuals and is less time consuming. • They are very fast in meeting our needs
Project Implementation & Transition How useful was the output you received?	• It could have been more useful had the students have greater exposure and time with us • It's very useful

Most of the activities were conducted online, which makes the processes fast and direct.

Even if internet usage on the part of the partner schools was a concern, they were still able to interact with the students and share their needs and brainstorm what possible solutions can be provided. As for what the representatives from the partner schools shared, they saw this engagement as productive, which makes their work easier and which gave them more opportunities to learn from the materials and the engagement. However, they still hoped that the students would have greater exposure to the partner schools and more time to engage with them.

The role of the Formator is very important in bridging the school to the community. Hence, to effectively implement the program, the meetings to involve both parties and to do needs assessment through virtual meetings should be initiated by the SL formator. It was recommended that during the community meetings, questions be communicated ahead so that partners can prepare the needed information for the students. Further, more time is needed for interactions between community representatives and the students. Consistently, Sandaran (2012) stressed that in Identifying and assessing community needs, students can see their actions making a noticeable difference even as they learn and apply academic skills and knowledge.

The community expressed how grateful they are for XU to reach out to them and establish the partnership. In the preliminary stages, there was constant communication to help the community understand FeSL. Moreover, the community representatives shared that they are grateful for the efforts of the students in coming up with their FeSL engagements. During community virtual interactions, students welcomed the suggestions of the community as well as responded to their technical questions.

In general, the community was grateful for the provisions because the materials can help them contextualize their delivery and address. However, it is recommended that the evaluation be extended to the students who are also the end users and who will benefit from the applications done by the partner schools. This is to determine the impact of these materials, both the webinar and modules, to the students, after these were

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continuously implemented in the classroom instruction.

According to Mikelic Preradovic (2015), mutual respect between all parties is a requirement for promoting tolerance, supporting diversity, and respecting individual differences. It is important to show respect for the beliefs, circumstances, and lifestyles of service users. Reciprocity denotes a value exchange procedure that is advantageous to all parties. Students learn more, teachers interact with the community, educational institutions do better work, and the community gains from the project's immediate effects. All participants in our adaptable service-learning program have undoubtedly profited from this social involvement.

4. e-SLP enhances Graduate students' social formation in the process of engaging with partner communities

In the light of social formation, the participants saw flexible service learning as an opportunity to serve the community. The experience gave them a wider perspective as well as realizing the magnitude of their impact as graduate students, especially during the time of the pandemic. Being able to serve the community meant extending what is called Cura Personalis which is translated as "care for the person." For the participants, undergoing flexible service learning is an opportunity to show care and concern to others, especially those who need it the most. As one student reflected, it helped him understand his role in the community and to become aware of their needs as well as being able to share with them his own experiences.

Moreover, the experience itself aligns with the core values that the university adheres to. Looking at the core values of competence, conscience, and commitment, the participants were able to exemplify these values through their preparations for making the e-SLP output as well as its implementation. As supported by one of the students, said that this experience of serving the FLMS administration, faculty, and staff, was one of his memorable experiences during the pandemic. He further shared that this experience became fulfilling and meaningful because they were able to

share their acquired knowledge and skills to those who are in need, which is also his mantra in the academe. This service-learning experience, he added, can be extended by being proactive (commitment), responsive to the needs of the school, teachers, learners, stakeholders, and the community in general (conscience) in terms of curriculum/ program delivery, planning, and financial management, personnel development, forged partnerships among stakeholders and civic affairs involvement (competence). Simonelli et al. (2004), pointed out that service as an accompaniment to learning, develops a greater understanding of local life, allowing students to gain insider views of the community. In this way, students feel a sense of responsibility towards the community and develop a greater sense of belonging and civic consciousness.

The experience was humbling to the participants who learned to empathize with the teachers from the recipient partner schools. They were able to reflect that they have to see things from other people's perspectives and experiences to understand their situation. Hence, this experience made them realize they need to be more considerate, especially in their context of being teachers, in dealing with their students as well as the parents.

Lastly, the service-learning experience helped the students to value the experience and appreciate small to big things in relevance to their role and participation for the benefit of a certain community. Their effort to collaborate with their classmates in discussing how to address the needs of the partner schools and to be able to coordinate and collaborate with the partner schools helped them to see the significance of maximizing the SLP experience, which they can apply to their professional growth, in their field, and to their personal growth.

This is in line with Mikelic Preradovic's (2015) definitions of SL as a kind of education, which shares three essential components that set it apart from other experiential education models. These components include organized, in-depth thought, the application of knowledge in practical contexts, and relevant service. Integration of theory and practice is encouraged by student reflection. As a result, service learning needs to be

relevant, meaningful, and thoroughly integrated into the curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

The flexible service-learning program provided avenues for the graduate students' community engagement, helped them achieve the expected graduate course learning outcomes with relevance and meaning, helped address the needs of the partner schools, and also benefited the students on how they can contextualize their learning in their respective field and career. The virtual set-up made the interactions fast and direct, amidst the technical difficulties experienced. This experience also inspired the graduate students to be reflective in understanding the significance of the course and how the teachings and experiences can be applied to their context. The holistic experience supports the service-learning framework, where classroom instruction is supplemented by community engagement that enriches the learning experience of the students from the classroom to action in addressing the needs of the community. As more engagement is done between the two parties, community development is then stimulated through the applications done by the recipient community with the use of their learning from the materials provided to them. Hence, this engagement should be continued whether it is onsite or online. Still, it is encouraged to also evaluate the extent of implementation and the impact of the provisions through the students' evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the service-learning program be implemented in Graduate studies each semester so that the students can have first-hand experience in applying their learning through community participation and development. For the students to get fully immersed in the context and culture of the community, onsite activities are advised.

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