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FEATURE

**Qualitative Content Analysis of Service Learning Portfolios
of Graduate Students in an International
Faith-Based Institution**

Arceli H. Rosario
Sheri Joy C. Namanya

Abstract. *Service learning has been practiced in all educational levels, especially in higher education (Brennan, 2017; Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Research studies (Holsapple, 2012; Schelbe, Petracchi, & Weaver, 2014) showed that students who engage in service learning develop increased sense of social justice, greater sensitivity and empathy toward others, higher cultural competence, better multicultural skills, and lower stereotyping tendencies, among other positive outcomes. Anchored on John Dewey's pragmatism (Maddux & Donnett, 2015), this study used qualitative content analysis to assess the service learning portfolios of 18 graduate students in an international faith-based institution. These service learning portfolios were submitted from 2010-2017. Findings showed that the participants engaged in activities that benefited the church, the institution, community groups within the institution, and the outside community. Beneficiaries were mainly the vulnerable and marginalized groups. The participants claimed that through their engagement in service learning they developed competence and professional identity, felt joy and empathy in serving others, and found meaning and purpose in life. This study affirmed best practices in the area of service learning and recommended improvements in the implementation of the institution's service learning program.*

Keywords: service learning, graduate students, international faith-based institution, Philippines, qualitative content analysis

Introduction

Service learning is a pedagogical strategy that incorporates community service to an academic curriculum (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010; Learn and Serve America, 2010). Harkavy and Hartley (2010), who traced the philosophical and historical roots of service learning, explained that while service learning was conceived to link the functions of higher education to higher purposes such as “transformative learning, education for democracy, and research to better understand and improve the world” (p. 419), it evolved to meet pragmatic purposes, that is, as an effective pedagogy because it promotes “contextual learning and real-world application of theory” (p. 419). According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Wulsin (2008), it “involves applying classroom learning through investigation of a community problem, planning ways to solve it,” and engaging in action, reflection, and “demonstration of results” (p. 1). Both faculty and students are involved “to address critical social issues and align curriculum, scholarship, research and creative activity with the public good” (Brennan, 2017, p. 3; see also Mugabi, 2015). From the time of its conception in the 1990s, service learning has grown in popularity (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). It has been adopted not only by higher educational institutions (HEIs) but by elementary and high schools as well (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Harkavy and Hartley (2010) underscored the responsibility of public colleges and universities to serve the people. In the United States, over a thousand HEIs have formed a coalition called Campus Compact, whose mission is to advance “the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility” (Campus Compact, n.d., para. 1). In addition, Harkavy and Hartley (2010) also noted the acceptability of service learning among private and faith-based HEIs due to their commitment to their mission to promote social justice.

While HEIs have implemented service learning and have increased their efforts toward improving community life and aligning what they do to promote the public good, some scholars lament that the “time and place where community engagement is sufficiently valued and rewarded within higher education” has not yet been reached (Morin, Jaeger, & O’meara, 2016, p. 154; see also Mugabi, 2015). Mugabi (2015) suggests that HEIs record, evaluate, and reward such community-oriented activities. Hence, this study aimed to assess the service learning program of an international faith-based institution by analyzing the service learning portfolios of graduate students through qualitative content analysis.

Review of Related Literature

Service learning brings about substantial benefits to students, the educational institution, and the community. Some researchers, however, have also highlighted potential and actual problems associated with it. The subsequent paragraphs discuss benefits and potential problems of service learning, as well as best practices in conducting service learning programs.

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Benefits of Service Learning

Studies reveal that service learning increases students' sense of social justice, heightens sensitivity and empathy toward others, elevates cultural competence, improves multicultural skills, lowers stereotyping tendencies, and develops professional identity (Bloomquist, 2015; Holsapple, 2012; Schelbe et al., 2014). As students go out into the community, they get a more complete picture of reality than what they see in their schools. Immersing themselves in that reality, they understand better the problems that beset the people around them. Thus, they are provided with opportunities to apply the theoretical skills they are learning in school and help the surrounding community.

Students who engage in service learning have reported that they are able to connect theory with practice (Akpabio, 2012; Bloomquist, 2015; Schelbe et al., 2014). As a result, they have better cognitive ability and academic performance (Akpabio, 2012; Bauman, 2014; Celio et al., 2011; Eyster, Giles, & Gray, 2001). Additionally, they develop leadership and interpersonal and communication skills (Akpabio, 2012). They also acquire a higher sense of professional and personal identity, efficacy, and meaningfulness (Akpabio, 2012; Celio et al., 2011; Cho & Gulley, 2016; Schelbe et al., 2014).

Service learning not only benefits students; it also benefits the educational institutions that implement it. Bridgeland et al. (2008) stated that while it could not yet be claimed conclusively that service learning increases high school graduation rates, they reported that it "can play a major role in keeping students engaged in school and on track to graduate" (p. 2). Yob's (2014) study titled "Keeping Students in by Sending Them out: Retention and Service-Learning" attested that service learning promotes student retention. In addition, service learning creates an avenue for students to connect their school with the community, where there are other prospective clients or students. Students who go out into the community carry the name of their institution. The community gets to know about their institution and may become attracted to it because of the services that the students provide (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010; Celio et al., 2011; Cicero-Johns, 2016).

More importantly, faith-based educational institutions claim that service learning is a platform which helps them accomplish God's commission and the service required of His followers (Colon, 2017; Matt 25:40; Matt 28:20; Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2010; White, 1903). Service learning fosters students' moral and spiritual growth (Eyster et al., 2001). Students attest that they experience personal satisfaction when they serve (Tagoe, 2014). These aspects are among the primary aims of faith-based institutions; hence, service learning is a strategy that such institutions may consider adopting and implementing.

Potential Problems in Service Learning

Despite the positive outcomes of service learning, there are arguments against it. Some studies report that it is not as laudable as it is claimed to be. Service learning has been criticized as lacking academic rigor (Bloomquist, 2015; Chenarani, 2017; Harkavy & Hartley, 2010), requiring financial demands on the institution (Cicero-Johns, 2017), and causing disorder to cooperating organizations (Schelbe et al., 2014; Strom, 2009).

Lack of academic rigor. Harkavy and Hartley (2010) mentioned that one of the criticisms against service learning is that it does not observe academic rigor. But such claim, these authors argued, was based on the critics' misconception of service learning; they equated service learning with extra-curricular volunteerism, which it is not (Schelbe et al., 2014). Bloomquist (2015), tracing her own experience with service learning in her master's program, described the different strategies she and her academic supervisor employed to ensure rigor. Among such strategies are weekly assigned readings, regular face-to-face conferences, emails, community-based research project, and weekly reflection. She claimed that all such strategies contributed to her learning, but she underscored the significance of reflection—how she wrote them as “serious thought pieces” of about 1,000 words, and how they served as “true learning catalyst” (Bloomquist, 2015, p. 170). However, if service learning is “vaguely defined, poorly evaluated” (Mugabi, 2015, p. 196), inadequately designed, badly implemented, students may develop an unhealthy level of sense of importance, indispensability, and stereotypes (Conner & Erickson, 2017).

Financial demands. Another issue pertains to school budget (Cicero-Johns, 2017). Service learning requires a growing operational cost for the host institution. In the United States, this cost used to be shouldered by the federal government. With the fluctuation of the economy, however, this funding has been discontinued. In other countries, educational institutions have to provide funding for service learning, but some institutions do not have the financial capability. Some may opt for fundraising for this cause, but it is not always effective since donors want to invest where there are tangible results (Cicero-Johns, 2017). Mugabi (2015) pointed out how service learning programs are insufficiently funded.

Causing disorder in cooperating organizations. Schelbe et al. (2014) and Strom (2009) present another downside of service learning. It is perceived to cause disorder and interrupt the normal operation of the cooperating organizations. Cooperating organizations expect certain qualifications and skills that they do not usually find in the student volunteers. Some organizations find it burdensome to provide training to these volunteers, especially because their service duration is relatively short. Hiring training personnel is also not an option because it will increase the already high operational cost. These reasons pose to students a challenge of finding organizations that will accept their services.

Best Practices in Service Learning

It is important for educational institutions to implement their service learning programs the best possible way. A poorly-implemented service learning program can pose a lot of problems for all the entities involved (Conner & Erickson, 2017; Schelbe et al., 2014; Strom, 2009). Educational institutions should evaluate their service learning programs to fit the needs of people and to curtail, if not totally eliminate, potential problems. Considering the following best practices may help them to that end.

Service Learning Office/Service Learning Committee. One best practice HEIs can adopt is to create a Service Learning Office and/or Service Learning Committee that coordinates students' service learning activities (Colon, 2017; Stoecker, 2014; Strom, 2009). This office or committee provides the institution with clearly outlined objectives for the program and criteria for the selection of activities to engage in (Chenarani, 2017; Colon, 2017; Stoecker, 2014). It also approves service learning project proposals (Colon, 2017). In addition, this office closely works with cooperating organizations to ensure that the benefits for the organization or community outlined in the proposal are fulfilled (Strom, 2009) and students are properly placed according to their discipline. Further, this office ensures that there is a written agreement among the students, the facilitating faculty, and the cooperating organization (Chenarani, 2017; Stoecker, 2014). Implementing a well-coordinated service learning program results in a win-win situation for both the academic institution and the cooperating organization (Strom, 2009).

Student reflection. In some institutions, ongoing and continuous student reflection monitored by the facilitating faculty is also observed (Bloomquist, 2015; Chenarani, 2017; Goslin, Klashorst, Kluka, & van Wyk, 2016; Stoecker, 2014). This practice helps students keep a record of what they learn as soon as they learn it and not wait until the end of the program (Bloomquist, 2015; Goslin et al., 2016). It also helps the faculty to ensure that students are doing the right thing and that they are constantly improving (Chenarani, 2017; Stoecker, 2014). Finally, it helps prevent any problem from arising or escalating. In addition to monitored reflection, some institutions encourage their students to engage in weekly face-to-face and online group discussion of their service learning experiences and reflection (Bloomquist, 2015; Cho & Gulley, 2016).

Assessment. Stroecker (2014) recommended that service learning should be assessed and that evaluation criteria must be in place. One of the best ways to assess service learning is through portfolio or e-portfolio (see Mueller, 2015). Service learning portfolio "is a collection of work and reflective products that is multidimensional and shows progress over time" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 14). According to Jacoby (2015), this is the most comprehensive means of assessing service learning.

Theoretical Framework

Service learning is rooted in John Dewey's pragmatism. According to Dewey (as cited in Harkavy & Hartley, 2010), learning occurs when the student is confronted with a problem in which he or she is engaged in thought and action to provide a solution. He further expounds that "the individual is preeminently active in the construction of his or her world, and that the meaning we derive in our lives is the outcome of a complex relationship between received ideas and present experience" (Maddux & Donnett, 2015, p. 65).

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What service learning activities/projects did the graduate students of an international faith-based educational institution engage in?
2. What connections did the graduate students make between their learning and service learning experiences?
3. Who were the beneficiaries of the service learning efforts of graduate students of an international faith-based institution?
4. How did service learning impact the graduate students in an international faith-based institution?
5. What were the best practices that the graduate students employed in their engagement in, and in the implementation of, service learning?

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, we used qualitative content analysis. Content analysis came from a quantitative tradition (Krippendorff, 1980). Weber (1990) admits that "the best content-analytic studies use both qualitative and quantitative operations on texts" (p. 10). Recently, content analysis has been done qualitatively (Schreier, 2012). It is a research method which focuses on "the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts" (Colorado State University, 2018, p. 2). Schreier (2012) adds that qualitative content analysis is an appropriate method to use for a descriptive study (p. 43). There are two types of content analysis—conceptual and relational. We used conceptual wherein the text is "coded into manageable content categories," identifying "specific words or patterns that are indicative of the research question" (Colorado State University, 2018, p. 4).

Sample Texts

We analyzed a total of 18 service learning portfolios from 2010, the year when service learning program was implemented in the participating institution, until 2017, the year the study was conducted. The following are the selection criteria: (a) Portfolios of students who belonged to the Education Department. (b) The

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portfolios were dated from 2010 to 2017. (c) The owner of the portfolio gave consent to have his or her portfolio included in the study.

Research Setting

The participating institution is faith-based and belongs to a worldwide educational system. It offers graduate programs. All faculty and most of the support staff and students live in the campus, which has a church and laboratory school for teaching that serve as platform for service learning programs. Faculty, staff, and students belong to community groups according to their country of origin. These community groups meet regularly for social, religious, cultural, and other purposes. They have also become platforms for students to render service learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

The portfolios of those students who gave consent were collected from the academic advisors or from the department secretary. They were analyzed according to the coding frame for each research question. Recurring words, phrases, statements, and thematic patterns were identified.

Findings and Discussion

The subsequent paragraphs present the findings that answer the five research questions. Quotes and paraphrased statements from participants are included to enrich the presentation of findings. In addition, concepts and findings from literature are cited in the discussion.

Service Learning Activities/Projects

The participants engaged in varied activities and projects which benefited the church, the institution, the community—both locally and internationally, and groups within the community. Involvement in the church included teaching Sabbath School or Sunday School children's classes, serving in the different departments of the church, and preaching during church services or during evangelistic meetings. Involvement in the institution included teaching a class, doing committee work, conducting and presenting research, assisting in the preparation for accreditation, and serving as assistant to faculty members. Involvement in the local community included conducting Branch Sabbath School meetings over a span of about three months or more; participating in weekly jail visitations, which include religious programs, counseling, provision of inmates' basic needs; orphanage ministry; feeding programs; giving free music lessons; and conducting seminars/workshops in one's area of specialization. Involvement in

community groups included organizing events, raising funds, and supporting members in different ways.

While the participants did some feeding programs and fundraising, most of the activities that they engaged in involved teaching and school-related tasks. This finding was expected, as the participants were enrolled in Education programs. More so, they addressed the needs not only of the community, but also of the church, the institution, and community groups. All the participants, in fact, served more than one group.

Studies in service learning revealed that students engage in varied activities that address the needs of the community. Among these activities are participating in relief operations (Moely & Ilustre, 2013); organizing events, trainings, and seminars (Allen, Rainford, Rodenhiser, & Brascia, 2007); assisting organizations in specific areas (Akpabio, 2012); teaching (Cho & Gulley, 2016); caring for the sick in healthcare facilities (Balduino & Veras, 2016). Most of these activities focus on the community—in the areas of education, community development, and environmental health.

Classroom and Service Learning Connection

All the participants engaged in teaching—either an academic course, a class in the church, in the jail, in the orphanage, out-of-school youth, adult learners, or professionals. They used the knowledge they gained from their academic training—in curriculum and instruction, in educational administration, and in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. The participants pointed out that they had gained specific knowledge and skills that prepared them to do service learning such as designing a curriculum, preparing instructional materials, dealing with different types of learners, presenting the lesson, assessing instruction, planning and organizing an event, evaluating a program/project, reflecting on theory and practice, preparing documentation, mastery of the subject matter, and integrating faith and learning. This finding corroborates with other studies which found that students who engaged in service learning utilized their knowledge from their academic program to help organizations and companies in specific areas (Akpabio, 2012; Allen et al., 2007). Others used their expertise in certain fields to assist the community (Balduino & Veras, 2016).

Beneficiaries of Service Learning

The beneficiaries of the service learning efforts of the participants of study were mainly vulnerable and marginalized groups. Specifically, children and youth in school, church, and community (out-of-school youth), adult English language learners, new teachers, financially challenged students, Adventist youth in non-Adventist universities, jail inmates, and orphans received instruction, financial

support, and/or healthcare services. There were also instances when professionals were the beneficiaries. Service learning students were invited to conduct seminars and workshops to teachers in the country and in other locations in Asia. The list of recipients of service learning mentioned by other researchers includes community residents (Moely & Ilustre, 2013), calamity victims (Moely & Ilustre, 2013), youth groups and students (Allen et al., 2007; Cho & Gulley, 2016), companies and organizations (Akpabio, 2012), and sick people in hospitals and healthcare facilities (Balduino & Veras, 2016).

Impact of Service Learning on Graduate Students

The participants claimed that service learning impacted both their professional and personal lives. They mentioned that service learning helped them gain competence and develop their professional identity. They also attested that they experienced joy in service and found meaning and purpose in life, among others.

Competence and professional identity. The participants reported that they became more competent in their area of specialization and gained a heightened sense of professional identity. In their reflections they wrote: “I realized how effective teaching can be using the strategies I had learned in class.” “I learned new skills and gained helpful insights from my supervisor. I now understand the accreditation process.” “I applied leadership theories in my work as a community leader.” “I realized that the core of learning is application.” “I have developed confidence.” “I saw the small details of administrative work that I never knew about.” “My understanding of the concepts I learned in class has deepened.” The participants explained that this heightened sense of competence came from experiencing how theories and concepts that they had learned from their classes were applied in real life. The participants of Schelbe et al. (2014), discussing on the benefits of service learning, repeatedly mentioned the phrase “real life.” They mentioned how the theories in the classroom came alive as they did service learning. Moreover, Eyler et al. (2001) reported that “service-learning improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in “the real world” (p. 3). Boru’s (2017) findings also revealed that students who engaged in service learning gain a heightened sense that they can exhibit the needed skills in their profession.

Joy in service. Service learning students, especially those who served in jails and orphanages, attested that they experienced joy in serving others—“joy of seeing people learn,” “joy of seeing people change their lifestyle,” “joy that through me others were blessed.” As they witnessed life’s harsh realities, such as seeing deprivation even of the basic needs of marginalized groups, especially those in jail, they developed empathy towards others; they felt their suffering and desired to somehow alleviate their condition. One student received a note from a woman jail inmate: “You will never understand what it means for a woman to receive a

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pack of sanitary napkins, a bar of laundry soap, a tube of toothpaste, and other stuff that you give us.” Some students spent their own money to provide the needs of those they were serving. More so, their engagement in service learning as proven by the excess in the number of hours they rendered showed their commitment to serve. The meta-analysis of Eyler et al. (2001) confirmed that service learning awakens in students the desire to serve others. They further attested that those who engaged in service learning as students continue to do voluntary service after graduation.

Spiritual development. The participants revealed that through their engagement in service learning, they had grown spiritually. They referred to a stronger connection to God. Among the statements that were recurring in the portfolios were the following: “enhanced my relationship with God,” “I have drawn closer to the Lord,” “I understand better God’s purpose for my life,” “God wants me to be a teacher,” “God is preparing me to be a leader,” and “I want to do God’s will for my life.” The findings of Eyler et al. (2001) showed that spiritual growth is one of the outcomes of service learning.

Best Practices in Service Learning

While service learning is basically designed to deepen students’ knowledge in their area of specialization through practical application of their knowledge to appropriate audiences (Bridgeland et al., 2008; Maddux & Donnett, 2015), it has become a platform by which the underprivileged and underserved members of the society can be attended to. The participants in this study focused their services to the vulnerable and marginalized groups. In addition, they addressed the needs of those who belonged to their own community groups, of their institution, and of those in the local and international community. Being an international institution of higher learning and with a mandate to prepare leaders that will serve in different parts of the world, the participating school encouraged its professors and students to respond to service requests of collaborators in the local area and outside the country. Evidently, there was a strong fit between what the students learned in the classroom and the types of service that they rendered.

Another excellent feature of the service learning of the participating school was the flexibility of the time that students did their service learning. With the guidance of their academic advisor, the participants started their service learning even in their first year of studies. They continued to fulfill the required number of hours until their last year. All the participants exceeded the required number of hours; they rendered an average of 192 hours instead of the required 100 hours. Also, because of the many opportunities for service that were going on in the campus of the participating school, the participants engaged in a variety of activities/projects.

The literature presents best practices in the implementation of service learning. Some of these practices were not found to be evident in this study. Among these best practices are having a template for the service learning portfolio, monitored reflection, using a public forum for the presentation of service learning portfolios, and making portfolios available online for reference of other students.

Several studies suggested that a template that would guide students in preparing service learning portfolios should be provided (Maddux & Donnet, 2015; Stoecker, 2014; Zubizarreta, 2009). Mueller (2015) suggested e-portfolios and their contents (e.g., videos of presentations, audio recordings, journal entries, formative evaluations, discussion of group postings, feedback from instructors or peers, among others). In this study, we found out that while most of the service learning portfolios were prepared in a scholarly manner, connecting reports and reflections with literature (Chenarani, 2017), there were those that did not. More so, none of the participants in this study reported engaging in a sharing of reflections with their facilitating faculty or academic advisor or with peers while they were going through their service learning. In addition, Stoecker (2014) encouraged educational institutions that implement a service learning program to organize a public forum for the presentation of service learning reports. It will be also helpful, especially to incoming students, to have service learning portfolios available online (Celio et al., 2011; Cho & Gulley, 2016; Mills, 2001).

Conclusion

Students engaged in varied service learning activities/projects and tried to address the needs of both their inside and outside communities. Their understanding of the theories and concepts learned in the class was enhanced through their engagement in service learning. Service learning made positive and holistic impact on the students, specifically on their spiritual, mental, emotional, and social well-being.

Recommendations

For the administrators and academic advisors/facilitating faculty:

1. A template that will guide students in the preparation of service learning portfolios should be provided.
2. Exemplary service learning portfolios should be made available for reference of other students.
3. Administrators should provide budget (e.g., for logistics) for service learning, especially those that are related to the course.
4. Academic advisors/facilitating faculty should design a platform where they can engage with their students in regular and monitored reflection.

5. A public forum should be organized for the presentation of service learning reports.
6. Educational institutions may regularly evaluate their service learning programs either quantitatively or qualitatively.

For students:

7. That they prepare their service learning portfolios in a scholarly manner, connecting reports and reflections with literature.

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Arceli H. Rosario, PhD
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Lalaan 1, Silang, Cavite, Philippines
rosarioa@aiias.edu
&
Sheri Joy C. Namanya, MAEd
AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines
namanyas@aiias.edu