

Benefits and challenges in integrating service-learning of social sciences subject in higher education

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Abstract

Service-Learning (SL) is an educational approach integrating learning through experiences with community service. Several higher education institutions in Vietnam are gradually adopting this approach in recent years, although SL has been widely applied in the Western education system since the 1990s. By doing a narrative literature review, this paper aims to clarify the benefits and challenges of embedding SL in training social science subjects in high education, especially regarding mechanisms to promote participation among relevant stakeholders, including lecturers, communities and students. Through the analysis, the benefits of SL are well-equipping students with the basic knowledge of the subjects, methodology and commitment to civic responsibility. Service-Learning allows educational institutions and lecturers to enhance efficacy, effectiveness and performing social responsibility. Community members directly benefit from SL projects. Some challenges in applying SL include the need for clarity in distinguishing between volunteer work, internships and SL, resulting in the inaccurate assessment of the roles and the concerns of different stakeholders in SL. Regarding participation, there are two main challenges. The first challenge concerns organising work and effective communication between the community, universities and students. The second is about stakeholder engagement and their actual performance in SL cooperation. This paper proposes setting up an SL department as a facilitator for supporting lecturers, connecting relevant departments in the University and connecting the University with the community.

Keywords: *benefits, challenges, integrated education, service learning*

1. Introduction

Confucius once said, "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand". His saying implies that practice plays a vital role in the training process, helping learners to understand the core meaning of the knowledge they are learning. During a very long human history, however, humankind has experienced dogmatic teaching and learning, learning to remember, and has emphasized the role of the teacher in the classroom. Social upheavals due to the influence of many important events, such as

the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, along with the decisive transformation of physical economics in the 20th century and the digital era in the 21st century, have made humanity reconsider and reorient the educational philosophy accordingly. Progressive education emphasizes that study goes as a pair with practice, and knowledge must be accumulated from the learners' life experiences. Progressive educational philosophy rejects rote learning and emphasizes critical thinking and learning to gain insight through teamwork,

collaboration, practice, and work- or product-based evaluation. Accordingly, the promotion of empiricism reflects the democratic ideology in education, linking theory with practice, progress, and humanity in education, and therefore, learning is a process to enrich one's personal experience.

In progressive education philosophy, service-learning (SL) is seen as a new pedagogical method, emphasizing learners' emotional factors and activeness when connecting learning with community service. There are many definitions of SL, and the common point is that they all emphasize that service learning is an experiential learning model. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined SL as "*a credit-based educational experience*" in which the learner participates in an organized service activity to meet identified community needs while learning specialized knowledge and improving the sense of civic responsibility. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), learning under the SL model is reflected in the integration of activities aimed at solving the practical goals of the community, through which learners accumulate knowledge, experience, and skills. Kaye (2010) also believes that service learning is the process by which learners will apply a combination of academic knowledge learned in school along with critical thinking skills to solve a real community problem. The ultimate aim of service learning is to help learners broaden their understanding of society, develop critical thinking abilities, commitments, values, and skills necessary to become responsible citizens and contribute meaningfully to solving social problems. According to Eby (2002), Service-Learning includes (1) activities that help meet needs that the community considers necessary; and (2) structured educational components that challenge participants to think critically and learn from their own experiences.

Service-Learning started around the 1960s and has been increasingly popularly applied until now (Busch, 2010). In the United States, for example, more than 950 schools are members of the Campus Compact initiative, committed to civic responsibility for higher education. Each year, this country enrolls millions of students and tens of thousands of lecturers involved in service-learning learning and teaching (Butin, 2006). Network organizations across European countries such as the UK, Germany, Denmark, Finland, and Portugal already connect and promote the service-learning paradigm in higher education institutions (Cayuela et al., 2019).

In Vietnam, there have been sporadic efforts from educational institutions to integrate service learning into training curricula, one of which was initiated by Hoa Sen University (Le and Dinh, 2019). From the Vietnamese government's policy point of view, community service, explicitly stated in the Education Law, is one of the three main functions of higher education: "*A higher education institution is an educational institution belonging to the national education system, performing the function of training higher education levels, scientific and technological activities, and serving the community*" (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2018). Therefore, research and discussion to find a solution to build and deploy an effective service-learning model is an urgent need for higher education institutions. This study applied the review of reports published in journals or national and international conference proceedings. This paper presents the benefits and challenges for the participation of the identified stakeholders in applying service learning in training the social sciences. Based on analyzing the literature review, recommendations to address the

challenges of stakeholder engagement to accelerate the building and implementation of the service-learning model at educational institutions in social sciences were also proposed and discussed.

2. Benefits of service-learning model in training social sciences

Service-learning is an innovative model in education, whereby it is relevant to all the different activities in education and brings positive benefits to the stakeholders. Stakeholders that benefit from this model include communities, schools and students (Salam et al., 2019). Accordingly, schools and lecturers lead in providing services through teaching and learning activities. The communities play the role of receiving services through SL activities. Meanwhile, students play both roles, as service providers and beneficiaries of services, through their accumulation of knowledge and practical experience.

2.1. Benefits for learners

Many studies emphasize the benefits of service learning in training students in fields such as Social Work, Social Policy, Criminology, Psychology, Communication, Languages and Sociology (Burke and Bush, 2013; Davis et al., 2014; Eby, 2002; Eyler et al., 2001; Marullo, 1999; Matthews and Zimmerman, 1999; Postlethwait, 2012; Stevens, 2014; Toporek and Worthington, 2014). According to the synthesis and evaluation of Eyler et al. (2001), participation in SL-integrated activities helped students make positive changes in critical thinking, the ability to study, professional competencies, ethical consideration, and leadership skills. Research by Yusop and Correia (2013) added more specific benefits of service learning to learners in two aspects: academic competence and civic value perception. For the benefit of academic

performance, the SL-integrated curriculum helps (1) improve the professional competence of students, (2) promote the motivation to learn new knowledge and skills in solving problems, and (3) develop project management skills. As for civic values, participation in service-learning projects inspires students to empower others and to become increasingly attentive to and concerned with the needs and perspectives of others. In addition, Yusop and Correia (2013) also discovered potential benefits related to better management conflict resolution and self-awareness skills. In their empirical analysis, Burke and Bush (2013) showed that criminology students experienced the practical benefits of the SL-integrated training method, which helped them better understand the program's curriculum and discipline requirements. At the same time, students also found that they had developed skills to enter the labor market confidently. Those are the ability to work in groups, identify their problem-solving skills, and have a sense of civic responsibility. Toporek and Worthington (2014) argued that integrating service learning in counseling psychology social justice training programs helps students to improve their understanding of social issues in the community as well as equip them with the necessary knowledge about poverty, homelessness and the bureaucratic social system that links to economic inequality between social classes. As a result, students can increase their sensitivity to sociocultural issues and practice necessary professional skills. In Social Work, a training program integrating SL is an appropriate educational approach because it meets two core values: the provision of community services and learner capacity development. Service learning also helps

increase students' interest and bring new energy to the classroom. During participation in a particular service learning project, students can better grasp and understand the academic knowledge provided in the course. In addition, students can also better understand the methods, participate in assessing community needs or develop program evaluation plans for intervention projects, which are expected activities by professional social workers after graduation. Lundahl (2008) described how his graduate students surveyed and evaluated homeless shelter needs. After the survey, these students published the study results in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Then, Lundahl surveyed his students' opinions and received feedback that participating in the research project was essential to the participants, helping them improve their understanding of the research process. Furthermore, service learning activities are entirely academic and can publish the results in academic journals; this is also directly in response to concerns regarding the non-academic nature of SL.

For students in Sociology, some reports have identified the relevance and benefits of integrating service learning in training programs (Atkins and Grant, 2022; Balazadeh, 1996; Eby, 2002; Freude et al., 2019; Hollis, 2002; Marullo, 2000). The American Sociological Association has stated that integrating service learning is necessary to gain sociological imagination, better understand the system of technical terms, and identify the effects of social science in studying social structure on people's lives (Calderon and Farrell, 1996). By testing and comparing the learning effectiveness of two groups of students studying in two training models, (1) traditional and (2) integrated with service learning, the report of Hollis (2002) showed

that students studying the service learning model mastered the knowledge from the course better than the other. In addition, service learning equipped students with necessary skills such as critical thinking, planning and teamwork. Atkins and Grant (2022) also emphasized that integrating service learning into the training program should allow students to participate in discussions to solve social problems, practice skills, and shape social attitudes, including a view on social justice.

In summary, SL is encapsulated in knowledge exchange and aims to build motivation to develop personal capacity and civic responsibility, to prepare well for the professional practice process after graduation. Service learning also creates a learning space outside the lecture halls, where through experiential activities designed in the training program, students relate knowledge with practice, thereby deepening their understanding of academic concepts and improving their critical thinking. At the same time, real-life encounters help students develop practical skills, including analysis, problem identification, intervention planning and writing scientific reports. While attempting to address community needs, students can shape a sense of civic responsibility, including self-identification, attentive listening, and concern for the needs of others.

2.2. Benefits for schools and lecturers

Schools and lecturers are the principal designers of integrated Service-Learning. Darby and Newman (2014), Kohlbry and Daugherty (2013) confirmed that SL courses are types of innovation and improvement in educational approach, aiming to increase training institutions' social effectiveness. The schools and the lecturers have created a bridge between academic theory and social practice.

Moreover, regarding social responsibility, in service learning projects, lecturers play a role in connecting and developing healthy relationships between students and community members (Salam et al., 2019). The lecturers' responsibility is greatly appreciated when they have to research and find practical solutions to design an integrated SL curriculum. Thus, the first benefit for schools and teachers is the flexibility to apply and coordinate teaching methods based on problem-solving, thereby making teaching and learning more enjoyable and effective (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). From another perspective, lecturers who design and operate an service learning course can conduct action research to verify the authenticity of academic theories in a practical context (Darby and Newman, 2014). By applying reality, teachers can also evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching contents and practice processes. Besides that, they can enrich their lectures, enhance teaching effectiveness, and meet the curriculum objectives well. Carrington and Saggars (2008) and Lasen et al. (2015) recognized that lecturers could improve critical thinking, apply and connect theory to practice, and transform effective teaching styles through service learning projects. As a result, when the training effectiveness is confirmed, the school increases its prestige in society by increasing lecturers' capacity and students' maturity (Kohlbray and Daugherty, 2013).

2.3. Benefits for the community

Communities are often identified as beneficiaries of SL activities (Krumwiede et al., 2015). Lecturers will work with students to collect information and synthesize the community's needs, thereby designing SL activities that can address the community's needs (Bowie and Cassim, 2016). SL projects

could provide various service activities, such as medical examination, health care, nutrition, psychological counseling, business operations, and environmental protection awareness. SL can be seen as a community development model because the ultimate goal is to empower, strengthen, and empower the community members (Krumwiede et al., 2015). Simola (2009) stated that community members were beneficial from free professional training programs. The important thing was that the consultations provided by SL projects were entirely free and objective, making young business owners in the community more confident with their business ideas. In another community, members benefited from the SL project of a group of medical and nursing students (Jarrell et al., 2014). Students provided medical examination services, nutrition counseling, and free drug distribution from the community. Not only within the framework of courses, some universities even cooperated with other social organizations to deploy SL service packages. As a result, SL activities better meet practical needs and target more specialized purposes, for example, addressing the homeless, elderly, problem-solving refugees, and women's empowerment (Geller et al., 2016; Rutti et al., 2016). Although the benefits of SL in higher education are clear, the documents also mention the shortcomings, limitations and challenges of this pedagogical approach.

3. Challenges in implementing service-learning

3.1. Confusions among service programs

According to Lemieux and Allen (2007), there needs to be clarity among Service-Learning, internships and volunteer work. Because of this confusion, defining the primary concern of each type of activity and the roles of related parties is incorrect.

An analysis of the contents within the framework of these three activities revealed

that the goals and the subjects between them are entirely different (Figure 1).

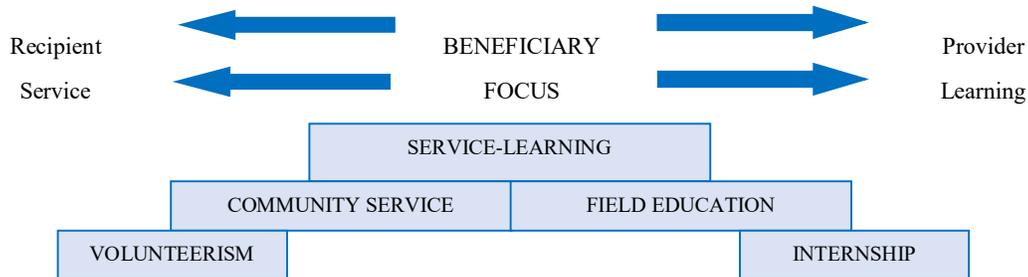


Figure 1. Distinctions among service programs (Furco, 1996)

Service-learning has never been voluntary despite the shared emphasis on providing services that address community needs. Volunteering prefers to support services that benefit the community and are entirely unrelated to the academic training program. Meanwhile, service learning is organized based on a partnership between the community and the school, with equal priority to balance the mission of learning and serving the community. While the goal of volunteering is towards better results for the community, SL aims at the growth of students by enabling them to understand the topic of classroom learning via practical experiences (Parker et al., 2009).

Despite the same philosophy emphasizing practical values and experiential learning, service learning has never been an internship. An *internship* is an activity designed by the school and students to gain knowledge and skills development rather than for the benefit of the community where the students come to practice. In service learning, students learn by doing tasks designed to meet course learning outcomes and the community's needs (Leary and Sherlock, 2020).

Distinguishing these three concepts is meaningful in identifying the nature of service learning. The main difference between service learning and the other two

activities is each party's primary goal and role. Concerning the objective, the distinction lies in the activities' beneficiaries and nature. Volunteer activities aim to provide services to the community, and the community is the primary beneficiary. The internship aims to gain practical experience; students are the primary beneficiaries. Meanwhile, SL aims to balance providing experiential learning environments for students, connecting school knowledge with practical knowledge and providing services to meet the community's needs; students and the community are the primary beneficiaries (Furco, 1996). The goal of SL is to improve understanding of academic knowledge, create active rights for students to own knowledge through their experiential activities, enhance community participation, and enhance cultural competence (Blundo, 2010; Lemieux and Allen, 2007; Maccio, 2011; Wells et al., 2012).

3.2. Challenges in organizing and implementing service-learning activities

According to Eyster (2002), the method has a thorough preparation from the training program and the teaching staff to ensure compliance with the pedagogical methods and principles in SL training. For the community, SL is expected to collaborate with a community ready for positive changes and a commitment to learning and working

together towards general outcomes. For students, SL aims to develop their upbeat attitude, actively learn, provide services that connect with classroom knowledge, and self-accumulate necessary knowledge and skills. However, the challenges are maintaining commitment and a smooth communication channel between the three parties in service learning activities (Toporek and Worthington, 2014). These challenges are related to the participation of three parties (Cronley et al., 2015). In addition, there are also other issues related to financial problems, time management, work pressure of lecturers and students' safety issues (Phillips et al., 2017; Salam et al., 2019).

According to Cronley et al. (2015), choosing the community as a partner in SL implementation is complex. SL activities are only possible to implement if the community is well organized, and there is the commitment to participate in taking responsibility for student management and supervision. If the community is aware of their role in service learning, it is easier for them to coordinate the implementation of SL projects. On the other hand, challenges may arise from a mismatch between course objectives and community concerns. Another challenge is the sustainability of SL projects. If the plan for integrating SL in the training course includes solutions to sustaining SL programs, in this case, the community will figure out what to do after the students complete the SL program and return to their University.

Challenges from schools include ineffective communication, work pressure, unrealistic expectations, and insufficient engagement with the community (Cronley et al., 2015). In service learning, lecturers play a vital connection between students and the community. They are also involved in the design of the service learning project

program. Peters (2011) found that lecturers must prepare a lot for drafting and implementing plans, guiding and coordinating with students. Through the SL program, lecturers must also demonstrate its effectiveness for students' academic maturity compared with traditional teaching methods. Marullo et al. (1999) pointed out that there exists a traditional historical view that doubts the academic validity of the pedagogy of Service-Learning and the reliability of knowledge learned from the community. Lecturers must also select, engage and discuss the plan with the community. As a result, they may be under more work pressure than in a traditional classroom setting. Moreover, the characteristics and problems of each community are different, making it difficult to quantify how fully coherence is achieved. On the other hand, because of many efforts in organizing service learning activities, sometimes it is accompanied by unrealistic expectations of the lecturers about the maturity of the students. Consequently, those requirements and expectations inadvertently put pressure on students.

For students, the challenges come from the pressure they have to deal with when participating in SL. Lack of experience and skills makes it difficult for them to communicate, express their needs and problems with the lecturers. Under the pressure of balancing learning goals to gain knowledge and experience and provide community services, students may lose interest and commitment (Cronley et al., 2015). Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) found that students may be stressed because they need to understand the meaning of service learning and realize the connection between discipline and community service activities. Therefore, if service learning belongs to the compulsory curriculum, service learning activities become pressure on the

students themselves (Burke and Bush, 2013).

Moreover, challenges arise from students' physical and mental health limitations, which may influence effective participation in SL activities. Burke and Bush (2013) showed that students hesitate to travel long distances. Even families can play a role in preventing their children from participating in SL activities (Salam et al., 2019). These challenges can be a barrier to students from committing to service learning activities, thus, affecting their knowledge and skills accumulation. Salam et al. (2019) and Phillips et al. (2017) expressed concerns about the cost and time of organizing SL activities. Ensuring

funding and availability from planning to implementation is a significant challenge. With financial pressure, some reports question the reasonable time for implementing effective SL activities that have practical benefits for students and the community. Furthermore, Burke and Bush (2013) argued that another challenge associated with poor time management among stakeholders could also affect the progress of activities, prolonging study time, delay in progress compared to traditional learning methods and increase financial pressure to maintain service learning activities.

Table 2. Challenges for stakeholder engagement in service-learning

Stakeholder	Challenges
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor structure and effectiveness - Lack of commitment - Unaware of community's role in SL training - Unsustainability
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ineffective communication - Work pressure - Unrealistic expectations - Insufficient engagement with the community
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ineffective communication - Self-accumulating learning pressure - Physical/ mental barriers - Lack of commitment

In summary, many articles have identified and analyzed the challenges of applying SL as an educational pedagogy (Table 2). Connecting and reconciling this tripartite relationship is an obvious challenge for service learning, as each side may encounter its own barriers. Two critical issues among these barriers are related to the organizational mechanism for implementing SL. The first is an issue

related to the organization and effective communication between the community, lecturers and students so that the three parties can work together towards common goals. The second is the issue of the commitment to participate and perform the role of the stakeholders for the actual effectiveness of the service learning. Both issues lead to a need for more mutual understanding to coordinate synchronously

between the three parties.

4. Discussion

In general, existing literature underscores the advantages and significance of service learning in cultivating skills within social sciences subject. The benefits for students can be categorised into three groups, including: (1) amassing knowledge and insights through tangible experiences; (2) nurturing analytical skills for problem recognition and resolution; and (3) cultivating a sense of civic responsibility.

Integrating service learning into Vietnam's educational landscape makes it imperative to break away from conventional teaching methods that often lack practical relevance. Within SL-integrated education, lecturers must continually update their understanding and relevance to real-world scenarios while formulating a pragmatic curriculum that enables students to partake in hands-on encounters. The scope of the classroom extends beyond the school, and the knowledge transmitters are not only lecturers but also community members. In this manner, while removing the traditional teaching methods, all three entities (community-lecturer-student) participate in accessing and co-creating knowledge to train human resources for comprehensive development, liberation, and a grasp of civic responsibilities within the context of integration and development.

Insights gleaned from prior research stress the necessity of integrating SL thoughtfully into the curriculum. The university and lecturers must actively engage with the community, discern its needs, and collaborate with students to formulate and execute projects with community stakeholders. However, this endeavour certainly poses added pressure on lecturers. Addressing this challenge requires establishing a dedicated department within the

university responsible for aiding lecturers in designing and executing SL-centered programs. This department's role encompasses ensuring effective communication with the community securing their commitment as indispensable partners in SL-based education. Additionally, it involves liaising with departments responsible for education, finances, and student management, fostering a conducive environment for refining operational mechanisms in alignment with service-learning principles.

There is a need for making specific educational adjustments, such as adapting grading criteria, modifying class and community engagement hours, and implementing relevant regulations associated with selecting subjects that incorporate SL integration. To foster student engagement, subjects incorporating service learning should ideally be elective, allowing students to select courses based on their interests and physical or mental well-being. Lastly, the challenge extends to the financial considerations of implementing service-learning. The costs of running SL initiatives are inevitably higher than the confines of the traditional classroom setup situated solely within the school premises. There are inherent expenditures, such as travel costs for educators and students, and expenses tied to orchestrating activities within the community.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, integrating service-learning into education is an undeniable and progressive trend, owing to its diverse advantages. Despite the considerable benefits offered by service-learning, its adoption remains limited among Vietnamese educational institutions, primarily due to challenges related to harmonising efforts among the community, lecturers, and students. Establishing a specialised department emerges as a crucial step to

ensure the efficient implementation of service-learning. This department would be responsible for orchestrating service-learning initiatives, providing unwavering support to educators and students, nurturing collaborative ventures between departments, and fortifying the vital bridge connecting the educational institution and the community.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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