Reflection of Service-Learning Development and its Network in Asia

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Abstract

Service-learning has emerged as a relevant pedagogy in higher education, combining academic knowledge with community service and fostering students' civic and academic growth. In Asia, this practice has evolved by incorporating models such as social entrepreneurship and design thinking, supported by networks like the Service-Learning Asia Network (SLAN) and pioneering institutions such as Lingnan University. The integrated service-learning model reflects Asian values such as the centrality of the family and community development, encompassing dimensions ranging from personal character development to education for global citizenship. However, service-learning faces challenges such as lack of funding, the diversity of educational systems, and limited teacher involvement, often due to the absence of institutional recognition. Despite these limitations, networks like SLAN and national initiatives are driving this methodology with increasing success.

Keywords: Service-learning, higher education, network, pedagogy.

Reflexió sobre el desenvolupament de l'aprenentatge servei i la seva xarxa a l'Àsia

Resum

L'aprenentatge servei ha emergit com una pedagogia rellevant en l'educació superior, que combina el coneixement acadèmic amb el servei comunitari, fomentant el creixement cívic i acadèmic dels estudiants. A Àsia, aquesta pràctica ha evolucionat incorporant models com l'emprenedoria social i el pensament de disseny, amb el suport de xarxes com el *Service-Learning Asia Network* (SLAN) i institucions pioneres com la Lingnan University. El model d'aprenentatge servei integrat reflecteix valors asiàtics com la centralitat de la família i el desenvolupament comunitari, i abasta dimensions que van des del desenvolupament del caràcter personal fins a l'educació per a la ciutadania global. Tot i això, l'aprenentatge servei afronta desafiaments com la manca de finançament, la diversitat de sistemes educatius i la poca implicació del professorat, sovint per absència de reconeixement institucional. Malgrat aquestes limitacions, xarxes com SLAN i iniciatives nacionals estan impulsant aquesta metodologia amb èxit creixent.

Paraules clau: aprenentatge servei, educació superior, xarxa, pedagogia.

Reflexión sobre el desarrollo del aprendizaje-servicio y su red en Asia

Resumen

El aprendizaje-servicio ha emergido como una pedagogía relevante en la educación superior, que combina el conocimiento académico con el servicio comunitario, fomentando el crecimiento cívico y académico de los estudiantes. En Asia, esta práctica ha evolucionado incorporando modelos como el emprendimiento social y el pensamiento de diseño, con el apoyo de redes como el Service-Learning Asia Network (SLAN) e instituciones pioneras como la Lingnan University. El modelo de aprendizaje-servicio integrado refleja valores asiáticos como la centralidad de la familia y el desarrollo comunitario, y abarca dimensiones que van desde el desarrollo del carácter personal hasta la educación para la ciudadanía global. Sin embargo, el aprendizaje-servicio enfrenta desafíos como la falta de financiación, la diversidad de sistemas educativos y la escasa implicación del profesorado, a menudo debido a la ausencia de reconocimiento institucional. A pesar de estas limitaciones, redes como SLAN e iniciativas nacionales están impulsando esta metodología con creciente éxito.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio, educación superior, red, pedagogía.

Ma Hok Ka, C. (2024). Reflection of Service-Learning Development and its Network in Asia. *RIDAS, Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, 18, 106-119. DOI10.1344/RIDAS2024.18.8

108

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping the future by addressing societal needs (Ma & Tandon, 2014). They are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between local and global challenges, influencing social change by promoting civic participation and empowering students to take on leadership roles in their communities (GUNI, 2014). Service-learning has emerged as a powerful pedagogy, connecting students with communities and fostering both academic and civic growth. By embedding service-learning into curricula, universities ensure that students not only acquire academic knowledge but also develop a deep understanding of societal issues and the importance of civic responsibility.

In Asia, universities are increasingly adopting service-learning initiatives, establishing dedicated offices to support social solidarity and responsibility. These offices are responsible for integrating community engagement into educational programs, building networks with local organizations, and fostering research that directly impacts the communities they serve (Ma, 2022).

Service-learning in Asia has rapidly developed over the past few decades, evolving from a focus on community service and community-based learning to incorporating elements such as social entrepreneurship, design thinking, and university social responsibility. The term service-learning is now widely used, though some universities still refer to it as social concerns, community development, or practicum (Ma, 2022). As defined by Ma (2019), "Service-learning is a teaching method that combines academic knowledge and community service" (p. 3), which fosters good character, empathy, and a caring disposition (Snell et al., 2015).

Initially embraced by Western education systems, service-learning has evolved into a versatile approach that aligns with the social, cultural, and political contexts of Asian societies. Its rise in the region has been driven by several factors, including the increasing focus on holistic and character education, the need to foster civic mindedness in younger generations, and the growing emphasis on social responsibility in higher education. Governments, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions across Asia, including in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and the Philippines, have recognized service-learning's role in shaping students' academic and personal development.

2. Growing networks and national support for service-learning in Asia

Before formal networks were established in Asia, many universities had already committed to serving and engaging with their communities. For example, Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan has been actively involved in community-based service-learning since 1998. Similarly, Silliman University in the Philippines integrated service-learning into its educational vision as a Christian institution focused on holistic human development for the betterment of society and the

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109

environment. In Japan, International Christian University (ICU) launched an academic service-learning course with two academic units in 1999. Lingnan University in Hong Kong, guided by the principle of Education for Service, has continued to involve students and faculty in service-learning activities (Ma, 2022). Many early advocates of service-learning in Asia come from Christian or Catholic universities, rooted in a mission of care and compassion (Ma, 2024).

In 2004, ICU in Japan established the first service-learning network in the region, the Service-Learning Asia Network (SLAN), with support from the Japanese government and the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (Ma et al., 2008; Ma et al., 2019). And then was further re-vitalized the SLAN by Lingnan University. One of the reasons for establishing the network is that the members want to promote service-learning within the region, rather than just sending students to Western countries. This approach helps save money and time for travelling while also addressing the real needs in Asia.

3. Lingnan University and the development of service-learning

Significant strides in the development of service-learning were made under the leadership of Lingnan University in Hong Kong. Key figures included Prof. Edward Chen Kwan Chiu (President of Lingnan University), Dr. Carol Ma Hok Ka, and Prof. Alfred Chan Cheng Ming (founding members of the first Office of Service-Learning in Hong Kong at Lingnan University) who were instrumental in advancing service-learning education in Hong Kong. A major factor contributing to the rapid growth of service-learning in Asia has been access to funding by Lingnan University. Between 2004 and 2005, Lingnan University received a $1 million donation from the Kwan Fong Charitable Foundation, which helped launch a pilot program for service-learning and research. This resulted in the creation of manuals for students, community partners, and faculty to facilitate these initiatives. Following positive community feedback, the university secured an additional $10 million in 2006 to establish Hong Kong's first Office of Service-Learning.

In 2007, with support from the Lingnan Foundation and the United Board, Lingnan University organized the inaugural Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Service-Learning and the Service-Learning Summer Institute. These initiatives marked a pivotal moment in the development of service-learning in the region, encouraging more universities to participate. Lingnan University played a key role in supporting the growth of SLAN, serving as its secretariat and providing research inspiration until 2015 (Ma et al., 2019; Ma, 2022) (Table 1) .

Table 1: Year of Biannual Asia-Pacific Regional conferences on Service-Learning and SLAN meeting. Renewed from Ma (2021).

Year	Location	Organizers	Theme
2007	Hong Kong	Lingnan University	Cross-Cultural Service-Learning Experiences in the Asia-Pacific Region: An Evolving Integration of Theory and Practice

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110

2009	Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China	Lingnan University	Crossing Borders, Making Connections: Service-Learning in Diverse Communities
2011	Hong Kong	Lingnan University cum SLAN meeting	Make a Difference: Impacts of Service-Learning "Tender Moment, Touched Heart and Inspired Action"
2013	Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China	Lingnan University cum SLAN Meeting	"Service-Learning as a Bridge from Local to Global: Connected World, Connected Future"
2015	Taiwan	Fu Jen Catholic University cum SLAN Meeting	Regional Conference on Service-Learning: Love Journey: Community Engagement through Service-Learning
2016	Hong Kong	SLAN meeting hosted by Lingnan University	
2017	Indonesia	Petra Christian University cum SLAN meeting & Presidential meeting	Educating the Heart: Nurturing a fruitful life through service-learning
2018	Japan	SLAN meeting hosted by International Christian University	
2019	Singapore	Singapore University of Social Sciences	Service-Learning: A lifelong Journey of Social Responsibility
2020	Philippines	SLAN meeting was hosted by De LaSalle University	
2021	Philippines	Silliman University	Community Engagement at the Intersection of Research and Extension
2022	Japan	SLAN meeting was hosted by International Christian University	
2023	India	Christ University	Service-Learning: Touching Lives and Transforming Communities through Innovative Pedagogy, Research, and Partnerships
2024	Singapore	SLAN meeting was hosted by Singapore University of Social Sciences	
2025	Philippines	Ateneo de Davao University	To be confirmed

4.The growth of SLAN and member engagement

Dr. Carol Ma recognized that for SLAN to continue growing, stronger engagement from its members was necessary. After discussions with SLAN members, it was decided that SLAN meetings would be held annually, with different institutions rotating as hosts. Additionally, the regional conference would be held every two years. According to Ma (2021), SLAN's structure is voluntary, without membership fees, which encourages members to take turns hosting meetings and conferences. This reflects the core values of service-learning in the region, which emphasize not financial gain, but the time and effort invested to support its development.

SLAN has become a collective effort, fostering a mutually beneficial platform that promotes collaboration. As noted by Ma (2018), the purposes of SLAN are:

1. To promote the common interests and networks of student exchanges, faculty research, curriculum development, and program evaluation among community partners, colleges, and universities engaged in service-learning in Asia.
2. To share ideas on the development of service-learning in the region.
3. To encourage cross-national collaborations and enhance professional development.

By connecting universities from various Asian countries, SLAN facilitates collaboration on research, curriculum development, and the sharing of successful practices. It offers a regular forum for discussing common challenges and exploring innovative solutions tailored to each institution's unique context. Today, SLAN has over 60 participating members from countries and regions including Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Japan, and others.

5. Research development and agenda for Service-Learning Asia Network

In addition to regular meetings and regional conferences, SLAN also convenes to discuss the research agenda for service-learning, which has been growing steadily across Asia. The focus is on understanding its impact and refining its application in diverse educational contexts. Key areas for research development include:

- Impact Studies. Research efforts assess the effects of service-learning on various stakeholders:
    - Students: How does service-learning influence academic growth, personal development, and civic engagement?
    - Faculty: How does it shape teaching methods and community partnerships?
    - Institutions: How do universities adapt curricula and policies to support service-learning?
    - Communities: Are their needs being met, and how sustainable are the changes introduced by service-learning?
- Implementation and Process Studies. Research explores the application of service-learning across different academic disciplines and cultural settings. It also examines what processes are effective in establishing long-term, mutually beneficial university-community partnerships.
- Institutionalization of Service-Learning. Research in this area investigates how service-learning can be embedded in universities' strategic goals and what policies and support structures (e.g., funding, faculty tenure recognition) are needed to sustain programs.
- Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Development. Theoretical research focuses on developing frameworks that explain the relationship between

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112

service, learning, and civic engagement, drawing from other academic disciplines to enrich the theoretical foundations of service-learning.

- Methodological Considerations. This area focuses on developing tools to measure learning outcomes, community impact, and faculty engagement. It also ensures that service-learning assessments are robust and scalable across diverse educational contexts.
- Comparative Studies in the Asia-Pacific Region. Collaborative research examines differences in service-learning implementation and impact across countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and the Philippines.

Despite more than two decades of service-learning development in Asia, many opportunities for further research still exist. Discussions during meetings and conferences help establish the research agenda for the region, with hopes for increased cross-institutional capacity building, collaborative research, and citizenship education throughout Asia.

6.Other networks in service-learning in Asia

In addition to SLAN, other regional networks are working to promote engaged scholarship, service-learning, community engagement, and university social responsibility across Asia. One such platform is Asia Engage (AE), which connects higher education institutions (HEIs), foundations, communities, and government agencies to improve the quality of life in the region. AE organizes a biannual regional conference focused on research, education, and engagement. Its secretariat is based at the Centre for Industry and Community Partnership (I-COMM) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), creating opportunities for the sharing of innovative ideas, capacity-building for impactful engagement, fostering collaborative community and industry-engaged research, and enhancing learning experiences.

Another important network is the UNISERVITATE Regional Hub in Asia and Oceania, which promotes service-learning in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs). According to UNISERVITATE, its mission is to bring about systemic change in CHEIs by institutionalizing service-learning as a tool to fulfill their mission of providing integral education. This initiative aims to engage students in addressing societal challenges through active commitment. Currently, the UNISERVITATE Regional Hub is led by De La Salle University, with support from other members such as Assam Don Bosco University, Australian Catholic University, and Fu Jen Catholic University. Together, they work on action plans to institutionalize service-learning in Asia, closely collaborating with the global UNISERVITATE network to promote engaged research, service, and teaching.

With the rapid development of service-learning in the region, the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), an American-based organization, has also established a regional

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113

platform in Asia. Led by Hong Kong Polytechnic University, this initiative helps shape a global service-learning research agenda and supports regional conferences to advance the field.

With different regional platforms and networks, there is hope that the networks promoted in the region will include the voices of their members. Even if a research agenda is set, it should also be consulted through the network.

7. National support and conferences

Regional networks are one of the reasons for promoting service-learning development in Asia. However, national support is also critical for the expansion of service-learning. Countries like Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, India, Hong Kong, China, and the Philippines have organized national service-learning conferences to bring together educators, students, community partners, and regional and international stakeholders. These events help build awareness and encourage the integration of service-learning into national educational policies.

In Singapore, the Service-Learning National Conference has become a prominent platform for showcasing innovative service-learning projects and best practices among educators. This annual event not only highlights successful initiatives but also serves as a space for networking and collaboration among institutions committed to advancing service-learning.

Japan has similarly embraced national support for service-learning through conferences and workshops that emphasize the importance of community engagement in higher education. The Japan Service-Learning Association plays a pivotal role in promoting service-learning initiatives and fostering collaborations among universities, thereby enriching the service-learning landscape across the country.

In India, the National Service-Learning Conference provides an avenue for sharing research, practices, and insights into the challenges and opportunities of service-learning. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, this conference emphasizes the importance of collaboration in enhancing the effectiveness of service-learning programs and sharing the best practices.

Furthermore, in some countries, service-learning is linked to national service programs, further emphasizing its importance in fostering civic engagement. For instance, the Philippines has integrated service-learning into its national youth service program, encouraging young people to engage in community development initiatives while gaining valuable experience and skills.

8. Key features of service-learning in Asia

Service-learning in Asia is characterized by a diverse range of practices, from community-based service-learning to more academically integrated approaches. Universities with adequate resources are setting up dedicated offices to manage service-learning projects, while others are still in the early stages of development. This diversity reflects the rich cultural contexts of the region and the varying needs of its communities.

One of the key features of service-learning in Asia is its focus on building strong community partnerships and collective actions. These partnerships ensure that the service provided by students meets real community needs, making the learning experience more meaningful. Community organizations often play a pivotal role in identifying needs and helping students and educators develop projects that address those issues. This collaborative approach not only enhances the relevance of the service provided but also fosters a deeper understanding of local contexts among students.

8.1. Integrated service-learning model in Asia

In order to contextualize Asian values (e.g. Confucians) in service-learning (Ma, 2021), Ma (2004) also proposed the Integrated Service-Learning (SL) Model in Asia as a comprehensive framework that connects academic learning with community service, while fostering personal and civic development. This model reflects the rich cultural context of Asia, emphasizing the importance of family, school, and community in the process. Service-learning in Asia has become a high-impact pedagogy, and its integration into higher education is a critical step toward achieving broader societal goals. These goals are interconnected across various dimensions, including the self (character education), others (youth development), family (family education), school (pedagogy), community (community development), country (national citizenship education), and the global (global citizenship education):

- Character Education (Self). Service-learning promotes personal growth by fostering self-awareness, empathy, and responsibility. Students develop these traits through reflection on their actions within the community, which helps them become more conscientious individuals. This component emphasizes the moral and ethical development necessary for becoming responsible members of society as part of the character education.
- Youth Development (Others). Engaging in service-learning helps students contribute to their communities and develop socially responsible behaviors. Through meaningful interactions with others, they learn the importance of cooperation, kindness, and support, which are essential for both personal and societal growth as youth development.
- Family Education (Family). Family is a central part of the Asian cultural context, and service-learning extends learning beyond the individual to the family unit. Service-learning in this model encourages students to reflect on their family's role in shaping their values, responsibilities, and perspectives

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115

on community engagement. It also emphasizes the importance of fostering stronger intergenerational relationships and mutual support within families, helping students to understand the impact of service on familial bonds and how family members can work together to contribute to the community.

- Pedagogy (School). Schools are not just places of academic instruction but also platforms for developing social responsibility. The SL model incorporates school-based pedagogy, where formal education is complemented by community engagement activities. Schools provide the structure for students to apply their academic knowledge in practical settings, reinforcing what they learn in the classroom through real-world experiences. Educators also play a pivotal role in guiding students through reflection, making the connection between academic content and societal impact more explicit.

- Community Development (Community). At the heart of service-learning is the aim to contribute to the betterment of the community. The SL model integrates academic learning with community service, enabling students to engage in projects that address local challenges. This not only supports community development but also enhances students' understanding of the social issues they are working to address.

- National Citizenship Education (Country). Service-learning also fosters national pride and civic responsibility. Students are encouraged to connect their academic experiences with their duties as citizens, contributing to national development and fostering a deeper understanding of their roles in the broader societal context. This helps cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their country.

- Global Citizenship Education (Global). The SL model encourages students to think globally, linking their local service experiences to global challenges. By participating in service-learning, students develop a broader perspective on global citizenship, understanding how their actions at a local level can contribute to solutions for global issues. This awareness fosters critical thinking and prepares students to engage with global social issues in a meaningful way.

Since service-learning in Asia takes various forms, it integrates community-based learning, academic studies, community-based research, and co-curricular activities. The Integrated S-L Model embeds Asian values and emphasizes the importance of reflection. Reflection is the core element of the model, ensuring that students critically evaluate their service experiences and connect them to both their academic and personal growth. By reflecting on their actions, students gain a deeper understanding of their role in local and global communities, enhancing their sense of civic responsibility and awareness

9. Challenges in implementing service-learning

Despite its potential, service-learning in Asia faces several challenges. One of the primary issues is the diversity of educational, social, and political systems across the region. Each country has its own approach to education and community engagement, making it difficult to create a standardized model for service-learning. This diversity can lead to inconsistencies in how service-learning is implemented, evaluated, and perceived by stakeholders.

Funding and institutional support

Funding and institutional support are significant challenges. Many universities, particularly those in less economically developed regions, lack the resources to fully support service-learning programs. Without proper funding, establishing the necessary infrastructure, such as dedicated offices or staff to manage projects, becomes difficult. Moreover, the absence of financial backing can hinder the development of effective training programs for faculty and students, which are crucial for successful service-learning initiatives.

Faculty involvement

Another challenge is faculty involvement. For service-learning to succeed, faculty members must be fully engaged, both in integrating service-learning into their teaching and participating in community-based research (Ma & Law, 2019). However, service-learning is not always recognized in tenure and promotion policies, which can discourage faculty from committing to these projects. The lack of incentives for faculty engagement can result in a disconnection between academic objectives and community needs.

Future directions: building a sustainable model for service-learning

As service-learning continues to grow in Asia, it is important to focus on sustainability. This means creating long-term partnerships between universities and communities, developing faculty support, and ensuring that service-learning is embedded in institutional policies. Sustainability is essential for maintaining the momentum of service-learning initiatives and ensuring that they can adapt to changing community needs over time.

Leveraging technology

Technology also presents new opportunities for service-learning. The use of digital tools and platforms can help students and educators collaborate across borders, enabling them to address global challenges while learning from different cultural perspectives. Additionally, technology can support the development of innovative solutions to community issues, such as using AI or blockchain to improve social services. The incorporation of technology can enhance the learning experience and broaden the reach of service-learning projects, making them more accessible to diverse populations.

Aligning with Sustainable Development Goals

Another critical area for future development is the integration of service-learning into the broader goals of sustainable development. By aligning service-learning projects with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), universities can contribute to global efforts to address issues like aging, poverty, inequality, and climate change. This approach not only enhances the relevance of service-learning but also prepares students to become global citizens ready to tackle the world's most pressing challenges.

Research momentum and future focus

Research in service-learning across Asia is gaining momentum, focusing on understanding its impact on students, faculty, institutions, and communities. Current research agendas aim to assess the outcomes of service-learning on student learning, community satisfaction, and institutional change. Comparative studies between different countries in Asia are helping to identify best practices and improve the implementation of service-learning programs (Shumer et al., 2021).

One of the key areas of focus for future research is the institutionalization of service-learning. How can service-learning be more effectively integrated into the missions of universities? What kind of support structures—such as funding, tenure recognition, and faculty training for its sustainability?

Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on the globalization of service-learning. Programs that link local community service with global citizenship education are gaining popularity, especially as universities recognize the need to prepare students for the interconnected challenges of the 21st century. This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility for global issues among students.

10. Conclusion: service-learning as a tool for collective impacts

Service-learning in Asia continues to evolve, providing students with transformative experiences that connect academic learning to real-world challenges and create collective impacts. By fostering a sense of social responsibility and civic engagement, service-learning empowers students to become change agents in their communities and beyond.

As Asian universities continue to build partnerships, share best practices, and deepen their commitment to service-learning, they are not only enhancing their students' education but also contributing to the development of stronger, more resilient communities across the region.

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119