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Service Learning in Asia: Local Practices and Diverse Contexts[1]

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Abstract: Connecting academic study with community service through structured reflection, service learning is now widely recognized in the world as a movement that is transforming higher education. As a teaching philosophy and pedagogy, service-learning has become a major force in Asian education as well. Many leading universities and colleges across Asia have established service-learning centers or programs, supporting a dedicated core of faculty and serving an increasingly larger student population. This paper discusses service learning in this Asian context, both reflective of international trends but also distinctive in its own local and regional situations, given the tremendous diversity both within and among Asian societies. Specifically, the paper will highlight three major emerging themes that have characterized service learning in the region, namely, service learning and indigenous cultural traditions, service learning and social justice education, and service learning and cross-cultural competency.

Keywords: service learning, Asia, curriculum

Introduction

Four years ago in 2006, when I was working for the United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia (United Board), I visited International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, where I learned about the inspiring story of an ICU-NJU (Nanjing University) service learning project. In January of 2005, a group of ICU students went to Nanjing University and participated in a service-learning program, sponsored by the Amity Foundation, where ICU and NJU students jointly produced a new play called *Zouba!* (Let's Go). The play portrays a group of students from Japan and China, trying courageously to move beyond history and start a painful, but meaningful journey of reconciliation. Despite its high political risks and initial tension, the joint performance in both Tokyo and Nanjing in the following year turned out to be a resounding success and made a huge splash in the news media. Here is a quote from a Japanese student participant reported on NPR's "Morning Edition," on January 27, 2007:

> "That first night we all went to dinner," she (Michiyo Oi, who wrote much of the script) recalls. "We sat around talking, and I figured they must be wondering what we were thinking. Each of us introduced ourselves, and when my turn came, I started to talk about the war, about what a shame it was that we did such terrible things. The air froze. Until then we were all laughing. The moment I mentioned the war, everyone went pale. The Chinese students looked at me as if they couldn't believe the way I'd brought this up."

As we all know, because of historical reasons, particular WWII, Chinese and Japanese are very much divided about that particular period of history. The Nanjing massacre or what the late historian Iris Chang called the "Rape of Nanjing," has been a focal point of contention between these two countries. It has become a taboo topic for politicians and diplomats from both sides. It was the service-learning project that brought students together and the joint theatrical production became the ice-breaker that allowed students to openly share their emotions and exchange ideas. It was such a powerful and profound learning experience for both the Chinese and Japanese students that the ICU Foundation in New York is planning to make a documentary about the student experience.

Having invested my life in cross-cultural and international studies for over two decades, I was greatly inspired by the story and just witnessed the tremendous potential of international service learning at its best. Indeed, connecting academic study with community service through structured reflection, service learning is now widely recognized in the world as a movement that is transforming education. As an instructional philosophy and pedagogy, service learning has become a major force in Asia. Between 2006 and 2007, on behalf of United Board I traveled to over a dozen university campuses in Asia, interviewed scores of faculty, students and community leaders and witnessed how service learning was recognized and celebrated for its pedagogical values across the region.

Indeed, many leading universities and colleges across Asia has established service-learning centers or programs, supporting a dedicated core of faculty and serving an increasingly larger student population. Under the auspices of the Singapore International Foundation, for example, over a five-year period (2000-2005), the Youth Expedition Project sent over 12,000 students on service-learning assignments across Southeast Asia, China and India.[2] In the meantime, the CBI (community based instruction) program at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) partnered with 100 local service agencies and conducted several hundred service-learning projects in Hong Kong and elsewhere.[3] What is more, in Taiwan, over half (86 out of 146) of its universities and colleges have incorporated service-learning into their core curriculum.[4] The Ministry of Education in Taipei plans to add service learning into its annual regular accreditation process. In a sense, service learning has come of age in Asia and its place in the Asian academy has been secured.

However, despite these accomplishments, there has been little scholarly publication on Asian-based practices and contexts of service-learning. Most of the written works on service learning so far are monographs, teaching anthologies or guidebooks published in the United States, including series and booklets coming from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), International Partnership for Service Learning (IPSL) and Campus Compact. The 21-volume set Service-Learning in the Disciplines, published by AAHE, is a good example of this increasing body of literature. Although these are seminal works that have made significant contributions to the development of service learning in Asia, there is little writing that explores specifically local or indigenous practices of service learning in Asian societies. Based on field trips, interviews and case studies from a forthcoming book (University of Hong Kong Press) I co-edited, this paper

attempts to help fill that gap by focusing on service learning in the Asian contexts, both reflective of international trends but also distinctive in its own local and regional characteristics.

Despite their tremendous diversity in cultures, disciplines and institutions (public, private or Christian by nature), service learning curricula seem to have coalesced around three major thematic foci:

I. Service Learning and Indigenous Cultural Traditions

> Service-learning is not intended to be used in every course, but it is possible to incorporate it into any discipline. It is not possible to design a single model that effectively integrates service-learning into academic study for all disciplines or institutions. Service-learning must be contextualized and relevant to meet unique and evolving needs. . . Thus, service-learning takes different forms in different contexts.[5]

This quote from two Indian faculty members captures the first theme of service learning in Asia, that is, promotion of indigenous or local and culturally specific knowledge or systems of knowledge. Service learning, like any learning, is not culture-neutral but deeply imbedded in the historical and social contexts of each educational system. Although service learning is primarily a Western term, the meaning, understanding and practices vary from society to society. In the Philippines, for example, service-learning is often practiced at colleges and universities that have a Christian tradition, while in India it grows out of a vision of national self-reliance in the post-colonial era. For Hong Kong the development of service learning has benefited from the government's emphasis on whole-person education. In contemporary China, as some scholars argue, service-learning represents a way of countering the growing individualism and materialism in a rapidly transforming society.

Indeed, cultural diversity and local themes are the defining characteristics of service-learning programs in Asian higher education. For example, Dr. Charn Mayot, Director of St. Martin Center for Professional Ethics & Service Learning at Assumption University in Thailand, notes the national contexts of service learning in his country. He explains that although the very term "service-learning" was not coined until 1967 in the United States and it was not used in Thailand as late as in the early 1990s, social concern has been a part of higher education in the country for a very long time through the concepts of community service and social exposure.[6] Similarly, Dr. Enrique Oracion, Director of the Research and Development Center at Silliman University in the Philippines, distinguishes service learning as a "pro-social behavior, but short of altruism," a time-honored Filipino cultural tradition, "because the latter means helping others without any expectation of return," while service learning "maybe less or not at all altruistic because of the learning or the grade the students expect to earn in exchange."[7]

Recently, there has been a growing debate over indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions in the academy. The World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC), for example, was established in 2002 by indigenous peoples' representatives

from Australia, the United States, Canada, and Norway. WINHEC's goals were to advance indigenous peoples' endeavors in and through higher education and establish an accreditation body for their own higher education institutions and initiatives. In the meantime, international attention has turned to intellectual property laws to preserve, protect, and promote traditional knowledge. In 2005, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) sponsored a conference in Delhi, India, and announced the initiative to create a digital library system for classifying the region's traditional knowledge and linking it to the international patent classification system.

Examples collected from the many field trips I took demonstrate that students engaged in service learning can benefit from and contribute to the development and promotion of indigenous knowledge and traditions. A good case in point was the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) program where service learning students from Singapore worked with the tribal communities in Australia and the indigenous Maori population near Whakatane, New Zealand.[8] Equally telling was the eco-tourism project taken on by Assumption University students in collaboration with several local organizations at Mooban Khanim in Pang Nga Province, Thailand. Mooban Khanim is in the area hit by the tsunami in 2004. Forty faculty and students learned that the village was not destroyed because it was protected by a vast mangrove forest around the village. Community members realized that the mangrove forest was both a source of food and a natural wall that protected the community from strong wind and giant waves. That knowledge from the villagers helped Assumption University faculty and students launch a multiyear service-learning project for the mangrove forest preservation in a sustainability project.[9]

It is also heartening to learn that in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, students of Payap University launched a service learning project by digitalizing artifacts, rare books, and audio-video materials on northern Thai culture. They had aptly named the project as "local wisdom" initiative, which attempted to preserve and document northern Thai dialects, folk songs, recipes, architectural designs and other cultural relicts. Altogether, they have identified 1,000 photos, 2,000 slides, 60 CD's, 123 video tapes, 244 audio tapes and 50 rare books. Those prized collections will soon be made available for researchers worldwide.[10]

Over recent years, a growing rank of scholars has called for a paradigm shift in liberal arts education. Specifically, they ask for a shift of emphasis upon the transformative rather than only the utilitarian value of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge, the philosophical, literary, scientific knowledge, as part of the cultural heritage and history of the local communities is an important part of that transformative knowledge. Unlike the "objective" or "scientifically based" intellectual paradigms, indigenous knowledge can be experientially learned in the field. My own experience has told me that service learning, as a powerful experiential pedagogy, is the one of the best pedagogical tools we have to acquire that knowledge.

II. Service Learning and Social Justice Education

> Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. [11]

This quote from the late US civil rights activist and leader the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. brings to the fore the second theme of the paper: service learning should be related to the concept of social justice education. Although service learning has been adopted widely among faculty, administrators and educators, the misconception of service learning as charity work is still well around and alive. Some faculty and students have expressed their skepticism about service learning simply because they feel that such endeavors amount to little more than "charity" work or, even worse, "distractions" from core disciplinary competencies.

It is probably true this "charity" type of service learning is still employed by some nonprofit organizations, including universities and colleges, and some service-learning projects lack a political awareness component and the service students perform treats social symptoms, without addressing the root causes of social disparities, poverty conditions and medical maladies. As Dr. Lai Kwok Hung, Senior Student Affairs Officer at Hong Kong Baptist University, stated, "Learning from serving others is not automatic. Students serving meals to the homeless, mentoring at-risk youth, and visiting chronically ill patients enjoyed the work and felt satisfied from such altruistic experiences, but did not necessarily engage in critical thinking about the existence of poverty, youth policy, and health-care reform. These experiences may even promote a power imbalance of the privileged 'haves' providing for the 'have-nots'."[12]

To help debunk this misperception and realize the full potential of service learning, service-learning scholars and practitioners are pushing the advocacy and social change agenda. The stories told by Asian faculty and students provide ample examples about how they learn to get involved in policy-related learning and community engagement. A good place to start, according to them, is to teach students about the social construction of human differences and their own unearned privileges. While completing their "social exposure" project, a group of Assumption University students, for example, witnessed the dire situation of street children in Pattaya and reflected on their own unearned privileges. They were "strongly struck by the fact that these children live on 12 baht a day . . . and these children have never tasted fruit before." In comparison, a majority of the students themselves go and see a movie several times a week and spend more than 100 baht for each movie.[13] They learned that sacrificing one movie each week could potentially help one child to be fed for seven days. Similarly, a Singaporean student performing service learning in Lijiang, China, wrote, "We saw ourselves as fortunate and felt the need to contribute to a less privileged society in our own capacity and capability."[14]

For social justice education, some faculty have introduced Paulo Freire's concept of transformative processes for service learning operations, which calls for changing public policy as well as to creating change agents. The CBI program at Hong Kong Baptist University, for instance, promotes the concept of problem-based learning, which "was

defined as a teaching method that builds the instructional process around one or more complex problems that the course content may be used to solve."[15] The expected learning outcomes of the CBI program, according to John Powers, a professor of communication studies, is to encourage students to identify real-life problems from the community and apply knowledge they have learned in seeking their solutions.

Doing service-learning in the Philippines taught the International Service-Learning Program (ISLMP) students the enormous disparities between the rich and the poor in the country. One ready example was the student experience of attending a lavish birthday party of a local politician. Despite the festive mood of the party, a female non-Filipino student was saddened by the lavishness, which presented such a powerful contrast to the poverty they saw being experienced by so many in the community day in and day out.[16] These examples clearly show how direct community engagement helps ISLMP students develop a transformative perspective on the critical issues of social inequality.

Working for peace and reconciliation represent another example of social justice education in service learning. As discussed earlier, after its successful experience for the joint-production of "*Zouba*," ICU's service-learning office is planning a follow-up reconciliation program in Nanjing, where ICU students will acknowledge history and take ownership of Japan's War policies. "This may be a rather unusual agenda for service-learning," some ICU professors wrote later, "but as nationals of a country that invaded Asian countries and committed atrocities during modern times, creating this understanding is something very important for all Japanese as global citizens."[17]

Nowadays, social justice ideals are broadly embraced by faculty and students, but oftentimes students are exposed to issues of injustice or inequity only as an abstraction. Service learning offers a proven pedagogy for moving the discussion of human rights and social justice from the classroom to the streets, where it takes on human meaning and the very concept of social justice can be, therefore, be translated into passion and commitment for the students.

III. Service Learning and the Concept of Multicultural Symbiosis[18]

> If you give people fish, they can eat for a day.
> If you teach them how to fish they can eat for a lifetime.
> If you teach them to learn, they don't have to eat fish all their life.[19]

This pithy quote captures the spirit of service learning among faculty and students in promoting cross-cultural and world literacy. In 2006 the six cooperative member schools of the Service-Learning Asia Network (SLAN), for example, introduced the concept of "multicultural symbiosis" or *kyosei* (meaning "living together" in Japanese) as the key learning objective for the International Service-Learning (ISLMP) program. [20]

In ecology, symbiosis, according to Enrique Oracion, refers to a mutually beneficial relationship among organisms. "When applied to human interaction amidst cultural diversity," he wrote, "the concept of multicultural symbiosis implies how the coming together of people with diverse cultural backgrounds offers relative benefits to all

involved."[21] Many ISLMP participants broke down their long-time held stereotypes against local cultures and residents. Living closer to the Filipino communities, for example, they observed school children came to school late, not because they were lazy, but "because they must walk three to four hours before reaching school" and "some pupils had to cross rivers several times, which made it difficult to go to school during bad weather."[22]

However, it is not easy to reach this lofty goal of multicultural symbiosis. It always takes vision, care and high ethical standards. Some case studies collected shed light on the sticky side of service, the all important ethical conduct of service learning in a cross-cultural or international context. Indeed, there are risks or pitfalls of all kinds in conducting service learning, especially international service learning. For example, some faculty members cited the phenomenon of "academic tourism," referring to those short and superficial stunts overseas without clearly defined learning objectives. Some students have been heard talking about their service-learning class as a glorified vacation or a visit, a sign of the so-called academic tourism.

Furthermore, the so-called "island programs," where students often stick together among themselves with little or no interaction with the local communities defeat the purpose of international service learning. Worst still, for some of them service learning projects could become a way of exercising their sense of generosity or beneficence (read paternalism or patronization). Ultimately, those "benevolent" service projects reinforce personal bias and cultural prejudice against other people. Those programs could become counter-productive and destructive.

In view of all these potential problems, as service-learning faculty and scholars, how do we set up some useful parameters or criteria for the ethical conduct of service learning? I participated in a workshop co-sponsored by the United Board and Lingnan University in Hong Kong in 2007, where four broadly defined themes were discussed, which were related to power, capacity, equity and sustainability.

With regard to the issue of power, participants have a number of interrelated questions: (1) How do we guarantee voluntary participation & informed consent? In other words, how do we make sure that there is no coercion for service learning, especially among vulnerable segment of the population with diminished autonomy or capacity? (2) Is the principle of shared governance being practiced? Is there a strong buy-in by the local communities? (3) Are the host communities equal partners in the education of student participants? Reflecting over the experience with ISLMP students, for example, Dr. Enrique Orcion emphasized that projects "must be appropriate to the needs of the communities and should be identified together with the locals during the planning stage in forging a partnership for service learning."[23]

A number of capacity-related questions were also raised about each of the major players or partners in service learning. First, for community capacity, do our students understand the difference between help on the one hand and social development on the other? Or, are we relatively certain that the local communities we serve will improve their capacity

by our genuine, active, and sustained engagement? Secondly, for student capacity, do our students have the maturity, skill, and knowledge, to perform the tasks or duties assigned by the agencies? And, finally, for agency capacity, does the placement agency have the ability to provide monitoring or supervision for students at the service site? Are the agencies' staff properly trained or have the right credentials? Is it faculty responsibility to scrutinize their qualifications or do we simply rely on administration assurances about these oversight issues?

A few case studies were cited in addressing those questions in the workshop. On student capacity, for example, Lai kwok Hung's point was very well taken when he wrote about student placement, "service learning placements should be tailored to students' needs and their level of self-efficacy. A community service placement that is perceived as too far beyond the student's capabilities will be threatening, and will decrease rather than increase their sense of self-efficacy."[24]

In addition, the concepts of reciprocity, equity and respect have been given and discussed by quite a few participants as the absolute key for a successful service-learning program. Dennis Lee, Regional Vice President and Managing Director for Students in Free Enterprise(SIFE) in Singapore, while discussing the Singaporean situation in service learning, cited reciprocity as the key factor in differentiating service-learning from community service.[25] He advises his peers and students to avoid "the ever-present pitfall of paternalism disguised under the name of service." "Service-learning," he wrote, "avoids the traditionally paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one person or group has the resources, which they share charitably or voluntarily with the person or group that lacks resources."[26] Likewise, Jane Szutu Permaul, Assistant Vice Chancellor Emeritus of Student Affairs at UCLA, in assessing the cross-cultural learning outcomes of the Chan Fellowship, raised similar questions, "Is cross-cultural learning a one-way or two-way learning experience? Do the American hosts learn anything along with the fellows?" It is also interesting for me to note how Assumption University students quickly find out that many communities will only allow a stranger to be involved in the community's life through someone they trust. "In our social exposure to hill-tribe communities," Charn Mayot wrote, "we work together with the Mirror Foundation, a local NGO engages in community development."[27]

Most faculty and students are strong advocates for the principle of equity, making sure that it is the communities, instead of selected individuals, who benefit from the service. Charn Mayot, for example, believes, "Any service-learning produces a good outcome for only one or two stakeholder group risks exploitation of the rest, and service-learning programs that intentionally or consciously ignore the benefits to other groups reflect an attempt to harvest other stakeholders' labor."[28] To push the equity issue one step further, the quote has pointed our attention to exploitation issues for the community as well as students. In fact, specific suggestions have been made by several members of the group about how to honor and recognize community contributions at the end of service learning projects. Perhaps, similar questions can also be asked about student exploitation, making sure partner agencies do not use free student labor to perform duties that should have been done by salaried employees with no proper supervision, especially duties outside

service learning agreement. With regard to respect, all discussants strongly endorse the idea of prior diversity/sensitivity training for students by faculty or staff in student affairs, where students are expected to be prompt, reliable, respectful, and have the cross-cultural competency in a different society.

In teaching service learning, participants agreed, we need to ask ourselves the question if the project is sustainable or not, given the human, environmental and economic resources available locally. For Charn Mayot, he would teache students the "sufficiency economy" theory of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a long-time intellectual tradition in his homeland. At Bann Amphur Muang in Prachinburi Province, as he wrote, Assumption students "learn the principles of a sufficiency economy through exposure to the way community members live, information instruction, and by participating in community activities."[29]

Increasingly, in university settings institutional oversight is being established for the ethical conduct of faculty who are engaged in research, especially with regard to human and animal subjects. That oversight is often provided by institutional review boards (IRBs). In addition, various academic disciplines, such as those represented by the American Anthropological Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Sociological Association, have developed discipline-based code of ethics. My question is should service learning programs and centers establish some mechanism or system, such as ethical oversight committees of their own, for oversight of service-learning projects since no formal research is involved by service-learning faculty? What is more, because service learning faculty come from all disciplines, should each faculty member refer to his or her own discipline's codes of ethics for guidance in the conduct of service learning? I believe this will be an important issue to consider for service learning scholars and practitioners for many years to come.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the Office of Service Learning (OSL) at Lingnan University for bringing those international service learning scholars together at the 1st and 2nd international service-learning conferences co-sponsored by Lingnan University and United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia. Of course, I would reserve my final comments for the distinguished group of international scholars from Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, New Zealand, the Philippines, Taiwan and the United States who have contributed their ideas, project information and writings to the development of this paper. Ultimately, it is because of their dedication and commitment, "Serving to Learn and Learning to Serve" has become a influential movement that is transforming higher education in Asia.

References

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[4] Jen-Chi Yen and Bai-Chuan Yang, Chapter 8, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 1.
[5] J. Chithra and Helen Mary Jacqueline, Chapter 4, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 1.
[6] Charn Mayot, Chapter 1, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 6.
[7] Enrique G. Orcion, Chapter 7, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 9.
[8] Jens Mueller and Dennis Lee, Chapter 6, *Service Learning in Asia*, pp. 4 and 5.
[9] Charn Mayot, Chapter 1, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 12.
[10] Site visit and interview by the author on January 23, 2007.
[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.
[12] Lai Kwok Hung, Chapter 3, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 15.
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[14] Dennis Lee, Chapter 9, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 15.
[15] John H. Powers, Chapter 5, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 2.
[16] Orcioin, Chapter 7, *Service Learning in Asia*, 13.
[17] Yutaka Sato, et al, Chapter 2, *Service Learning in Asia*, 13.
[18] I borrowed the term from Enrique G. Orcion, Chapter 7, *Service Learning in Asia*, page 2.
[19]Tom Smith, as quoted by Dennis Lee in Chapter 9, *Service Learning in Asia***.**
[20]Established in 2004, SLAN currently has six member schools: ICU in Japan, Silliman University in the Philippines, Lady Doak College in India, Chung Chi College in Hong Kong, Seoul Women's University in South Korea, and Soochow University in Taiwan.
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[22] Ibid, p. 13.
[23] Ibid, p. 24.
[24] Lai Kwok Hung, Chapter 3, *Service Learning in Asia*, p. 14.
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[27] Charn Mayot, Chapter 1, p. 15.
[28] Ibid, p. 11.
[29] Ibid, p. 14.