

Journal of  
**Economic and Social Thought**

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 5

September 2018

Issue 3

**Service-learning in higher education in Southeast Asia**

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**Abstract.** Although service-learning in higher education is a creation of the American society, it has found its way into many education systems outside of the United States. An excellent example of an area where service-learning is taking root is the southeast Asian region. Scholars believe that the slow but steady spread of service-learning as an educational innovation in Asia is symptomatic of modest changes in the conceptions of higher education. As the name suggests, service-learning is a form of education where students acquire real-life knowledge and skills through a wide range of experiences that benefit communities. In other words, service-learning combines education with community service, the aim of which is to enrich students while also meeting the needs of a society. Since service-learning has specific objectives and involves skills acquisition and critical analysis, it goes beyond the usual volunteering and or fundraising. As an active form of university engagement with surrounding communities, service-learning grounds students in local cultures while helping them pursue their educational goals.

**Keywords.** Service-learning, Higher education, Southeast Asia.


**JEL.** M10, M14.


**1. Introduction: Main Features of Service-learning**

There are many partners and reciprocities in service-learning, but the main ones are experience, reflection, and knowledge. Staff and community agencies provide experience, faculty members offer the knowledge and skills, and students reflect on everything they acquire (Berasategui, Alonso, & Roman, 2016). In this regard, the main features of service-learning are systematic linking of things, the utilization of reflective abilities, placement in a community, acquisition of experience from the community placement and bringing it into the classroom, assessment, and the recognition of all those involved. The linking of things involves experiences, reflection, and acquired knowledge. The agencies involved in this interchange include students, community agencies, members of staff, and members of the public. Students can express what they have learned verbally, in writing, or through media. Here, the student draws from his or her past experiences to examine the present and make projections about the future. By so doing, the student creates for himself or herself knowledge, understanding, and awareness. Reflection also helps the students determine what they need to do to forge ahead productively.

Placement in a service or community agency is perhaps what differentiates service-learning from the rest. Under such conditions, students get ample time to acquire knowledge and skills through extensive interactions with people from different walks of life (Hesser, 1995). The student also does useful work that contributes positively towards the transformation of society. Once the student has undergone successful placement, the system requires of him or her to bring the

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experiences back to the classroom (brick and mortar or online classrooms) for discussion. It is during such moments that students exchange ideas and their opinions and perspectives about service-learning. The school uses this feedback to streamline service-learning so that it is more beneficial to students and responsive to the needs of local communities. Like in any learning situation, assessment is important in service-learning. However, unlike those used in other schooling methods, assessment in service-learning looks at whether the student demonstrates knowledge and skills acquisition. Finally, service-learning recognizes all individuals and organizations that make it possible in every environment.

### 2. The foundations of service-learning

As previously indicated, service-learning goes beyond regular volunteering and fundraising. It has specific goals and objectives and demands more than superficial experiences that give students the feel-good factor. Indeed, the creators of service-learning did so by building on the works of various scholars, philosophers, and educators. Notable influencers include C. Wright Mills, John Dewey, Jean Lave, Paolo Freire, Etienne Wenger, and Gloria Jean Watkins (better known by “bell hooks,” her pen name). For instance, John Dewey argues that the key to quality education is the emphasis on experience and continuity and interaction (Simpson & Jackson, 1997). Here, continuity refers to the relationships between past happenings and current experiences. With service-learning, students take active roles in society, relying on past happenings to achieve success in their current engagements. Therefore, to create a service-learning program that addresses the needs of students, universities, colleges, and other stakeholders must look for ways to develop a curriculum that is useful in a non-classroom setting.

Another foundation of service-learning is the idea that social issues penetrate and influence how people live and behave. C. Wright Mills was the first to advance this idea in her 1959 work titled “Personal Face of Public Problems.” According to Mills (1959), social issues influence the action, behavior, and lives of people, but they may not necessarily be aware of it. The idea that Mills advanced in 1959 is relevant to service-learning today because it helps students analyze people’s situations and social contexts. A student is more likely to succeed in his or her service-learning placement if he or she understands the social context of the people around him or her as well as their situations. Indeed, to provide service-learning without interrogating the circumstances of the users and their social realities is to avoid important issues that lead to social understanding and improved acquisition of knowledge and skills. Reflection is also crucial to service-learning. As an aspect of service-learning, reflection comes from Paolo Freire’s works. According to Freire (1981; 1998), it is important to create awareness and understanding among people. One can do this through dialogue and reflection.

### 3. The shift towards service-learning in Southeast Asia

Higher education in southeast Asia is changing. At present, there is a growing interest in service-learning across Asia, and many factors could be responsible for the observed shift. Universities and colleges in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and other southeast Asian countries are continually looking for ways to improve their higher education system. Most of them are now drawing upon their national and local histories, functional missions, and existing socio-economic needs to develop effective service-learning programs, borrowing various elements from the American system (Nakanishi & Yamano, 2014). Notably, other global and regional dynamics also affect how the southeast Asian countries develop their service-learning in higher education. Often, the need to develop an effective higher education system that grounds students on local cultures derives from perceived internal and external security and economic threats. For example, economic tension in the southeast Asian region due to the territorial dispute in the South China Sea call for new nationalist expressions. The South China Sea dispute involves Brunei,

the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

It also possible that the changing characteristics of students attending colleges and universities have contributed to the shifting nature of higher education in southeast Asia. Today, more adults are enrolling in higher education, leading to increased competition for the few positions available in existing colleges and universities (Nakanishi & Yamano, 2014). Universities and colleges are also facing a wide variety of challenges, including budgetary constraints due to higher education financing alterations. In this regard, higher education systems are forced to look for alternative financing while also reducing their annual expenditure. The use of service-learning appears relevant in developing student knowledge and skills without encouraging competition or exhausting financial resources. Communities and universities and colleges in southeast Asia have also realized that traditional schooling, where the focus is narrow, highly competitive, and exam oriented, discourages some students from continuing with education. In some cases, students suffer severe burnout in the name of looking for a degree. Service-learning promises to be the solution to these identified problems, hence its widespread adoption in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.

### 4. Forms of service-learning curricula in Southeast Asia

Many kinds of service-learning exist in southeast Asia. The type of service-learning in existence in Southeast Asia depends on the country and the institution of higher education involved. There is a large number of colleges and universities in Taiwan and the Philippines that utilize service-learning as a long-term approach to teaching (Nakanishi & Yamano, 2014). Other institutions in some southeast Asian countries use service-learning on an experimental basis. The positive outcomes of such experiments often precede the full adoption of service-learning as an educational approach. Some forms of service-learning in this part of the world are independent and well-defined. In other cases, the process is simple and a component of the traditional education system. For instance, service-learning is an aspect of the educational rigor for high school students in Hong Kong. The experience helps the students to put into practice what they have been learning in class and to look into the future with anticipation.

Another example of service-learning in Southeast Asia is in the students entering colleges in the Philippines. In this part of the southeast Asian region, the government requires that every student entering college must go through the provision of national service before proceeding. However, since these experiences do not contribute to one's academic scores, and since there is no reflection after their completion, these forms of experiences are non-academic service-learning. Universities that offer educational service-learning in southeast Asia include the University of the Philippines, Silliman University, and the Central Philippine University in the Philippines; Payap University in Thailand; and Soochow University and Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan (McCarthy, Damrongmanee, Pushpalatha, Chithra, & Yamamoto, 2005). In these and other institutions of higher learning, service-learning can exist as components of established classes, independent and sequential classes, capstone classes, regional exchange classes, local community classes, and international classes.

In places where service-learning programs exist as components of existing classes, students go for placement in local communities. After that, they combine what they learned in the placements with classroom discussions and reflection, in most cases, this type of service-learning curriculum is narrow because it is complementary to other aspects of learning. An excellent example of a southeast Asian university that uses a service-learning curriculum inside existing classes is Payap University in Thailand. Here, students have participated in various programs that help members of the local community to develop accounting procedures for cooperative groups (Hesser, 1995). Most of the students that have participated in the development of these accounting procedures for village cooperatives are or

## Journal of Economic and Social Thought

were pursuing an elective course in the Department of Accounting and Finance. The department uses the method to strengthen student's understanding of accounting and finance. Therefore, the experience is also examinable.

Some universities in southeast Asia, having realized the benefits and the potential of service-learning, have developed independent and sequential classes for them. An excellent example of a university with an independent and sequential service-learning curriculum is Soochow University in Taiwan. In this university, students have the freedom to select service-learning as one of the units to pursue towards the achievement of a degree (McCarthy *et al.*, 2005). Trinity College in Quezon City, the Philippines also has a service-learning program as an independent and sequential class where students are free to elect it. Independent service-learning classes go into more detail than those that exist as components of traditional classes. Students in independent service-learning classes have the opportunity to participate in longer community placements, and to reflect on all experiences gained in such situations. The students also have the chance to help more members of the community, and to discuss a wide variety of issues with their colleagues and instructors.

Service-learning as a capstone class is the third form of service-learning curriculum that universities in the southeast Asian region currently use. The focus of service-learning as a capstone class is to apply the knowledge and skills that one has acquired in various lessons through active participation in activities that benefit communities. An excellent example of a university that uses this approach to service-learning is India's Lady Doak College (McCarthy *et al.*, 2005). Notably, the university has not yet perfected this option. It uses its knowledge and experience to improve on it and to transform learning for the majority of its students. At Lady Doak College, students in their final year of study can enroll in a "Citizenship Training for Rural Women" class. The class helps the students acquire a wide variety of knowledge and skills that they can use to improve their integration back into the community following the successful completion of a degree program. Other forms of service-learning curriculum like exchange programs, local community experiences, and international experiences also exist in various universities in different parts of the southeast Asian region.

### 5. Conclusion

Service-learning is a creation of the United States. However, it has slowly but steadily found its way into many education systems outside of the United States. Service-learning entails the acquisition of knowledge and skills through participation in various activities that benefit local communities. Unlike regular volunteering work and fundraising, service-learning has specific goals and objectives. While service-learning has many partners and reciprocities, experience, reflection, and knowledge are the main ones. The foundation of these three main components of service-learning is the works and philosophies of various scholars, educators, and philosophers. In southeast Asia, service-learning is taking root due to tension, changing characteristics of students, and increasing financial constraints among universities and colleges. The establishment of service-learning in this part of the world appears to be the solution to these problems. Typically, the service-learning curriculum can exist inside other classes, independently, or as a capstone project. Different universities utilize a different system depending on their needs and areas of focus. Without a doubt, service-learning is an active form of university engagement with surrounding communities that grounds students in local cultures while helping them pursue their educational goals.

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