
Service-Learning and Development Sociology: Appraising Civic Engagement and Experiential Learning as a Pedagogy

Shilpita Gine

Department of Sociology, Salesian College, Siliguri

Email: shilpita1810@gmail.com

Abstract

Service-learning, as an educational approach combines service activities and community engagements to academic learning experiences. While this approach has gained prominence in the Indian context in the contemporary times, intersecting service-learning pedagogy and sociological theories, aims to understand how the method augments students' understanding of sociological concepts, promotes civic engagement, and contributes to societal change. This research paper explores the relationship between service-learning, civil society, and sociological theories drawing from a synthesis of relevant literature and empirical research. The paper further investigates how service-learning programs engage students in civil society initiatives, enabling them to apply sociological theories in real-world contexts. It demonstrates the potential of this interaction to foster civic engagement, promote social change, and advance the students' understanding of societal events; concomitantly, provides a valuable platform for students to apply sociological theories to real-world contexts, fostering critical thinking and empathy.

Keywords: *Service-Learning, Development Sociology, Sociological Theories, Civic Engagement, Sociological Imagination*

Introduction

While the presumption with Sociology as a discipline as performed has been perceived separately from that as learnt, Development Sociology, as a sub discipline, played a crucial role in understanding societal development contributing to both academic knowledge and practical solutions to address pressing issues. The belief in sociology as a theoretical discipline not only lost the essence of the discipline in terms of the insight and perception it

provided towards equipping one to imagine sociologically, it also hindered teachers to train students to be sociologists in their day to day lives and a sociological discovery on their part (Ostrow, 1999).

Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy (1999) explores the theoretical underpinnings of service learning within sociology, offering a framework for a sociology of service learning and its potential contributions to the discipline. With an overview and evaluation of the Service-Learning Course offered by the Department of Sociology in Salesian College, Siliguri during the even semester of 2023, the paper elaborates upon an integration of theoretical knowledge with practical community engagement as a pedagogy to foster students' understanding of sociological concepts and facilitate sociological imagination to appraise social reality. The paper further makes use of arguments of Development Sociology as a theoretical framework to support the purpose of service learning considering C.W Mills' understanding on the connect between individual biography and the history which calls for the requirement to assimilate and analyse the context, calling for a mind for reflecting upon the information provided developing a rationality and making meaning of the situation which is referred to as sociological imagination whereby the individual understands his or her experiences locating oneself within the society. The intersection of service learning and sociology examines how service-learning with development sociology perspective would serve as an effective pedagogy in enhancing students' understanding of sociological concepts by promoting civic engagement further contributing to social change. Astin et al. (2000) provides insights into the impact of service-learning towards individual and social development emphasizing upon the role of sociological perspectives in fostering civic engagement. However, the key to this approach lies in reflection on part of the student along with their ability to interrelate their field experiences with the theories learnt. Eyler and Giles (1999) explores C.W Mills' concept of sociological imagination within the context of service learning, highlighting the importance of bridging personal experiences with societal issues also explores how sociology can complement other disciplines in addressing complex social issues. Butin (2006) critically examines the limitations and challenges of service learning, particularly in sociology, urging for a deeper integration of critical analysis and reflection in service experiences. In this backdrop, two themes have been developed to assess the application of Development Sociology in the context of Service-Learning.

Critical Reflection upon One's Position and Learning from the Community through the Service Activities

Service-learning experiences become more meaningful when students apply sociological concepts and theories to the situations they encounter. The students by using a sociological lens (applying sociological theories that they have learnt in class), make sense of social reality effectively outside the classroom context. Students practicing in sociological imagination to their service experiences gain a broader perspective on social change. They understand that addressing personal troubles alone may not lead to lasting change; systemic issues must also be tackled. Service-learning experiences are enriched with sociological imagination fostering social justice and advocacy. Students see their service as part of a larger movement for societal improvement.

“No matter how much I picked, there was plastic buried underground which I have no idea how deep it was buried which gave me an uneasy feeling in my stomach. This made me think that even in a small area that doesn't even cover a single kilometer there is an innumerable number of plastics ...I feel we failed as human beings, we failed as social beings. I know it is impossible for us to bring back our planet to its prime stage and it is extremely hard to face the disaster that we created. I must say that we must no longer harm the planet...”

narrated a student from Sociology Department in his report. With a sociological imagination and civic engagement, the students identified their roles in contributing to social change. The process further enables the students to be active citizens addressing immediate needs and advocating for systemic change.

Community Needs and Community Strengthening

By identifying community needs as part of the course, the students are more likely to see their role as active agents in addressing societal challenges and not just passive volunteers. Service-learning involved direct interaction with diverse communities and individuals. By using sociological imagination, students empathized with the experiences of others and developed cultural competence, recognizing how social and cultural factors shape people's lives. The service-learning programme enabled empowerment of the people the community organization is working with. Sociological imagination encouraged the students

to critically analyze social issues they encountered during service-learning. They explored how structural factors, such as poverty, discrimination, or institutional barriers, contribute to the challenges faced by individuals and communities.

Methodological Framework

In sociology, students carry the responsibility of a sociologist to the field for understanding the socio-political setting and macro-level understanding of the disadvantages of the people or the community practicing empathy (as they understand Weber's *Verstehen* or empathetic introspection in the community), accepting diversity, independent thinking and creating new knowledge participating in the community.

48 students from the Department of Sociology (In their Second Semester), Salesian College, Siliguri engaged in service-learning for a semester to fulfil 30 credit hours. The key to partaking was their reflection on their social position vis a vis the community which they engaged in when they went back. The students reflected upon each silence, each discomfort, gestures, postures, care along with the observable issues and concerns of power within the community. Three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were chosen in Siliguri based on their accommodation of activities on Saturdays and the students were asked to choose the organizations based on their preferences. Save Earth for Life worked for the environment. In contemporary development sociology, there is an increasing focus on environmental sustainability. Scholars explore the relationship between development and ecological impacts.

Engaging in advocacy efforts to influence public policy related to breast cancer, access to healthcare, improvements in healthcare systems and collaboration for planning and executing awareness campaigns including organizing educational events, workshops, and social media initiatives serve as an important tool for spreading awareness about breast cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment options. In this backdrop, Sumita Cancer Society was chosen as one of our field sites to work towards awareness and prevention of breast, cervical and oral cancer.

Don Bosco night school worked towards supporting education of the underprivileged children as part of initiatives taken by Don Bosco School, Siliguri. The field served as an opportunity for the students to make use of

sociological perspectives and concepts in action. The students developed the curiosity to understand social problems examining larger factors – understanding the socio-political structures of society, to not just ask why but to answer that as well enabling the students to study social reality (as a site) for making sociological detections.

Each student was required to maintain a journal for recording their day-to-day service experiences and share the experiences via email the same day. The students were required to write a reflective assignment regarding their experiences, connecting them to classical sociological theories – Karl Marx’s understanding of class and class consciousness, Max Weber’s understanding of *Verstehen*, and Emile Durkheim’s Functionalist perspective considering his understanding of social fact. The student’s ability to work as well as reflect upon what they have learnt in the classroom was evaluated through their reflective assignments, presentations, and discussions. These assessments gauge students’ understanding of sociological concepts and the application of the same in services of the community and towards transforming oneself.

Service-Learning and the Field Experiences

Considering the three NGOs chosen as field sites for the students, each NGO had unique characteristics and approach for reaching out to the community at large. While Save Earth for Life enabled active participation for supporting the environmental initiatives and campaigns of organization, students participated contributing to the promotion of a cleaner environment and sustainable practices. The teacher’s responsibility primarily was to evaluate the impact of service learning on student participants and the community.

A wide range of activities were conducted throughout the course – participating in clean-up drives and waste management initiatives in local communities, assisting in organizing and attending environmental awareness events and workshops and contributing to the organization’s advocacy efforts for sustainable practices yielding several notable outcomes and achievements like cleaner communities which involved active involvement in clean-up drives which led to visibly cleaner and more appealing public spaces, with improved waste management practices in the communities served by Save Earth for Life.

There was an increased sense of awareness that inspired more sustainable behaviors in the local community. Students reported a heightened sense of responsibility toward the environment and an increased commitment to taking actions in their personal lives to promote a cleaner and more sustainable environment.

*‘One of the events called ‘door to door awareness campaign’ was a good initiative by the NGO as each of us were spreading awareness regarding what was going on in our surroundings or what we as human beings are doing which is bearing an impact on not only us but also the environment and the entire animal kingdom’*writes another student from Sociology Department.

The service-learning project has been an eye-opening experience for all involved. It provided an opportunity for students to witness the direct impact of individual and collective actions on the environment. This experience reinforced the importance of community engagement, personal responsibility, and the role each person plays in environmental conservation.

Service learning with Save Earth for Life has been a transformative and enriching experience for the students. It allowed students to actively contribute to environmental conservation, promote awareness, and support the organization’s initiatives for a cleaner and more sustainable environment. The service-learning project not only benefited the organization’s objectives but also had a lasting impact on the personal and academic growth of the participants. Another student of the Sociology Department narrates,

‘Overall, I am proud to have been part of the community effort to improve our surrounding and make a positive difference. I hope to continue to work with this community in the future to ensure that our environment remains clean and safe....’

By collaborating with Sumita Cancer Society, the students actively supported the activities and initiatives of the organization. The aim was to raise awareness about breast and cervical cancer and encourage early detection, to assist in organizing and participating in community events and educational programs, to contribute to the overall mission of the NGO in empowering individuals to take control of their health.

The students were mostly collaborating with healthcare professionals in the organization's efforts in raising awareness participating in educational programs which led to a greater understanding of breast and cervical cancer and the importance of early detection.

The experience provided a unique opportunity for personal growth, fostering skills in communication, community engagement, and advocacy. It has enabled students to actively contribute to the fight against breast and cervical cancer, promoting awareness about the same.

Don Bosco Night School focussed on providing education and support to underprivileged children with the task of education, mentorship by the students of the Department letting the underprivileged children realise their full potentials.

The students actively supported the educational initiatives and programs of the NGO, contributed to the institution's work, assisting in classroom settings to provide assistance to the children. The service-learning experience fostered personal growth and empathy among the students.

The service-learning experience facilitated students realization of transformative power of service and mentorship. It enabled community engagement and compassion among the students.

The experience has been a rewarding and impactful experience. It allowed students to actively contribute to the organization's mission, support underprivileged children's education, and make a meaningful difference in their lives. The service-learning project not only benefited the organization's goals but also had a lasting impact on the personal and academic growth of the participants.

Service Learning – Towards a Sociology of it?

Service-learning as an educational approach combines community service with academic instruction to provide students with opportunities to apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-world situations. A sociology of service-learning would examine the extent to which the service activities are connected to sociological imagination considering a critical framework which would encourage individuals to think beyond their personal experiences and understand the broader social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their lives. Sociological imagination would equip the individual in extending

connections between their personal troubles and larger social issues. Mills (1959) argued that individuals often experience personal troubles, which are individual difficulties or challenges, such as unemployment, divorce, or health problems. However, these troubles are not solely a result of personal characteristics or actions but are also influenced by larger public issues, which are societal problems rooted in social structures and institutions, like economic inequality, discrimination, or political systems.

By linking biography to history, sociological imagination enables connecting personal biographies (individual life stories) to the broader historical and social context. It asks individuals to consider how their experiences and choices are influenced by historical events, social norms, and cultural forces. Mills (1959) argued that sociological imagination allows individuals to see how their personal lives intersect with the social world. It helps people recognize that their individual experiences are not isolated but are shaped by society's norms, values, institutions, and power structures whereby they question the familiar.

Further acknowledging the tension between social structure (the larger societal forces and institutions) and individual agency (the capacity to make choices and take action), help individuals understand the constraints and opportunities presented by their social contexts developing empathy to view society as an inclusive one.

Using sociological imagination as a tool thereby, encourages individuals to see the connections between their personal lives and the broader social world and observe reality with keen eyes.

'One thing that I noticed while teaching the kids was that the kids there having Hindi as their first language could read Hindi from books fluently as well as speak fluently without any mistake whereas according to my experience it was not the same with the kids who had Nepali as their first language...'

narrates a student of the Sociology Department who was asked to observe every detail in the field site. While service-learning enables Sociologists to study the dynamics of student engagement with the community through service-learning course, they explore the relationships between students and community members, examining issues like power dynamics, cultural understanding, and reciprocity.

The essential component of service-learning being reflection, using sociological imagination as a tool, students had to focus on how reflection can promote critical analysis and self-awareness among students, helping them connect their service experiences to sociological concepts and theories. One of the students wonder

'The question that struck my mind at that moment was that if only this less number of people can bring so much change then think about what people from all over could do.'

Service-learning, in inspiring students to become advocates for social change also developed cultural competence among the students.

A Sociology of service-learning would prove to be a field for analyzing the social, cultural, and educational aspects of service-learning programs. The students partaking in service-learning cleanliness drive related to the sociological perspective and theories learnt under functionalism. Taking a sociological perspective, they reflected upon how society works and how social interactions, norms, values, and beliefs affect individual behaviour.

"....Functionalism, as a sociological theory, emphasizes the positive aspects of social institutions and how they can work together to maintain order and stability in society. In this view, service learning in a cleanliness drive is beneficial because it encourages people to contribute to the betterment of society. It also helps to foster collective responsibility, as people are encouraged to take part in the maintenance of the environment. This creates a sense of unity, as people feel a sense of belonging and collective responsibility..."

narrates a student from Department of Sociology after the service experience. Understanding the impact of these programs on students, communities, and society as a whole has helped develop strategies for improving the service-learning initiatives in the future.

Service Learning as a Pedagogical Tool in Sociology

Service learning as a pedagogy in sociology would involve integrating community service experiences with academic learning to enhance understanding of sociological concepts and theories. While this approach goes beyond traditional classroom instruction, encouraging students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, it encourages application of sociological

concepts in the field practically in real-world situations. This hands-on experience helps to reinforce theoretical knowledge and deepen their understanding of how sociological principles operate in everyday life.

The reflective practice is a key component of service learning. Students are required to reflect on their service experiences, connecting them to sociological theories and critically analyzing their observations. This reflective practice helps in articulating the connections between theory and practice.

'We live in a society that is bounded by various customs and regulations. There are social institutions that regulate our behaviour and keeps our actions in check. Each society has its own mechanisms and functions. Society in fact according to a French Sociologist Émile Durkheim is visualized as a system having inter-related parts bounded with certain processes operating to maintain equilibrium. In the case of a Non-Governmental Organisation, it is a group that takes up or works for a social or political cause involving health, education, protection of environment, human rights, violation of civil rights, etc.' writes a student from the Sociology Department instilling a sense of social responsibility and emphasizing the role of individuals in creating positive societal changes.

'I started observing the trash thrown out there, it was all because of our own carelessness' writes another student of Sociology. Moving beyond theoretical and academic knowledge, service learning helps students develop skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking. One of the students emphasized on 'unity and positivity' that came along the service activities. These skills are transferable and valuable in various personal and professional contexts further contributing to the development of well-rounded and socially conscious individuals who are better prepared to contribute meaningfully to society. It aligns with the applied and transformative nature of sociology, emphasizing the importance of bridging theory and practice for a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena.

The literature on service learning and sociology demonstrates the rich potential of this pedagogical approach in fostering civic engagement, promoting sociological imagination, and contributing to social change. Underscoring the value of combining academic knowledge with practical experiences to create informed and active citizens committed to addressing societal issues from a sociological perspective. Integrating sociological imagination into service

learning enhances the educational value of community service by encouraging students to connect their personal experiences with broader societal issues, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. It transforms service learning from a simple act of volunteerism into a reflective and transformative process that can contribute to positive social change.

Conclusion

Exploring the synergy between service learning and sociological theories, emphasizing the potential for this pedagogical approach to empower students to become informed, empathetic, and active agents of societal transformation, the value of connecting academic learning with real-world service experiences to foster a deeper understanding of sociological concepts promote positive social change.

Underscoring the transformative potential of integrating development sociology with service-learning, highlighting the capacity of this synergistic approach to empower students, enhance community well-being, and contribute to social change. While sociological imagination inspires civic engagement by helping students recognize their capacity to effect change. It encourages students to become active citizens who not only address immediate needs but also advocate for systemic change. Students see their service as part of a larger movement for societal improvement. In summary, integrating sociological imagination into service learning enhances the educational value of community service by encouraging students to connect their personal experiences with broader societal issues, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. It transforms service learning from a simple act of volunteerism into a reflective and transformative process that can contribute to positive social change. Integrating Development sociology to service-learning practices would take up an intervention-based approach and evaluate the issues related to social justice and transformation. Development sociology would take a critical stance, questioning dominant development paradigms and policies would further contribute to local communities and cultures reaching out to them in terms of intervention. In this backdrop, an exploration of emerging trends and innovative practices in the field of experiential education and civic participation is certainly the need of the hour for effective implementation of service-learning courses across disciplines

References

- Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., and Yee, J. A. (2000). *How Service Learning Affects Students*, UCLA: Higher Education Research Institute.
- Butin, D. W. (2006), *The Limits of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(4): 371-394.
- Eyler, J., and Giles Jr, D. E. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. St. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Giddens, A. (2006). *Sociology* (6th ed.), UK: Polity Press.
- Hironimus-Wendt, R. J., and Lovell-Troy, L. (1999), *Grounding service learning in social theory*, *Teaching Sociology*, 360-372.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ostrow, J., Hesser, G., and Enos, S. (1999). *Cultivating the Sociological Imagination: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Sociology*.
- AAHE's Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Sedlak, C. A., Doheny, M. O., Panthofer, N., and Anaya, E. (2003), *Critical thinking in students' service-learning experiences*, *College teaching*, 51(3): 99-104.