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Re-examining the Dynamics and Efficacy of Service-Learning Pedagogy in Development Sociology

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***Abstract:** Service-learning, as a pedagogy expounds service activities and civic engagement as part of academic learning experiences. Applying the ideals of Development Sociology as intervention-based, the research paper critically explores the relationship between sociological theories taught in class and service-learning practices in the field. Intersecting Development Sociology to service-learning pedagogy aims at augmenting students' understanding of sociological concepts promoting civic engagement, and further contributing to societal change facilitating intervention in public sphere. In this backdrop, the paper investigates the extent to which service-learning programmes engage students in civil society initiatives, enabling them to apply sociological theories in real-world contexts questioning the 'real intellectual' space by taking up a reconstructive task. The paper, with primary research data collected from service-learning, framed and conducted as part of undergraduate sociology honours course for a semester between January and June 2023, critically examines the potential of this interaction in promoting civic engagement, promoting social change; providing a valuable platform for promoting 'specific intellectual spaces' catering to local development concerns of the real-world and development of empathy on part of the students.*

Key words: Service-Learning, Development Sociology, Sociology of Intellectuals, Civic Engagement, Sociological Imagination

Prologue

Development Sociology, as a sub discipline has played a crucial role in understanding societal development contributing to both academic knowledge and practical resolutions to address demanding issues. The belief in sociology as a theoretical discipline losing the insight and perceptions for equipping one to imagine sociologically and hindering teachers to train students to be sociologists in their daily lives and a sociological discovery on their part (Ostrow, 1999), seems debatable when opting for service-learning drafted for theoretical papers. Considering service-learning as a critical pedagogy, which though creates community awareness and field-based learning opportunities, has more goals to fulfil considering its scope.

With an overview and critical evaluation of the Service-Learning course created and offered by the Department of Sociology in Salesian College, Siliguri during the even semester of 2023 for a course on classical sociological theories, the paper critically evaluates 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.

While service-learning connects students' learning objectives with the objectives of service, the student practice adequate reflection upon their position during community participation also finds opportunity to apply what they have learnt in classrooms. Each service-learning

course have four main components in common – the course is credit bearing, has a component of community service, believe in structured reflection, considers collaboration and reciprocity (Rama, et al., 2000).

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. 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. With a sociological imagination and civic engagement, the students identify 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.

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 often enables empowerment of the people the community organization is working with, and sociological imagination encourages the students to critically analyse social issues they encounter during service-learning. As part of the course offered, the students thereby explored how structural factors, such as poverty, discrimination, or institutional barriers, contribute to the challenges faced by individuals and communities.

While service-learning and Development Sociology interacts to 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) critically evaluates the impact of service-learning on individual and social development emphasizing upon the role of sociological perspectives in fostering civic engagement, provided, the key to this approach lies in reflection on part of the student along with their ability to interrelate their field experiences with the classroom teaching. Whereas exploring C.W Mills' concept of sociological imagination within the context of service-learning highlights the importance of bridging personal with the larger social issues, it also calls for exploring how sociology can complement other disciplines in addressing complex social issues (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

Methodological framework

While Stocker (2016) discusses service-learning in theoretical lines of structural-functionalism and conflict perspectives in sociology, further research on service-learning as anchored in various perspectives of classical sociological theories – structural functionalism, conflict, critical and interpretative perspectives call for further updating of discussion (Abenir and Hok Ka, 2020). With works of scholars on modes of community engagement, service-learning has been considered as having degrees of benefits and reciprocity in the field considering engagements at the levels of – transaction, transition, transformation and transcendence. While charity-based service-learning is anchored in structural-functional perspective, critical service-learning is hinged upon conflict perspective and community-based service-learning in interpretative perspective.

Considering a classical sociological theory paper for designing a service-learning course fosters challenges not only in terms of framing the course whereby complexity of theoretical concepts may hinder connecting classical theories to diverse service-learning experiences particularly in discipline like sociology; and developing appropriate rubric for assessment in capturing both theoretical understanding and practical application, framing a methodology to assess the dynamics and challenges of the process for research pose trials as well.

In this backdrop, the paper has used qualitative methodology to draw data from the journals maintained by students for the course, their experiences shared and written as part of their assignments along with participant observation as methods of collecting data for the research.

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 in the course 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.

The students carried 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 community.

Considering structural-functional perspective which identifies society as consisting of various parts, each part having a distinct function promoting solidarity for the society, Sumita Cancer Society was considered as one of the organizations to investigate the function it served in catering to health interventions. The organization engaged in advocacy to influence public policy related to cancer in general and breast cancer, oral and cervical cancer in particular. The organization evaluated access to healthcare, focussed on improvements in healthcare systems and collaborated for planning awareness campaigns. The organization held educational events, workshops via social media regarding breast cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment options. A group of students – who voluntarily chose to

work with the organization were mostly collaborating with healthcare professionals for raising awareness, knowing more about the preventive measures and vaccines, understanding the stigma associated with the disease and reflecting upon the same in the light of theories taught in class.

In similar lights, Don Bosco night school was chosen who worked towards supporting education of the underprivileged children as part of initiatives taken by Don Bosco School, Siliguri. The students supported the under privileged children who were a part of the night school in their reading, writing, mathematics, and science up to fifth standard. The field served as an opportunity for the students to make use of sociological perspectives and concepts in action.

The third organization, Save Earth for Life was chosen considering conflict and critical perspectives whereby the student would critically reflect upon their position vis a vis what they observe while working with the greater community. The students were involved in cleaning up kilometres of areas with plastic wastes, initiating rallies and awareness campaigns, critically reflecting upon environmental concerns, climate change and risk society.

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. 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.

With adequate preparations and scope for student reflections, the course was designed and conducted over a period of three months. The researcher partook in each of the field visits to assist the students participating in the service-learning course. Along with notes taken from the field and from observations and reflections shared by

community partners and students, the researcher has described service-learning experiences of the students bringing to forefront the significance of practice in sociology.

Expounding the Service-Learning 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. 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.

While the experience of working with the organization provided a unique opportunity for personal growth, fostering skills in communication, community engagement, and advocacy on part of the students, enabling the students to actively contribute to the fight against breast and cervical cancer, promoting awareness about the same, the process has been unidirectional in nature. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000) argued that charity-based service-learning functions with a unidirectional framework where the community is seen requiring services and there is a one-way expertise, and service from the organizations and educational institutions to communities.

‘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

contributing to positive societal changes thereby to the maintenance of the whole as conceived by structural functionalists.

The second NGO 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 interpretivist perspective focuses on individual interactions and meanings assigned to the experiences in our life. 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 with interactions with underprivileged students coming to the night school. The exercise was useful in terms of reflecting upon one’s position with meaningful interactions.

The service-learning experience at Don Bosco Night School facilitated realization of transformative power of service and mentorship among the students. 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.

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. 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.

Butin (2015) argues that service-learning based on conflict perspective considers ideologically driven practice voicing for social justice. In this light, there was an increased sense of awareness that inspired more sustainable behaviour 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 visiting each house in the locality, we were speaking to them regarding our surroundings and 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...'

expresses a student from Sociology Department.

The service-learning project 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 allowing 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 benefited the organization's objectives bearing a lasting impact on the personal and academic growth of the participants. In this backdrop, taking from Butin (2006) who 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, re-examination of service-learning as a pedagogical tool is the need of the hour.

Re-examining Service-Learning as a Pedagogical Tool in Sociology

While service-learning as a pedagogy in sociology would serve for integrating community service experiences with academic learning to enhance understanding of sociological concepts and theories, this approach, going beyond traditional classroom instruction, would be encouraging students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings. Manifesting a scope for community engagement, there would be greater opportunity for addressing community needs and grassroots level intervention by the students fostering civic responsibility among the students. However, the question arises in terms of the extent to which the hands-on experience would be able to reinforce theoretical knowledge and deepen understanding of how sociological principles operate in everyday life.

Whereas on one hand, students gain practical skills and deeper understanding of social issues, organizations deal with concrete issues which require interdisciplinary perspective to deal with. Integrating a holistic perspective for integrating knowledge from various academic disciplines may not be possible on part of the students hindering deeper understanding and reflection on their part. 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 analysing their observations. This reflective practice helps in articulating the connections between theory and practice.

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 rich potential of this pedagogical approach in fostering civic engagement, promoting sociological imagination, and contributing to social change. 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. 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 and speak Hindi

fluently without any mistake whereas, 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 smaller 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 analysing the social, cultural, and educational aspects of service-learning programs, reflecting upon how society works and how social interactions, norms, values, and beliefs affect individual behaviour.

Conclusion

Examining the interaction between service-learning and sociological theories, considering it as an effective pedagogical approach often leads to surface-level participation on part of the students. Not considering the power dynamics and exploitation within the field - may impose perspectives leading to limited impact of the programme on students.

Development Sociology taking up a critical stance, questioning dominant development paradigms and policies though contribute to empowerment of local communities, integrating Development Sociology with service-learning may lead to ineffective appropriation

of the philosophy of Development Sociology, particularly for time bound courses; the focus may be more on meeting of immediate community needs instead of delving deep into the problem. Thereby, an exploration of emerging trends and innovative practices in the field of Development Sociology and service-learning is certainly the need of the hour for effective implementation of service-learning courses across disciplines.

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