
SERVICE-LEARNING AND COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY AUDIO-BOOK PROGRAM FOR THE BLIND

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ABSTRACT

University courses in ethics are designed to help a student develop their moral character. But while classroom work provides students with knowledge, it is often not sufficient for deeper character development. The students also need some sort of practical engagement with people in their surrounding communities. This interaction creates both individual reflection and social awareness. Service-learning is a program which encourages the participants to learn and develop their moral characters through working in the community. During this interaction, both participants and community members learn by sharing and exchanging their experiences. But the question remains how effective this program is in creating awareness of communities outside of the orbit of the typical university experience? This paper, uses a case study of an audio-book program developed at Assumption University of Thailand called: ‘AU Voice for the Blind.’ It will demonstrate on both a theoretical and practical level how the student participant’s values are shaped by such learning experiences.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Audio Books, Blind Community

University courses in ethics are designed to help a student develop their moral character. But while classroom work provides students with knowledge, it is often not sufficient for deeper character development. The students also need some sort of practical engagement with people in their surrounding communities. Peter J. Parker claims that education often isolates academic life from the community life. Because of this, students often lack the ability to put into practice what they have learned.¹

There is an increasing interest in creating social awareness through education. Herman Wasserman and Arnold S. de Beer proposed a communitarian ethics to deal with HIV/AIDS problems in Africa.² Also, Amatai Etzioni applied communitarian ethics to appeal for organ donation. His communitarian approach emphasizes how social awareness can lead to responsibility and moral duty.³

The university while often isolated from the wider community still has a central role in the development of social responsibility. This paper proposes the value of communitarian ethics for university service-learning programs.

School and Community

Communitarian ethics focuses on the interrelationship among members in the community/society. This is a recognition of the limits of individualism and its emphasis on merely legal and contractual relations. In his work *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer claims that “human society is a distributive community. In other words people, “come together to share, divide, and exchange...”⁴ He goes on to write:

“A solitary person could hardly understand the meaning of the goods or figure out the reasons for taking them as likable or dislikable. Once people like in crowds, it becomes possible for individuals to break away, pointing to latent or subversive meanings, aiming at alternative values – including the values.”⁵

According to Walzer, one needs others to understand one's own meaning and values. Alasdair MacIntyre also mentioned that the moral identity could not create by one own but through the process of community:

“Notice also that the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral limitations of the particularity of those forms of community. Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.”⁶

John Dewey noted that the teachers should not only teach morals, but also act as role models. He pointed out that the school should be the place that the students could learn and develop their morals not only in class, but at every moment when they are in the school.⁷ This is echoed by Lawrence Kohlberg who considered schools to be ‘just communities’ where students could develop moral character and learn to make moral decisions through a kind of democratic participation.⁸ This is also asserted by Thai scholars like Warayuth Sriwarakuel who recognize that democracy is not merely individualistic but is also connecte with communitarianism since it requires cooperation and respect for the equality of the other’s positions.⁹

The community plays the important role as a source of moral education. Etzioni mentioned that one of the missions of any social institution is to educate individuals to have mutual respect and civil commitment.¹⁰ According to Etzioni, the community itself can be an important place for such an education. Moral education begins with the smallest community which is the family. Later in the school, the teachers are tasked with continuing to cultivate virtues like self-discipline or social responsibility.

According to communitarian ethics, the social interaction between the members of community is needed. The individuals could learn from others as the role models. They can adjust, develop, and change their moral character by having the dialogue with others and which in turn transforms their knowledge. However, from my view, the most important is the self-reflection which results from the experience. Without self-reflection, the individual could not develop their morality.

Service-Learning and its Purposes

Service-Learning is a program which promotes learning through serving others. As per T. Stanton writes, it is to provide services to others (especially the less advantaged in a community), to undergo community development, individual and community empowerment; and simultaneously “determines the purpose, nature and process of social and educational exchange between learners (students as service providers) and the people they serve”¹¹. In this way, service-learning connects the participant’s individual development with the greater community.

For the service-learning projects at Assumption University, the student participants are exposed to various communities which they would normally be unaware of. For instance, one service-learning project requires students to teach English to younger students at neighborhood schools. At first, the students did not see the point. But after visiting the school and the community, they understood the problems of the lack of teachers and the low salaries.

In the service-learning program participants have the opportunity to work in real situations, and they have a chance to apply their knowledge for solving the problems in the community. But to solve these problems, they need to build trust with community members. and this leads to the development of interpersonal skills. Charn Mayot provides the example of indigenous communities which will only work with those who earn their trust.¹²

So this is one of the most important aims of the service-learning program: the development of personal and interpersonal skills of the

participants. Likewise, the students also develop personal skills, gaining self-understanding, management skills, and moral character. For the most part, individuals create their self-identity through their interaction with others. So in this way, interpersonal skills and personal skills support one another in their respective development. For service-learning, the participants need to interact with other participants and the people in the community. They need to apply their knowledge and skills. At the same time, they have the opportunity to learn new things from the project and gain the insight from the opportunity. This helps them to develop a clearer understanding of themselves.

The participants not only gain new friends from these projects but they also learn to work with people from diverse backgrounds. From the study of Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, this helps the student reduce the problem of considering others in the form of stereotypes as the students have the opportunity to have genuine, informal contact with others.¹³

The “AU Voice for the Blind”

The AU Voice for Blind was the project developed by the researcher because of his previous experience as a volunteer producing audio-books. The main challenge of the National Library for the Blind and Disabled is that there are many books on the waiting list to be converted to audio format, but there are few volunteers to produce such work. Furthermore, many of the audio books produced by volunteers are of low quality. But if members of the blind community wish to study in secondary school or pursue higher education, they need the access to audio versions of literature and textbooks.

Assumption University of Thailand is a Catholic International University which places an emphasis on ethics and service to the community. It requires all students to study professional ethics. Some of the students in the St. Martin’s Center for Professional Ethics at Assumption University were enlisted for these projects. They provided reflections upon their experiences with the project.

Nattaphol Lohsiwanontn related that “This project has shown me the part of society that I have ignored. These children do have some disabilities but it never stops or holds them from having a quality life and being a useful citizen. Many of them have self-confidence and courage to do things like a normal person. Also, they have proved that the motto ‘practice make perfect’ is really legit. These children study like a normal person, go to the university to study law, and even have better grades than me. This project is very useful in that it makes us acknowledge these quality people in our society. In my opinion, this project should be one of the mandatory project for ethics seminar of our university every semester.”

Warisara Chanprasit, the student in this project of semester 2/2016, reflected her experience that “This project gave me such a good experience and taught me how to be gentle to other people. I am capable of helping people by using my own skill. Finally, our group has a kind cooperation among members and receives the useful suggestion from Ajarn Chavakorn.”

Charisa Singhasakulkai relates that “I learned many things from this activity, such as giving others without any return whether it be an object or a kindness just a little. It can be very valuable for their lives. Therefore, it makes me learn about their life as different, but still a good life. It also made me learn how to work with other people, how to solve a problem and make me more aware of society as well.”

Satarat Prachuaparee was another student in this project. He claims “This project changed my mission and attitude so much. Because, it made me realize that this world has many people who don’t have the [the same] opportunities for a better life. And we have to help and take care of those people because of our common humanity. [As humans] we can do good or bad, but we should to do whatever we can to make the world better and help each other because we are human.”

But it is important to note that the groups who had the opportunity to meet with the blind community before working on the books had a greater empathy than those meeting these communities afterwards. This might be because the group who had the opportunity of meeting the blind

community before producing the voice books understood the difficulties faced by this community and developed their sense of empathy through their experience. This again highlight the inter-personal development which is the emphasis of service-learning.

There were also exercises which tried to develop this empathy. Students were required to block their vision for a day and performing everyday activities.¹⁴ This helped many of the participants to more deeply understand the problems of the blind.

Many students stated in their reports and presentations that through their involvement in this service-learning project, they understood more about the life of the blind. Through the project, they developed their interpersonal skills with other AU students and the blind community. Some reported a deeper appreciation to their own lives and appreciated the opportunity which others might not have. They saw the inequality of the education system for the blind and disabled. Some decided to continue as volunteers for producing audio books or the library. Also, in the presentations for sharing their experience with other students, the representatives of one group mentioned that all are connected to each other and it is our job and responsibility to promote the justice and opportunities to other communities especially the least advantaged in society.

ENDNOTES

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Toward a Philosophy of Integrative Education*, trans. Kannikar Promsao (Bangkok: Suan Nguen Mee Ma, 2010), 25-42.

² Herman Wasserman and Arnold S. de Beer, *Covering HIV/AIDS: Towards a heuristic comparison between communitarian and utilitarian ethics*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250894800_Covering_HIVAIDS_Towards_a_heuristic_comparison_between_communitarian_and_utilitarian_ethics (accessed February 2019).

³ Amitai Etzioni, *Organ Donation: A Communitarian Approach*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amitai_Etzioni/publication/10708117_Organ_Donation_A_Communitarian_Approach/links/563113b408ae13bc6c3553aa.pdf (accessed December 2018).

⁴ Michael Walzer, “Complex Equality” in *Communitarianism: A New Public Ethics*, ed. Markate Daly (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1994), 101-110.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 221.

⁷ John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 3-4.

⁸ Ernest Alleva and Gareth B. Matthews, *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), s.v. “Moral Development”.

⁹ Warayuth Sriwarakuel, In Defense on Communitarianism, <http://repository.au.edu/handle/6623004553/18299> (accessed November 2017).

¹⁰ Amitai Etzioni, *Organ Donation: A Communitarian Approach*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amitai_Etzioni/publication/10708117_Organ_Donation_A_Communitarian_Approach/links/563113b408ae13bc6c3553aa.pdf (accessed December 2018).

¹¹ Stanton, T. “Service-Learning: Grouping Toward a Definition.” in Barbara Jacoby and Associates. *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990, p.9

¹² Charn Mayot, “Bridging Classrooms to Communities in Service-Learning Program” in *Service-Learning in Asia: Curricular Models and Practices*. Ed. Jun Xing and Carol Hok Ka Ma (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 1-13.

¹³ Janet Eyller and Dwight E. Giles, *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 28.

¹⁴ There is the clip in YouTube for this demonstration: <https://www.youtube.com/snWehS3sKV0>, The project reports are collected by St. Martin’s Center for Professional Ethics and Service-Learning, Assumption University of Thailand. The information could be requested by auservicelearning@au.edu or contacting Boontham Sornsawat.

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