

It's La Salle's Business After All: A Service-Learning Approach in Teaching Technical Writing

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Introduction

The paper highlights one of the ways in which De La Salle University – Dasmaringas (DLSU-D) constantly strives to nurture collaboration between teaching and service learning as an important component in the cultivation of Lasallian values, even in areas that may be considered “technical.”

What follows are highlights of the report, edited for publication. This is based on ongoing research approved and funded by the University Research Office, which received the proposal last August 2016. Although the research is in progress, it has already encouraged productive reflection and identified potential areas for improvement in the teaching and learning process.

Objective of the Research

Working on the genuine interest of articulating the direct impact of Lasallian values in the academic performance of students, the research project would like to find if there would be a significant improvement in the written outputs of students, if a service learning approach were used in the teaching-learning process. It would also like to know if such an approach would lead students toward a deeper understanding of Lasallian values.

By improvement, the project looks into the ability of the written output to demonstrate appreciation for the different areas of the communication process. It includes the clarity of purpose of the sender, the accuracy, completeness, and organization of the message, and responsiveness to the receiver's and the situation's needs.

By deeper understanding, the paper inquires about any evident display of Lasallian values as articulated in the Lasallian Guiding Principles (LGP). Composed of three documents – formation, education, and social development, these principles are products of an effort to clearly articulate the Lasallian presence and mission in the Philippines. They are results of resolutions passed during the First Lasallian Family Convocation of 2003 calling for an intensified presence and understanding of the Lasallian spirit among individuals and institutions in the Philippine district (Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family).

Context of the Research

It has become the mission of DLSU-D to make the Lasallian spirit come alive in the academic life of the members of the DLSU-D community. Therefore, this project is an attempt to show how DLSU-D undertakes steps in faithfully adhering to the vision of not just superior quality

education but superior Lasallian quality education. It embraces the Lasallian fact that the ultimate barometer for a school's success is not just numerous national and international recognitions, but its fidelity and ability to live by the Lasallian mission the school is built on.

The research is also in response to the 50 year Cavite Research Development Project, which seeks to outline priority areas for research that will ultimately redound to the improvement of Cavite³ as a hub for development, not only in the Philippines but also across Asia.

This development project identifies language as a pivotal instrument in, not only orienting the citizens of pressing issues in the province, but also mobilizing attention and support that will bring about significant positive change to the community at large (Cavite Research Development Program: The Next 50 years).

The subject that is under study is Technical Writing – a subject offered as a language subject in the Languages and Literature Department. Aside from Technical Writing, the other important variable in the project is service-learning.

One of the ways in which the university tries to live by the Lasallian mission of service is through its service-learning program. Service -earning has become part of the curriculum of DLSU-D college students. Students take a service-learning class during the first year in college. Known as NSTP-CWTS or National Service Training Program – Civic Welfare Training Service, it is a subject that is mandated by law to be taken by all college students (together with the Reserve Officer Training Course, which students can choose as an alternative). DLSU-D begins with lectures during the first term and ends with practical activities during the second term composed of programs meant to help the community.

The spirit of service is also very alive in one of the centers of DLSU-D called the Lasallian Community Development Center. Its main thrust is to become the center of excellence in extending relevant service, research, and training to the community.

Despite the strong existence of the Lasallian value of service through these service-oriented agencies inside the university, the cry to find service-learning not just as an individual isolated subject or a part of an extra-curricular activity but instead integrated in various subjects offered in DLSU-D, still remains loud and clear. Advocacies are still ongoing in various areas of academic planning to make the presence of service-learning prominent and pervasive.

There have been attempts to integrate service-learning opportunities in the past, but these would always fall short given how subjects put a premium on the technical knowledge that would make the school's campaign for quality education stronger. Therefore, the question that remains unanswered: Will service-learning not only make our students' good citizens, but also technically proficient as required by their programs of study?

Progress of the Research

The progress report is drawn from the different phases of investigation mapped out by this project, which is to be completed in February of 2017. They involve student self-assessment, identification of non-profit organizations, lessons and discussions, groupings and orientation, feedback, presentation of the final output, and reflections and assessment of the whole situation.⁴

Updates

Students and Self-Assessment

The experimental and controlled groups for the project were chosen at random among sections of third year students from the Architecture program. This suggests they fall under the same competency level as indicated by the common program and year level they attend. Both groups have successfully completed previous English subjects like grammar, reading, and writing. It is worth noting at this point that the participants shall be notified of the nature of the research and the purpose of their participation only after outputs have been collected to prevent the students' performance from being influenced by such knowledge. These outputs include a simple instructional manual, letters, memos, project proposals, and minutes of the meeting.

Both groups of students follow a blended arrangement in class. This means that 50 percent of the lessons are done online through reading tasks and assessments, while the other 50 percent of the lessons are held onsite. The only difference is the service-learning component that the experimental group will experience.

Self-assessment was conducted through a simple narrative exercise, which has as its prompt, questions that target the areas of improvement that the paper will look into: purpose, content, and format. It asked:

1. *What is the purpose of each output?*
2. *What does each output look like?*
3. *What are the key parts of each output?*

Initial examination of these outputs showed students consider the written outputs for Technical Writing as tools for information dissemination. No purposes other than this were mentioned. Another observation reveals that *public* was the recurring recipient that appears in the answers. The answers were not clear about who *public* is or what kinds of people belong to this category. Also, specific contexts were rarely mentioned. *Workplace* and *company* appear in some of the narratives but were not seen as a consistent element of their answers and there was neither an elaboration of any specific workplace nor workplace situations.

Looking at the outputs from the point of view of the LGP, written outputs are not yet seen as a tool in which values can be exhibited or demonstrated. The written outputs also were not seen as a tool for greater service to God and country. No indication of social responsibility can be observed. There was also no mention connecting the written outputs as a way to address the

plight of the marginalized or vulnerable. The outputs were seen as information dissemination tools and nothing was articulated about which information and for whom.

At this point, these areas of concern are not at the forefront of the consciousness of the students whenever technical writing is the subject of discussion. There were no indications that students would like to extend these tools of technical writing for causes, social or otherwise, other than those found in the workplace. When students see technical writing as defined by the outputs, they do not see it along the lines of family, community, and the wider society.

Participating Agencies

Out of the fifteen agencies invited to participate, two responded. They are Bahay Pagasa-Dasmariñas (BPD) and Livelihood Enterprise Development Center (LEDC). Translated as House of Hope “Bahay Pag-asa” in Dasmariñas is a transformation center for children-in-conflict with the law. Instead of detaining them in jails, these children are cared for in a monastery-type center inside the 27-hectare campus of De La Salle University-Dasmariñas. On the other hand, LEDC is initially a product of a Lasallian initiative to promote inclusive growth toward providing sustainable urban framework in a microfinance setting.

Initial talks with the managers of the organization clearly expressed apprehension about the language that will be used in the written outputs of the students. They were concerned about the usefulness of the outputs. Such reaction suggests that their communication activities focus on the native language, engaging with people who are more comfortable with the native language.

During the orientation, students from the experimental group were given the chance to see the location of BPD, feel its atmosphere, and even get a tour. They were also allowed to closely observe the residents of the BPD. On the other hand, the students’ connected with LEDC focused on the Facebook page the center maintains and the presentation that the manager showed during the orientation. Due to their small office, the center held its orientation at a vacant classroom nearest the office.

Reflections, So Far

The last part shares some reflections made in the course of undertaking the project. Their position or appearance in the final version of the paper is still undecided but has definitely opened doors for future research investigations. The journey itself has brought about significant observations that the paper did not even originally plan to examine.

For one, the failure of the teacher to connect with the agencies should be a good way of examining whether the competencies shared in teaching technical writing are limiting the students to communicate in a particular environment only. The partners that share the mission of the school may be requiring a different set of competencies for engagement. Very much related to this is the preferred mode of communication. It is imperative to know the role of language in pushing forward with the advocacies of the universities. It is important to reflect on the fact that given how the school pushes for the use of English as the primary medium for communication, it must be clearly resolved whether it is unknowingly limiting the chances of students to actually

touch base and help people in the community. Given this situation, it is a cause of concern to foresee failure of students to respond to the needs of the marginalized because the subjects they learn in class prevent them from exhibiting competency in communication.

Although, the experiment so far has shown English as a deterrent rather than as a tool in directly engaging with the poor who prefer to communicate in their native language, it is worth noting how the experiment has tapped into the ability of the students to think out-of-the-box and work their way around such a challenge. They thereby demonstrate a skill that is both important in technical writing and service learning, which is empathy.

Instead of communicating with the organization as earlier planned, the situation, and the medium of communication have repositioned the students to the role of communicating on behalf of these organizations and made them assume the role of voice or advocate of the organizations, including the competency in language they exhibit.

In terms of Lasallian causes, the experiment reveals that collaborating with the marginalized might be more effective if done via collaboration with organizations that will help the marginalized. Evidently, the language has repositioned the Lasallian role from reaching out to the marginalized to mobilizing sectors to help the marginalized.

The inclusion of service-learning has, so far, moved the students to further look into the context, which opened doors of opportunity to profile the receiver of the message and assume their role as sender. This is already a sophisticated level of competence as far as assessing the situation is concerned. So far, this is where the project is. Given the discoveries made along the way, it remains to be seen if ultimately the inclusion of service-learning will bring about significant improvements. So far, it has awakened competencies that we did not expect to be demonstrated. Whether these will be carried over to better writing outputs remains to be seen.

Endnotes

1. Responding to the call from Brother William Mann, FSC, president of St. Mary's University of Minnesota (SMUMN), for a research endeavor that has "the human person at its core, and society's poor as its focus" this paper was presented during the 5th International Lasallian Research Symposium held at SMUMN on September 25-27, 2016.
2. Marco Suavillo Saez, PhD is a professor at De La Salle University in Dasmariñas, Philippines.
3. Cavite is the province in which DLSU-D is located.
4. Cox, M., Ortmeier-Hooper, C., & Tirabassi, K. E. (2009). Teaching Writing for the "Real World": Community and Workplace writing. *English Journal*, 72-80.

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