

Connecting at the grassroots: the field instruction program of the UP-CSWCD Department of Community Development

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Learning takes place in an environment where teachers and learners interact and experience growth. Through an understanding and use of scientific techniques, a teacher can introduce human cognitive processes to produce desired learning outcomes. Teachers provide useful and meaningful experiences to students, which the latter can assimilate and apply to future situations.

In the undergraduate program on Community Development of the University of the Philippines, a substantial amount of time is spent on the Field Instruction program where students live in grassroots communities to learn from real life situations and practice what they have learned from their classroom based courses. They get to experience the daily lives of the peasants, fisherfolks, indigenous peoples and urban poor communities. Here, they apply the skills and methods they have learned about community organizing, education, planning, advocacy, communications and research. They likewise learn how to work with a group, plan their work schedules, and coordinate with government and non-government organizations.

This study will identify the theories that are appropriate for the Field Instruction Program described as a field-learning situation and provide insights into ways of improving the program. Means of data-gathering are the following: review of documents available on the program; interviews with faculty field instruction supervisors; interviews with alumni and current students.

Specifically, the study aims to do the following: 1. To present the case analysis of a field-based learning program for undergraduate and graduate students of Community Development;

To validate learning theories and identify emerging learning constructs based on the case analysis; and

To assess prospects and challenges of praxis-oriented learning in higher education.

Keywords: field instruction; service learning; constructivism

Introduction

Learning takes place in an environment where teachers and learners interact together and experience growth. Teachers provide useful and meaningful experiences to students, which the latter can assimilate and apply to future situations.

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Learning theories, which have evolved over time, can help teachers develop a system of improvement in their teaching styles to achieve the needed learning outcomes from their students. Educators have benefited much from these theories. Application of these theories has brought about changes in curriculum and classroom management. Since there is nothing constant but change, change prompts the learning theorists, in particular, and the educators in general, to search for better ways to improve learning.

The Field Instruction Program of the Department of Community Development, College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines in like manner is always in pursuit of appropriate learning theories and methods to improve its instruction and learning outcomes. This becomes imperative since students on field work are faced with community situations where social change is happening and where their learnings from previous classroom courses can be applied.

This is the rationale for this case study. An analysis of the case might provide insights into ways of improving a curriculum or applying theories that might contribute to knowledge. After all, the purpose of research is not only to find solution to an identified problem, but ideally, to produce knowledge that will help the stakeholders.

Statement of the Problem

It is difficult to teach “social change” without engaging the learner to be part of actual development practice (Zinberg, 1976). This is especially true for community development. As an academic discipline, it consists of a dynamic set of concepts and practices.

This paper is a product of reflexive research practice that builds on teaching fieldwork in community development and actual engagement in community work. It involves theorizing from practice. It presents how community development field-based approaches have evolved, and identifies emerging discourses that have implications to improving teaching methods in higher education.

The central theme of the paper is how knowledge is constructed in field-based learning. Specifically, the study focuses on the following:

1. To present the case analysis of a field-based learning program for undergraduate and graduate students of Community Development;
2. To validate learning theories and identify emerging learning constructs based on the case analysis; and
3. To assess prospects and challenges of praxis-oriented learning in higher education.

Context and framework of the study

The Field Instruction Program of the Department of Community Development takes on the constructivist theory of learning which states that learning is an active process and that individuals create knowledge rather than simply acquiring it (Vygotsky, 1978). The new knowledge is inextricably linked with prior knowledge, learned from their personal experiences, social situation, and the environment.

Vygotsky’s constructivism (1978) emphasizes the critical importance of culture and the importance of the social context for cognitive development. His theory has three major themes, as follows:

1. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development;
2. The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) refers to anyone who has a greater understanding than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept and can be a teacher, older adult, peers, a younger person, or even computers;
3. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) argues that students can, with help from adults or children who are more advanced, master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own.

Woolfolk's (1998) dialectical constructivism cites that knowledge is constructed based on social interactions and experience. Knowledge reflects the outside world as filtered through and influenced by culture, language, beliefs, interactions with others, direct teaching, and modeling. Guided discovery, teaching, models, and coaching as well as the individual's prior knowledge, beliefs, and thinking affect learning. This is what is called situated learning and affirms that of Vygotsky's (1978) notion that learning is inherently social and embedded in a particular cultural setting. Jonassen (1994) says that learning is an active process of constructing knowledge by integrating new experiences into the learners' existing knowledge. Hence, learning environments should provide various experience – based activities and views of reality.

The implication of this theory in education lies in the fact that learners develop in social or group settings. A constructivist teacher creates a context for learning in which students can become engaged in interesting activities that encourage and facilitate learning. Teachers facilitate cognitive growth and learning, as do peers and other members of the learner's community.

Corollary to constructivism, several learning concepts have emerged in recent years: learner-centered learning (Cuseo, n.d.; Marzano, 1992; Savoi & Hughes, 1994), field-based learning (Hobbs & Wright, 2006) and cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1983; Kagan, 1994). The students are regarded as active learners, and not as mere repositories of knowledge. Learner-centered learning recognizes the students' needs, abilities and interests as bases for knowledge construction. The teacher acts as facilitator. Learning, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The learning environment extends beyond the classroom and student-teacher relationship. Field-based learning emphasizes the need to apply concepts in real-life situations. Cooperative learning, on the other hand, posits that interaction within small groups enhances critical thinking and shared learning.

Methodology: grounded theory, reflexive methods, interactive learning-research methods

Analysis and synthesis of field experiences are intertwined processes; analysis involves breaking down information while synthesis means putting them together into a coherent whole. Three interrelated research approaches guided this paper: grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), and interactive learning (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Tungpalan, 1997).

Grounded theory means deriving concepts and principles through analysis of patterns and themes from field data sets. Its inductive character aims to contribute and enrich current theories, or even lead to redefining and discovering specific phenomena.

Reflexive research is influenced by grounded theory and feminist research. It legitimizes practice as a source of knowledge. From one's own lived experiences, the "conscientious"

researcher reflects, interprets, critiques and synthesizes the lessons derived from practice. It begins with some theoretical grounding as basis for interpretation and reflection. Then it moves forward to a deeper understanding of field experiences.

Interactive learning as a research methodology is derived from feminist research practice, particularly from feminist oral history and group methods. Knowledge generation is pursued alongside group interaction. There is sharing of experiences thru dialogue. This process results to group reflection, deeper analysis, and unified perspective.

The Case: Connecting at the Grassroots

The College of Social Work and Community Development has two undergraduate courses, BS Social Work and BS Community Development and four graduate courses, Masters in Social Work, Master in Community Development, Master in Women and Development Studies, and Doctorate in Social Development. Except for the latter, all other courses integrate field instruction in their curricula. The academic programs of the college, as well as its research and extension activities are guided by the following vision and mission (CSWCD, 2007):

Vision: Justice, peace and sustainable well-being shared by the Filipino people and the global community;

Mission: Academic excellence in the service of the nation and the global community through participatory, gender responsive, empowering and transformational development praxis.

The BSCD course is a four-year program. In the first three years, the students learn theories and basic skills on community organizing, community training, community research, community planning and community development programs. They learn through week-end exposures the situation and struggles of marginalized sectors. On the last two semesters, the students are placed on the Field Instruction Program, whether these are in urban poor or rural poor communities. Students get to practice what they learned in school to actual community situations. The program aims to make the community the bigger classroom for translating theory into practice and practice into theory. The whole program consists of thirty-six units of fieldwork, in a maximum of two field assignments in one school year. The requirement is for at least 750 hours on field, making the students practically on field 6 days a week.

At the start of the semester, the students attend a general orientation in the College to be more aware of the overall background, objectives, policies, and schedules of the program. At the same time, the students' expectations, fears, and doubts are processed. This takes place during the first two weeks of the semester. During this period, they also attend field-based classes which meet only three times in a semester, with all of the requirements coming from their field experience. Usually, there are three to six students per team, with one faculty supervisor per team.

After the first phase of the fieldwork program (6 weeks), a mid-semester sharing is held where each team shares their experiences, lessons, and insights and plans for the second phase. Thereafter, the remaining weeks in the field is fulfilled. Experiences are then summed-up, lessons are culled and recommendations put forward during the end-semester sharing. The field-based classes meet again after the mid-semester and end-semester sharing.

Taking Roles. The FI Program focuses on grassroots sectors and their struggles, such as peasants, fisher folks, workers, urban poor, women, youth, and children. The students learn about the peoples' situation and from thereon, facilitate community processes to tap the peoples' and the communities' potentials for their development. For the people to have the capacity to analyze their situation, cultivate their inner strengths and capabilities and as a group develop strategies to respond to their situation — these encapsulate the processes that the people undergo.

And for the program to take place, there are various individuals/groups who take specific roles in the whole implementation. The fieldwork program coordinator/ committee facilitate, identify, screen, and evaluate various agencies and community setting for student placement—or the place of fieldwork.

The faculty supervisors provide the link between the programs of the partner agencies/organizations and the academic requirements of the students. They help in planning and assessment and initiate and facilitate processes for students to relate the development theories learned in the classroom to actual community realities. The supervisors visit the students at least once in two or three weeks, to review accomplishments and trouble shoot problem areas.

Lastly, partner agencies and/or organizations offer sundry of opportunities for the students and the field supervisors to work into. All together - the students, program coordinator, faculty supervisor, partner organizations and communities - provide the dynamism in a vast arena for learning and service.

While on Field. And what really are the people's struggles where the students provide all the kinds of support they can muster?

The struggle for land remains central to the peasant movement. The urban poor communities cry out to stop demolitions and be provided with permanent decent housing. The fisherfolks, too, call for the stop to illegal fishing and the privatization of the fishery resources and are working towards the judicious management of their resource base. Women suffer from gender-based marginalization and violence. Young people also suffer from poverty and marginalization. Children and youth are being forced to take on responsibilities and work in hazardous conditions, in some cases abused, abandoned or jailed. But they, too, have the potentials to become active participants in development efforts.

These are just some of the scenario that the students face when they get on their fieldwork. The following are examples of how the field instruction program has been implemented for over 30 years (Tanchuling, 2008).

A. Linking Communities for Development (LINK-COD): Establishment of Teaching-Research-Extension Communities (TREC)

The LINK-COD Program, implemented from 1977 to 1984, introduced a radical approach to learning where CD faculty and students lived in pre-selected communities holding classes as well as conducting training, research and extension. Three *barangays* in Sariaya, Quezon (Pantoc, Limbon and Bucal) and one in Calumpit, Bulacan (Meysulao) became the focal points for integrated community development approaches. Students were able to promote participatory approaches in the formation of the Barangay Development Councils (BDCs), organized sectoral groups and conducted various training on awareness building, leadership, livelihood activities and cooperative formation. From the LINK-COD experience, faculty members were able to write monographs and discussion papers which enriched literature on community development practice in the Philippines, which at that time, were very limited.

B. Service-Learning: Innovations in Community Development Practice

The socio-political changes that swiftly followed the February 1986 People Power Revolution and the resurgent vitality of people's mass action and participation have brought about innovations in the design and implementation of the Fieldwork Program. Since 1986 up to the present, various people's organizations, NGOs and agencies became the partners of Fieldwork Program in testing innovative and programmatic approaches in CD Practice, such as: integrated area development; community-based coastal resource management; organizing and —re-building || communities affected by natural and human-made disasters; early childhood care and development; community-based advocacy for women and children victims of domestic abuse; children and youth organizing; sustainable livelihoods and micro-enterprise development, multi-stakeholder participation and community governance.

The notable achievements and innovations in the service-learning thrust of the DCD's Field Instruction Program, among others, are:

- Participatory evacuation/resettlement management for survivors of disasters. From 1992 to 1996, the Fieldwork Program partnered with Social Action Center of Pampanga (SACOP) and Pampanga Disaster and Relief Center (PDRC) to organize survivors of the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo Eruption from the barangays devastated by lahar.
- Institutionalization of stakeholders' participation for legislative advocacy in the early childhood care and development (ECCD) program in the 18 municipalities of the province of Bulacan. From 1998 to 2000, students were assigned to different municipalities to ensure the formation and sustainability of barangay and municipal level core group and committees on ECCD and to integrate these committees along with their programs of action to municipal and barangay councils through legislation.
- Community-based resource management and promoting sustainable livelihoods. From 1998 up to mid-2007, students conducted fieldwork activities in coastal barangays of Narra in Palawan, Barili and Badian in Cebu, and Anda in Pangasinan. The students were instrumental in facilitating the conduct of participatory coastal resource assessments with local leaders, formulation of resource management plans, establishment of fisherfolk resource management organizations and women's groups, policy advocacy to Local Government Units and implementation of sustainable livelihoods.
- Restoring livelihoods for the disaster survivors from Brgy. Catablingan, General Nakar,

Quezon. The Fieldwork Program forged a long-term partnership with the Barangay Catablingan council in General Nakar to assist in its rehabilitation efforts after it had been devastated by landslides and flashfloods in November 2004. As part of the field work outputs, a project proposal developed by a team composed of the graduate and undergraduate students was granted PhP1 million in the *Panibagong Paraan 2006* Project Grant Competition initiated by World Bank. The project was a component of the Barangay Rehabilitation and Development Plan and provided alternative livelihood such as smokeless charcoal briquettes.

Application of learning theories

The field area provides a microcosm of Philippine society where the various grassroots sectors are represented and where their poverty and struggles are vivid and apparent. The tasks given the student are very real, thereby demanding from them deep critical analysis and social action. The faculty supervisor and the agency supervisors need to provide sufficient scaffolding to the students such that their ZPD in community development is further explored and improved.

Knowing the situation of the community comes first. And based on the analysis of this situation, the students are able to apply the various theories, processes and approaches they learned in their classes in community organizing, education, planning, research, campaign and advocacy, organizational development, and relating with various government and non-government development agencies (de la Cruz, 2004). Application of these processes depend on the actual field situation and are undertaken through various community-based programs with the partner agencies. The students have to be well aware of the process that the community is undergoing - they learn that they are not the leaders in the community, nor should they be lagging behind the people, but instead be truly partners in the struggle for change.

For some students, the adjustment process is difficult but this gets to be obscured by the whole positive experience on field - where they get to know themselves a little more, where they are able to see the real situation of poverty, where they are able to share their time and talent to the people and where they for a brief moment walked hand-in-hand with them. The students learn that for real development to take place, the real actors should be the people themselves, with the students taking on the support roles.

Knowledge is constructed by all actors in the process of field work, and reflection on the experiences is always encouraged, not only among the students but also the people in the community, faculty supervisor, agency supervisor, and their peers.

Learning constructs from contemporary development practice

The FI Program is not merely an academic program. It can be considered as simulated development practice, yet with real actors and situations, including real threats and outcomes. Students do not go on field just to pass academic requirements, but become embedded in the communities' culture and struggles – to become trained and committed development professionals.

Constructivist learning is operationalized in the context of working with poor and marginalized communities and sectors. Beyond being learner-centered, field-based and promoting cooperative learning, the FI Program also incorporated contemporary and

progressive learning approaches. These approaches espouse pro-poor political standpoint and pursue collective analysis and action as the foundation of social transformation. It draws heavily on the learning constructs that evolved from development practice in poor countries.

Learning processes within the FI Program integrate the principles of popular education (Garcia, 1999; Tungpalan, 1991), development education (Doronila, 1995), participatory learning (Chambers, 2002; IIRR-Angoc-IFAD, 2001), political education (Freire, 1972; Hope & Timmel, 1995), and feminist pedagogy (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Tungpalan, 1995).

Popular education is rooted to Freire's concepts of conscientization and praxis. Critical awareness among the oppressed is the core element of social transformation. It emphasizes experiential learning and culture-based approaches that can lead to collective action. Development education provides the context where popular education can thrive – that involves critical analysis and effective responses to development issues confronted by marginalized social groups. Participatory learning breaks the hierarchy among those who know more and those who know less. Teachers, students, community groups, activists and development workers can be both learners and teachers. Shared learning, feedback and group methods are considered important. Political education and feminist pedagogy are learning constructs derived from activist language, rather than as part of academic jargon in traditional higher education. Political education provides the framework for training students to become good citizens who take responsibilities for nation building. Moreover, it espouses political action for transforming power relations as a key element to help change the lives of the poor. Feminist pedagogy extends political action to promoting gender equity and justice through liberating and empowering education.

These learning constructs are fused, contextualized and framed to pursue the learning goals of the FI Program. The learning environment is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic and complex set of realities. Both teachers and students, as well as the host communities and partners, continuously negotiate and adjust learning opportunities and desired outcomes. As an academic discipline, Community Development uses praxis-oriented learning. It involves the cyclical upward interaction of theory and practice that is characterized by popular, participatory, inclusive, context-based, democratic and action-oriented learning approaches.

Lessons learned

There are many lessons learned from the field-based learning environment. The FI Program of the UP-CSWCD Department of Community Development provided a venue for integrating “old” and “new” learning concepts. Amidst the challenges and opportunities offered by new developments in information technology, educating college students to become productive and committed development professionals can be effectively facilitated using non-traditional and praxis-oriented learning modes.

1. Education for critical consciousness

Community Development education is viewed as part of cultural and political action, especially in the context of pro-people development perspectives. The FI Program is regarded as a “life-changing” experience by almost all students, and even faculty supervisors. Working and learning relationships are established with community groups, as a venue for developing critical thinking using problem-posing methods. In the process, political standpoint is clarified, tested, and refined.

2. Service Learning

College education becomes more responsive to nation building through combining classroom preparation and volunteer community service to address real-life needs and situations. Life skills are learned beyond the classroom. Citizenship formation becomes integral to tertiary education. It enhances service commitment to society and work ethics in development practice.

3. Transdisciplinary approach

Community Development practice requires both theoretical and technical preparation in community organizing, research, training, mobilization, planning, management, advocacy, alliance building, gender, environment, working with marginalized groups, agriculture, micro enterprises, urban planning, housing and resettlements and policy reforms as applied in different settings and development issues. Thus, grounding on different relevant academic disciplines becomes a challenge to many development practitioners.

The work at hand often demands a “transdisciplinary” approach that cuts across disciplinary boundaries and integrates varied concepts into a coherent perspective of practice. Thus, the value of praxis-oriented learning as experienced in Community Development education can also be applied in other disciplines.

4. Reflexive learning approaches

The integration of theory and practice can be facilitated by using reflexive learning approaches. Shared learning, group methods, experiential approach, peer learning, shared reflections and feedback – provide learning opportunities to enhance the development of critical analysis and service commitment among students, teachers and other participants in the learning process.

5. Prospects and challenges of praxis-oriented learning

Service, commitment, and life-long learning are very big words. In the short span of time allotted for fieldwork, there is no assurance that these principles can be learned by the students. Yet, the program persists and hopes that in the students’ life journey, their field practice somehow would make a significant impression in their future choices. For faculty supervisors, especially those who have opted to stay on for years (or decades) in field instruction, this type of teaching experience is of great value, both for personal growth and academic training. Praxis is difficult to teach, unless one engages in it. Field supervision is not just teaching or mentoring (Tungpalan, 2008). It also involves building relationships with students, organizations and communities. It is a continuation of one’s advocacy and commitment to development work in the larger society.

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