Exploring the identity and spirituality through service learning in a select Catholic university

Vicente, Niku ✉
De La Salle University, Philippines (niku.vicente@dlsu.edu.ph)

Del Castillo, Fides
De La Salle University, Philippines (fides.delcastillo@dlsu.edu.ph)

Abstract

This research looked into the profound integration of Service Learning (S-L) within the identity and mission of a select Catholic university in the Philippines. Grounded in the rich tradition of Lasallian spirituality and values, Service Learning emerges as a significant pedagogical approach that fosters holistic development among students while nurturing a deep commitment to social responsibility and active citizenship. By employing thematic analysis and drawing on relevant literature, this study aims to uncover the underlying themes and patterns in students' experiences and perceptions of service learning. Through the lens of the Lasallian Reflection Framework, this research seeks to explore the impact and contributions of service learning concerning identity and spirituality development. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the transformative power of service learning in shaping the lives of students and enriching the fabric of the university community.

Keywords: service learning, youth, ministry, spirituality, school identity, Lasallian reflection framework

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1. Introduction

In the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly Catholic universities in the Philippines, the integration of academic learning with a strong commitment to community engagement has given rise to a distinctive pedagogical model known as Service Learning (S-L). It serves as a significant avenue for fostering students' holistic development, while instilling core values such as social responsibility and active citizenship since it foster a balance approach to experiential education (Furco, 1996). Some researches on service learning focuses its integration to curriculum (Baring et al, 2020). While others in teaching-learning contexts (Pinto & Ramalho, 2023). However, for a select Catholic University, it is central to have deep exploration of Lasallian identity and mission. Guided by the profound spirituality and commitment to providing quality education to marginalized communities, it is important to emphasize faith in action. The integration of Lasallian spirituality with the educational mission distinguishes the approach, emphasizing not only intellectual formation but also the cultivation of faith, a passion for learning, and a sense of community grounded in shared mission priorities. This spirituality is lived out in daily actions, reflecting a commitment to social justice and community engagement that is deeply embedded in the Lasallian tradition (Lasallian Spirituality Today, 2023).

The concrete expressions of this tradition highlight the availability of educators to students and the transformative practice of teaching grounded in Lasallian values. Lasallian institutions aim to create an academic environment where excellence is seamlessly aligned with a commitment to social justice. This holistic education is framed by core elements of Lasallian spirituality—faith, zeal, and community—which underpin the educational mission of Lasallian schools and universities, guiding both students and educators in their pursuit of knowledge and service.

Within a specific Catholic university, the embodiment of Lasallian identity and mission is further reinforced by the Lasallian Mission Office, which ensures the vitality and continuity of the Founder's mission. This office plays a pivotal role in cultivating an environment where students are encouraged to integrate academic achievement with a deep commitment to Lasallian values of faith, service, and community. A key component of this mission is the Service-Learning Program, a constructivist pedagogical approach that allows students to learn through experience and reflection. In doing so, students develop empathy for marginalized sectors of society, putting into practice Lasallian values while strengthening their sense of social responsibility and servant leadership.

At this university, Service Learning is guided by the Lasallian Reflection Framework, which encourages individuals to engage in reflective practice, critically examining their experiences through the lens of Lasallian values and principles. This framework consists of three stages: (1) See-Experience (Masid-Danas), wherein individuals immerse themselves in their service experiences; (2) Analysis-Reflection (Suri-Nilay), where they reflect on their experiences in light of Lasallian values such as faith, zeal, and service; and (3) Commitment-Action (Taya-Kilos), where reflections are translated into concrete actions that contribute to societal improvement and the fulfillment of the Lasallian mission. This reflective process allows participants to deepen their understanding of themselves, their relationships with others, and their commitment to social justice, rooted in the spiritual tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

In this study, the following questions were explored:

➤ What did you observe and feel about the organization's situation and advocacy? (See-Experience or Masid-Danas)

➢ What challenges did you encounter, and how were you able to succeed in accomplishing tasks? (Analysis-Reflection or Suri-Nilay)

➢ What did you learn about the Lasallian Core Values? (Commitment-Action or Taya-Kilos)

Aligned with the Lasallian Reflection Framework, this research seeks to investigate how service learning influences students' identity and spiritual development. Through thematic analysis and a review of relevant literature, the study aims to uncover key themes and patterns that emerge from students' experiences and perspectives on Service Learning.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, integrating thematic analysis with an empirical phenomenological approach, and incorporates the Lasallian Reflection Framework to comprehensively explore students' experiences and perceptions of Service-Learning (S-L) within a select Catholic university context. The thematic analysis enables the identification of recurrent patterns or themes within qualitative data, while the empirical phenomenological approach deepens understanding of the essence of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis - The empirical phenomenological approach, as a subset of phenomenological inquiry, is particularly significant in this research for its emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of participants. Rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, this approach seeks to uncover the essence or underlying structures of human experiences, allowing researchers to delve into the subjective meanings and perspectives of individuals (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). By employing the empirical phenomenological approach, this study aims to go beyond surface-level descriptions of students' experiences with S-L and explore the deeper meanings and nuances inherent in these experiences. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, researchers can gain insights into the subjective realities of participants, shedding light on how S-L shapes their identities, values, and perceptions of social responsibility. Thematic analysis, supplemented by the empirical phenomenological approach, will be employed to analyze interview transcripts. This combined approach provides a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Triangulation, incorporating perspectives of the university's concept of service learning, enhances validity and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Participants of the Study - Participants in this study are select undergraduate students enrolled in Service Learning courses. There are thirty-seven (37) male and twenty-four (24) female. There are a total of sixty-one (61) participant in this study. Convenience sampling ensures diverse experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Semi-structured interview papers, guided by reflection prompts based on the Lasallian Reflection Framework, are collected and analyzed to capture detailed accounts of participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on S-L. Ethical considerations are paramount, with informed consent obtained and measures ensuring confidentiality. Data saturation is monitored, and all data is securely stored. Limitations include the subjective nature of qualitative research and potential biases.

3. Results and Discussions

The Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF) provides a structured guide for reflection prompts, which are a primary data source in this study. This framework is distinctly Lasallian, rooted in the life and mission of St. John Baptist de la Salle. It mirrors the transformative journey De La Salle himself experienced: encountering poverty firsthand (see-experience), engaging in prayerful discernment that informed concrete plans to uplift the poor (analysis-reflection), and committing to establishing educational programs for the marginalized (commitment-action). This process reflects the same stages present in the Service-Learning (SL) program, where participants immerse themselves in community life (see-experience), critically reflect on their experiences in relation to core Lasallian values such as faith, zeal, and service (analysis-reflection), and eventually convert these reflections into tangible actions that advance social justice and the Lasallian mission (commitment-action)

(Caldea, n.d.).

3.1 See- Experience (Masid- Danas)

See-Experience means to "conscious experiencing." This first stage, referred to as "see-experience," goes beyond passive observation, such as reading books or watching documentaries, and calls for active participation. It encourages direct engagement with the realities of marginalized communities through exposure and immersion (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.). In their immersion, participants observed and felt the need for technological advancements and improvements in the community they visited. They identified strategic approaches as crucial for expanding the market reach of the organization they worked with. For instance, participants recognized that the organization needed to address the issue of wastage, particularly of unsold milk, to improve revenue generation and market gains. This recognition reflects their awareness of the importance of responsible consumption, emphasizing environmentally and economically conscious purchasing decisions. Table 1 provides insights into the participants' observations during this see-experience stage.

This process of firsthand experience sharpens sensory engagement—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—leading to more purposeful interactions. Through these encounters, participants not only gain a deeper understanding of the communities they engage with but also reflect on their own values and perspectives. This phase fosters a deeper recognition of shared humanity while also highlighting the unique differences that exist among people. As the first stage concludes, participants are often left with a mix of realizations, emotions, critical questions, and a desire for clarity and further understanding (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

Table 1 captures the essence of these observations, showing how participants noted the need for technological innovations and strategic market expansion to help improve the organization's visibility, efficiency, and customer reach. Additionally, they realized that responsible consumption, particularly in addressing product wastage, is key to supporting the organization's goals of increasing sales and engaging more effectively with the community. This "masid-danas" stage, therefore, represents the foundation of their learning journey, setting the stage for deeper reflection and action in the subsequent phases of the Lasallian Reflection Framework (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

Table 1
Area of Inquiry on See-Experience

Area of Inquiry	First-Order Constructs	Second-Order Constructs
What did you see and feel about the organization's situation and advocacy?	Need for technological innovations, improvement in marketing to increase brand visibility and customer reach, and improvement in layout/capacity planning. Optimizing space and layout design for efficient work and processing, including possible hazard assessment around machines.	Strategic approaches are essential for successful market expansion
	The company needs a solution for minimizing the wastage of unsold milk as well as increasing market gains and revenue generation. To improve upon factors such as sales volume, social media engagement, market reach, and youth involvement.	Responsible consumption emphasizes making environmentally and economically conscious purchasing decisions.

3.2 Analysis-Reflection (Suri-Nilay)

Analysis-Reflection emphasizes critical reflection. This stage, a key component of the Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF), encourages participants to move beyond superficial sensory experiences and delve into the deeper, underlying causes of the situations they encounter. It involves examining the interconnectedness of personal and societal structures—whether economic, political, or socio-cultural—and challenging one's perspectives, biases, and assumptions (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

In this process of critical reflection, participants are called to analyze their experiences, considering both the

difficulties they encountered and the successes they achieved in their tasks. As they engage with the organization's challenges, participants in this phase of reflection often realize that pooling resources and collaborating with others is key to overcoming obstacles. For instance, they find that working together with other members or groups enhances the collection of necessary information, which helps them address the organization's needs more effectively. This realization highlights the importance of communication and teamwork in achieving common goals.

Table 2 emphasizes the value of collaboration and communication in the analysis-reflection stage. Participants acknowledged that to overcome challenges, such as gathering data or handling tasks, they needed to collaborate and share resources. Through clear communication and teamwork, they were able to better organize and complete their tasks, strengthening their understanding of the organization's needs and their ability to contribute meaningfully. The act of collaborating not only improved information gathering but also fostered a deeper connection to the organization's mission.

In this stage, participants are also invited to reflect on how their experiences connect to Christian faith and Lasallian values. The process of analyzing challenges and successes in collaboration with others mirrors the Lasallian emphasis on community, service, and social justice. This critical reflection pushes participants to engage with what it truly means to live out their faith in action, as Christians and as Lasallians, aligning their work with the broader mission of the institution (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

Table 2
Area of Inquiry on Analysis-Reflection

Area of Inquiry	First-Order Constructs	Second-Order Constructs
In what ways did you experience difficulties and in what ways did you succeed in accomplishing tasks?	To overcome these difficulties, my group chose to pool resources and collaborate with other groups in terms of data acquired. I did my best to accomplish tasks and communicate with the group on how this would be handled in such a way that we still could explain the project very well.	Collaboration enhances information gathering about partner organizations.

3.3 Commitment-Action (Taya-Kilos)

The Tagalog term "taya" generally means "to bet" but in a deeper sense it signifies "to offer." When associated with a deeper value, "taya" can suggest commitment, often involving personal sacrifice. Meanwhile, "kilos" translates to "action." When combined, "taya-kilos" means "committed action." This phase of the Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF) stems from the previous "suri-nilay" or critical reflection stage and is grounded in clear values, principles, and standards. It is where concrete, context-sensitive, and life-affirming plans of action emerge, driven by a commitment to positively impact others (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

"Taya-kilos" is not simply about individual responsibility but is often carried out in collaboration with others, either within a local context or on a broader, global scale. The implementation of these actions is regularly evaluated based on both the outcomes and the integrity of the process, which ultimately leads to a renewed cycle of reflection and action (Lasallian Mission DLSU, n.d.).

Table 3 highlights the areas of inquiry related to this stage. One of the key insights is the application of the Lasallian core values, such as the "zeal for service," which manifests in a willingness to assist the organization. For instance, within a Service-Learning Program (SLP), participants realize the importance of working with others for a shared purpose—improving the company while connecting with the broader community. This connection between the zeal for service and the organization's needs reflects the essence of Lasallian commitment-action: a tangible commitment to foster positive, meaningful change in partnership with others.

In practice, participants who engage in this "commitment-action" stage are often motivated by a deeper understanding of the organization's challenges and aspirations. From the reflection in Table 3, participants noted

needs for technological innovation and optimized marketing to enhance brand visibility. This recognition of the company's needs is integrated into action plans, such as improving layout design for efficiency and addressing issues like product wastage. These actions align with the overarching Lasallian values of community involvement and responsible consumption. Through this process, participants not only commit to helping the company but also engage in sustainable practices that benefit both the organization and the community at large (See Table 3). Thus, "taya-kilos" reinforces the idea that committed action is more than just addressing immediate needs—it is about long-term, value-driven engagement that creates lasting positive impact.

Table 3
Area of Inquiry on Commitment-Action

Area of Inquiry	First-Order Constructs	Second-Order Constructs
What did I learn about the Lasallian Core Values?	Zeal for service because I felt the willingness to help the company and communion in mission as I worked with my members and the company for the common goal of improving. This SLP allows us to connect with other brothers and sisters and help them with their needs.	Connecting service zeal to community needs for positive change.

3.4 Limitation and Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into the impact of Service Learning (S-L) on identity and spirituality development within the framework of a Catholic university, however study is limited in scope. It was conducted within a single institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other universities, even those that share similar Catholic and Lasallian values. Different institutional contexts, cultural settings, and student demographics could lead to varied experiences of Service Learning, potentially yielding different insights into the development of identity and spirituality.

Second, the research primarily relied on thematic analysis derived from students' reflections and self-reported experiences, which may be subject to personal bias and social desirability. The absence of long-term follow-up data also limits our understanding of the sustained effects of Service Learning on students' identity and spiritual growth beyond the immediate experience. A more comprehensive analysis of the difficulties encountered during Service Learning could contribute to refining the pedagogical approach and enhancing its effectiveness.

For future research, expanding the study across multiple Catholic or faith-based institutions would offer a more comparative understanding of how different spiritual traditions and institutional missions shape Service Learning experiences. Future studies could also incorporate quantitative measures alongside qualitative reflections to offer a more robust evaluation of students' identity and spiritual development.

Finally, future research could explore the specific impacts of Service Learning on marginalized communities and the reciprocal benefits they receive from student involvement. Understanding the dynamics of these community partnerships and how they align with the values of faith, service, and social justice would further enhance the theoretical and practical foundations of Service Learning within the Catholic educational tradition.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research underscores the transformative impact of Service Learning (S-L) on identity and spirituality development within the context of a Catholic university. The study reveals how S-L, grounded in Lasallian spirituality and values, goes beyond academic learning to foster a profound sense of social responsibility, active citizenship, and spiritual growth among students. Through the application of the Lasallian Reflection Framework, students' experiences—ranging from direct engagement with marginalized communities to critical reflection and committed action—serve as a catalyst for deep personal transformation. This pedagogical approach not only enhances academic learning but also fosters social responsibility, servant leadership, and a deep commitment to faith, community, and service.

The study highlighted in this article reveals that through Service Learning, students become more attuned to the complexities of societal issues and empowered to contribute meaningful solutions. By recognizing the interconnectedness of their actions with broader economic, political, and social structures, they are better equipped to address challenges like resource wastage, technological innovation, and market expansion with a sense of responsibility and purpose. Ultimately, the Service Learning model, when guided by the Lasallian mission and values, cultivates a holistic development in students, ensuring that they leave the academic setting not only as professionals but as active, compassionate citizens committed to social justice and the common good. This exploration affirms the role of Service Learning in shaping both the spiritual and civic dimensions of students' lives, ultimately enriching the university community and advancing its mission of service, faith, and social justice.

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