

# Contributing to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals as a Service-Learning Instructor: Understanding the lived experience through transcendental phenomenology

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we seek to understand how being a Service-Learning instructor contributes to the attainment of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). We intently looked at the textures and structures that made up the lived experience of a Service-Learning instructor. In order to properly understand, articulate, and arrive at the essence of what it means to be a Service-Learning instructor, an investigation with proper transcendental phenomenological design was carried out using transcendental phenomenological methodology of Clark Moustakas (1994). Through phenomenological reduction and thematic analysis, the following themes have emerged: (1) One's relationship with and faith in God is the cornerstone of the experience; (2) Being committed to nobler standards of the academe and for service; (3) Attaining holistic development of learners through formation and dynamic learning experiences; (4) Being a messenger and a message of transformation; and (5) Fullness of the experience through inner-directedness and social affirmation; and (6) Wholeness of being through complete understanding of oneself. Through imaginative variation, the following structures have been identified: in terms of causality, Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor is founded upon honoring God as she teaches and serves; in terms of relating to others is having a strong desire that the real needs of people are met; in terms of materiality, several instances point out the physical materiality that underlie the textural experience; in relation to time and space is finding fulfillment in a God-given ministry. Taken together, these textures and structures of the experience all point to the essence that being a Service-Learning instructor, Anna has found herself. She has found her purpose, her meaning, and her being as a Service-Learning instructor.

**Key Words:** transcendental phenomenology; service-learning; Catholic higher education institution; lived experience; Philippines/Filipinos

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Borrowing the question that the persistent donkey from the adorable movie about an ogre turned hero repetitively asked, "Are we there yet?". We too,

perhaps ask the question in terms of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals all too much and find ourselves lacking in certain areas. As universities worldwide push for greater recognition in

terms of rankings, and as we try to scramble for answers that might be out there in the world, the truth and the answer lies closer to us than we might think. The answer to knowing how much we have achieved lies in understanding our own lived experiences. In this paper, we seek to understand how being a Service-Learning instructor contributes to the attainment of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). We looked intently at the textures and structures that make up the lived experience of being a Service-Learning instructor through a transcendental phenomenological lens. One of the pressing reasons why understanding the essence of being a Service-Learning instructor is important is because knowing the lived experience of teachers can be a great anchor on how to support them effectively (Tipon et al., 2022). Moreover, Sartor-Harada (2022) shared that Service-Learning instructors experienced a lack of training in Service-Learning as a teaching methodology and that there was an increasing pressure on faculty to design, implement, and evaluate Service-Learning courses stemming out of a greater interest from students, universities, and communities. Corollary to these is the UN SDG 4 on Quality Education which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN SDG 2030 Goals). Taking all of these into consideration, understanding the lived experience of Service-Learning instructors and how it contributes to the attainment of UN SDGs provides us a semblance of an answer to the question, “Are we there yet?”

According to Donaghy & Saxton (2012), Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning. Experiential learning as defined by Kolb & Kolb (2005) is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience; knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p.194). Another theory to form the basis for the theoretical underpinnings that this current study is anchored on is critical social theory. The goal of critical social theory is to critique and change society, it attempts to search for societal assumptions that hinder people from truly and fully understanding how society works (Nickerson, 2023).

In reviewing related literature on Service-Learning and Phenomenology using Scopus and EBSCO, there were four studies that studied Service-Learning using Phenomenology: Johnson & Howell (2017), Pratt & Danyluk (2017), Lau (2016), and Frank et al. (2012), and although these these studies do provide the essence and meaning of a Service-Learning experience, all four look at the lifeworld of the students, and not that of the Service-Learning instructor’s. Moreover, a deeper look into Phenomenology in the context of teachers in the Philippines or Filipino teachers using the resultant research literature in this study allowed us to see that as of the present, there were some phenomenological studies done on the lived experience of Filipino teachers, but there was no phenomenological study carried out on the lived experience of Filipino Service-Learning instructors that would allow us to take a look at their life experience and gain a better understanding of the meaning and essence of being a Service-Learning instructor.

Due to the lack of existing literature on the lived experience of Service-Learning instructors in higher education using phenomenological methods to arrive at the essence and meaning of what it means to be a Service-Learning instructor, the need to come to a better understanding of the of the same is warranted and justified. To clearly stipulate the problem that this current research sought to answer, this problem statement was identified: ‘What meaning is there in being a Service-Learning instructor?’ In order for the meaning and essence of what it means to be a Service-Learning instructor to be uncovered, the following general research question was asked of the research participant: ‘What is it like being a Service-Learning instructor?’

This paper brings us into the lifeworld of Anna, a seasoned Service-Learning instructor from a Catholic higher education institution in Manila, Philippines. In this paper, we will take a definitive look at the various textures and underlying structures that make up Anna’s lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor at a Catholic higher education institution in Manila, Philippines.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to properly understand, articulate, and arrive at the essence of what it means to be a Service-Learning instructor, an investigation with proper transcendental phenomenological design was carried

out. Transcendental phenomenology is the appropriate research methodology as it allows entry into the lifeworld of a Service-Learning instructor through the following: having experience as the foundation of reality, the attitude of bracketing or *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. This particular research design is securely founded on post-positivist philosophy.

For the present study, transcendental phenomenological methodology of Clark Moustakas (1994) was used. Throughout the study, even before the review of related literature was done, the attitude of bracketing was kept. Being a Service-Learning instructor myself, I had to write down my own experience in order to have a conscious understanding of my own experience which served as a reminder to look at the lifeworld of Anna distinctly and not to have my own experience mingle with hers. I interviewed Anna on two occasions, which resulted in a total of 126 minutes of a recorded interview via Zoom with 15 pages of transcription based on the interview. There were a total of 14,238 words in the transcribed interview. I was able to identify 52 significant statements which were statements that point to the qualities of the experience: “rough and smooth, small and large, quiet and noisy, colorful and bland, hot and cold, stationary and moving, high and low, squeezed in and expansive; fearful and courageous, angry and calm - descriptions that present varying intensities, ranges of shapes, sizes, spatial qualities, time references, and all colors within the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.90). After these significant statements were identified, horizontalization was done. Horizontalization allows us to identify each statement as unique. It is the “grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character.” (Moustakas, 1994, p.95). Since the interview was conducted in both English and Filipino, I had to translate some of Anna’s words and phrases from Filipino to English. The transcribed interview as well as the translated statements were given back to Anna to check and she also gave her approval. Once the horizontalized significant statements were identified, meaning units were abstracted from them. These meaning units are at the heart of the transcendental phenomenological process since it is at this point that the specific textures of her lived experience were severed from the meaning that each unique statement was coming from. This was a crucial step in the process since this was the step that brought us closer into

arriving at the essence of the lived experience. Without these meaning units that have been abstracted from the actual experience, the process would not have been truly transcendental. After this stage, emerging thematic units rose from these meaning units that allowed me to put together aspects of Anna’s lived experience that were related to each other. After emerging thematic statements, core themes were identified. This entire process which started from significant statements up to the identification of core themes is called phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

Once all of these were accomplished, the textural description of Anna’s lived experience was written. After phenomenological reduction, the next step in transcendental phenomenology is imaginative variation. The goal of imaginative variation is to “seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of references, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions. The goal is to understand meanings and depend on intuition as a way of integrating structures into essences” (Moustakas, 1989, p.97). Imaginative variation paved the way for the structural description of Anna’s lived experience to be identified. The way I was able to accomplish this task was by (1) going back to the original transcripts; (2) intently studying the process of abstraction carried out in the previous step by looking at the significant statements, meaning units, emerging thematic statements, and thematic statements; (3) analyzing the thematic statements in light of the whole transcript. These steps allowed me to have a better understanding of the plausible structures that paved the way for the textures of the lived experience. The amalgamation of the textural and structural descriptions provided for the understanding of the essence of Anna’s lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor.

### 3. TEXTURAL DESCRIPTION OF ANNA’S LIVED EXPERIENCE BEING A SERVICE-LEARNING INSTRUCTOR

Anna has been teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels of one of the departments of the College of Business. She has had extensive experience in bringing students to various Service-Learning activities and projects. Prior to being a Service-Learning

instructor, Anna was also a values education teacher and handled several positions in the university including being the director of student activities, chair, vice-chair, coordinator for graduate studies, among many other administrative functions. She was also a trainer for Service-Learning instructors, and had received awards and accolades from award-giving bodies for her work as a Service-Learning instructor. At the time the interviews with her were conducted, she had been bringing her graduate students to the national penitentiary to serve the needs of the inmates for several years already.

The textures of her experience being a Service-Learning instructor are discussed in this part of the paper wherein the following textural themes have emerged through phenomenological reduction and thematic analysis: (1) One's relationship with and faith in God is the cornerstone of the experience; (2) Being committed to nobler standards of the academe and for service; (3) Attaining holistic development of learners through formation and dynamic learning experiences; (4) Being a messenger and a message of transformation; and (5) Fullness of the experience through inner-directedness and social affirmation; and (6) Wholeness of being through complete understanding of oneself.

### *3.1 One's relationship with and faith in God is the cornerstone of being a Service-Learning instructor.*

Anna does not just consider herself to be a Service-Learning instructor, but rather, she considered herself as a Service-Learning formator. She drew her inspiration from the Gospel, from her relationship with Christ. Anna's experience being a Service-Learning instructor was nourished by her obedience to God's will for her life. Fulfilling what God asked her to accomplish brought her so much joy. Guided by self-reflection, she taught others with an attitude of non-condemnation, she listened, learned, and understood the experience of the prison inmates. It is all in alignment with her faith.

Anna drew strength from her relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in serving others. Her faith drove her to serve those who were in need. Anna believed that teachers who were founded in their own faith were able to make things happen for others. She also recognized the hand of the Lord in her work. She acknowledged that it was the Lord who brought her to certain

situations and guided her as a Service-Learning instructor. She knew that it was God who had brought her to where she was and it was Him who has been leading and guiding her path even into the future.

### *3.2 Being committed to nobler standards of the academe and for service*

Having integrity and high moral standards was a requirement for the experience. Based on Anna's experience, character was really very important being a Service-Learning instructor. With regard to her students, Anna maintained high academic standards. This was seen in the manner in which she gave feedback on requirements submitted by her students and in how she set them up for success during class. Anna provided guidance to her students using the right standards for a more meaningful learning experience. Anna was committed to holistic and responsive care for people in need. At the very core of all the interventions that they carried out was the person in need.

### *3.3 Attaining holistic development of learners through formation and dynamic learning experiences*

Being a Service-Learning instructor, Anna crafted Service-Learning experiences for experiential and contextual learning. The goal of holistic formation determined distinct, focused, and specialized approaches to learning. Anna aimed for a total formation of students in the learning experience: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. She provided meaningful learning experiences for her students that served those who were in need. Moreover, Anna was able to bridge academe and community through the Service-Learning experience. She provided guidance through a personal and intimate sharing of the experience - she experienced the same things that she made her students go through. She was able to deal with her students who initially may not have had the same perspective as she did. She dealt with them gently and kindly and made an effort to understand them as a way for them to understand where she was coming from. Anna gently responded to opposition by having knowledge about and great trust in the process of Service-Learning in the penitentiary. Anna made her

students understand by making an effort to understand where they are coming from and at the same time, she also pointed out an opportunity for them to grow.

### *3.4 Being a messenger and a message of transformation*

Through creating deeper and more meaningful learning experiences, Anna paved the way for learner transformation. As a messenger of transformation, Anna facilitated dynamic and holistic learning experiences for total learner transformation. Transformation occurred in the people that she worked with, not just her students. Anna recalled her experience with one of the Service-Learning coordinators who sat down and attended her classes. There was also transformation happening inside the prison and Anna was an instrument of this. As a messenger of transformation, Anna was an advocate for those whom she served, for those who were in prison. Anna testified to seeing the marked difference in her students given the limited time that they had. Being a Service-Learning instructor, Anna was not just a messenger and a witness to transformation in others, but she was also transformed going through the experience.

### *3.5 Fullness of the experience through inner-directedness and social affirmation*

There was fullness in Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor and it was achieved through inner-directedness and social affirmation. Fullness of the experience may be described as being completely fulfilled because of the experience, or having a feeling of utter contentment in such a way that one did not look for anything else. One of the ways of having inner-directedness was by keeping focused on and doing one's calling, and this brought complete fulfillment and utter contentment for Anna. There were several aspects of Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor that brought fulfillment and nourishment to her experience. One of which was by accomplishing her role and purpose. For Anna, contentment came from seeing her students transition into a different and better person and having put in a lot of effort, reflection and action into their Service-Learning experience. Anna shared how content she was when one of her students had a total change of

heart. Anna was able to achieve her goal and this nourished her experience. Being a Service-Learning instructor, Anna shared her life with the prison inmates, and by doing so, it helped nourish her experience even more.

Aside from having inner-directedness as a means of attaining fullness of the experience of being a Service-Learning instructor, receiving affirmation through social relationships also helped. Primarily, Anna received affirmation from the administrators at the penitentiary. Another source of nourishment for her experience was the outpouring of gratitude from her students which allowed Anna to give so much more. Being recognized and appreciated as a Service-Learning instructor was not just through informal means but also through a formal one, when Anna received an award for her work in the penitentiary. A manner in which social relationships contributed to the fullness of Anna's experience was that she was able to overcome challenges and fears with the help of the prison inmates, the very ones whom she was helping. Anna shared how she and her students initially felt fear entering the prison compound for the first time. Also, she received support from her family through financial and material means. She had a family that happily supported her intervention and ministry because they saw her dedication and the reality inside the prison. Lastly, in considering how social relationships nourished Anna's lived experience was through having enduring and meaningful social relationships. Anna saw herself as a formator, and being a formator was different from just being a teacher. These meaningful relationships were not just formed inside the classroom but also in the penitentiary.

### *3.6 Wholeness of being through complete understanding of oneself.*

The last textural theme that made up Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor was her wholeness of being that was achieved through a complete understanding of oneself. Anna took steps in order to better understand being a Service-Learning instructor and this paved the way for deeper self-realizations about the experience. There was also an integration of her background in student affairs to her lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor. There was integration and alignment of her existing roles and advocacies to being a Service-Learning instructor. Being in service to others comes from deep



within Anna and her lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor was a validation of her character. Having a deep commitment to the prison inmates brought drive, direction, and dynamism to Anna. Also, she had to defend giving service to the prison inmates to her students. Parameters to her being were not set by technical work boundaries, rather, they were defined by how much she was able to reach out to others who were in need.

#### 4. STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION OF ANNA'S LIVED EXPERIENCE BEING A SERVICE-LEARNING INSTRUCTOR

In terms of structures of causality, Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor was founded upon honoring God as she taught and served. This is what allowed Anna to share: *"What it really is for me is that I draw it from my own experience, I draw my own inspiration from the Gospel, from the life of Christ...But for me, that really made my teaching more meaningful and more substantial, substantive. And probably also, the teaching part, the educating part, is more meaningful because it is not just what I want, it is really fulfilling a mission that makes other people better, that makes other people think for themselves and prepare for themselves, and so on."* Her foundation and core as a human being was founded on her relationship with God. Anna explained in her own words what the essence of her experience being a Service-Learning instructor was all about: *"because the essence of it all is really just fulfilling the Gospel. You know, when I was in prison, you visited me. And that is really the call for me. I am just fulfilling what the Lord is asking me to do, right? It is not for anything, it is just for me as a teacher, to be able to lead my students into a deeper understanding and spirituality of how it is to be human."*

In terms of structures of relation to others, a structure that was foundational to Anna's lived experience was having a strong desire that the real needs of people be met. This was true whether it was for her students or for the prison inmates. *"So it is not just the development of skills, as I said, it is also looking at the person and their needs at the center of their intervention,"* this was what Anna said of the Service-Learning activities that they sought to carry out in the penitentiary. On the other hand, when it came to

her students, Anna's desire to see them transform into better individuals made her stop only when she had seen the transformation occur. *"So I was really very happy as I sat down and watched them implement their Service-Learning activity. I wanted to see the effect that going to the national penitentiary had on her. I stayed and watched throughout their entire implementation. When I saw what I wanted to see, I said, "This is already okay Lord, I can leave them already."*

In terms of structures of materiality, Anna's textural experiences were also made possible by having a strong desire that the real needs of people be met. Several instances pointed out as to the physical materiality that underlied the textural experience, such as buying all the pechay from the prison inmates and distributing the same to her neighbors: Another one would be the paintings and other handicrafts made by the prison inmates. These tangible objects made by the prisoners were an instrument of their story that Anna liked to share with others. These were made possible by her strong desire to have the real needs of the prisoners met.

In relation to the structure of time and space, the textures of Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor was finding fulfillment in a God-given ministry. *"But now, I focused, because I am teaching in the Master's Degree, in the MBA, when I was with my students in the Bilibid, in the national penitentiary, I told myself that I will focus, after all of the many experiences that my students had, several of my students, I decided that for the MBA, I am going to immerse themselves in the penitentiary, especially for the prison."*

Lastly, in the structure that relates to self, Anna, being a Service-Learning instructor, had a strong sense of self, she understood who she was, where she was at, and where she was going. She directed her students well and even faced opposition. She gave so much to others because she knew that in doing so, she was being true to herself.

#### 5. THE ESSENCE OF ANNA'S LIVED EXPERIENCE BEING A SERVICE-LEARNING INSTRUCTOR



The implication of the textures and structures that made up Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor was that Anna had found herself. She had found her purpose, her meaning, and her being as a Service-Learning instructor.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper looked at how Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor aligns with, relates to, and contributes to the attainment of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It generally seeks to answer the question: "Are we there yet?" Looking at Anna's lived experience, the following contributions to the attainment of UN SDGs are presented. Her experience contributes to SDG 3 in ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their status in life, whether free or in prison, have a healthy life. Her contributions and that of her graduate students promoted the well-being of those living inside the penitentiary. Anna's lived experience also points us to a contribution to reduced inequalities within the country which is SDG 10. By carrying out Service-Learning projects inside the penitentiary, there were opportunities and privileges that have been afforded to the people deprived of liberty (PDL), which would have been totally inaccessible to them if it were not for Anna and her students. Speaking of opportunities, there were projects that empowered the PDLs through giving them an opportunity to earn a living whether inside or outside the penitentiary, which is aligned to SDG 8 which aims for the promotion of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth; for full and productive employment and decent work for all. All of these lead to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels which is SDG 16. By being a Service-Learning instructor who brought her students to the national penitentiary, they were able to contribute to the creation of a national penitentiary institution that is truly inclusive. Anna's work at the national penitentiary contributes significantly to these four SDGs. Lastly, Anna's lived experience being a Service-Learning instructor contributes to SDG 4 on Quality Education because as she taught her graduate students, transformation

occurred in them. This contributes to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

This study is not without its limitations. For the first limitation, the present study was conducted only in one higher education institution, therefore the the experience being talked about may be cohesive but it may also be exclusive, further studies may include demographic and phenomenological studies on a larger scale that includes Service-Learning instructors from different parts of the country, not only in the cities but also in municipalities and provinces.

For the second limitation, since the present study focused on the experience of one Service-Learning instructor, there are several other stakeholders in Service-Learning that may be considered to have a better understanding of the dynamic interaction between everyone involved. Further studies may include demographic and phenomenological studies that focus on other stakeholders such as Service-Learning coordinators who are working in universities tasked to coordinate Service-Learning activities with Service-Learning instructors and the communities. Future studies may also involve Service-Learning coordinators coming from the communities whose task is to coordinate with the Service-Learning coordinators or Service-Learning instructors from universities and connect them with the people in the community who are in need of service. It should be noted that although there are some studies that allude to the community aspect of Service-Learning, it would make a great contribution if those involved in the community, those who are receiving the service, that their lived experience also be studied and better understood, as Carlozzi (2023) reported that the values and needs of community partners in Service-Learning partnerships were quite often neglected.

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