

¹Vinitha Guptan

Role of Technology-Enhanced Service Learning in Empowering Marginalized Communities in Malaysia



Abstract: - Service learning (SL) provides a fitting opportunity for students to engage with and learn from the larger community. Such engagements are fast becoming a crucial facet of student and academic activities within Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. (SL) enhances pedagogical learning, fosters more durable relationships which extend beyond campus walls and appropriately prepares students for life outside the campus. The integration of community engagement within the (HEIs)'s curricula fosters an educational setting which facilitates the students' academic, personal and professional developments. (SL) is a learning pedagogy that helps students identify issues within the community, work together and address some of the diverse challenges that have been identified. Today, without a basic knowledge of Information and communication technology (ICT) or digital literacy, it is very difficult to secure employment. Marginalized communities are faced with various socio-economic and environmental barriers which prevent them from obtaining such knowledge. This, in turn further perpetuates a vicious cycle that leaves them within a constant state of powerlessness. This study sought to explore the potential of (SL) in empowering marginalized communities by providing them with basic (ICT) training. A qualitative approach was utilized involving interviews with twenty respondents from marginalized communities. The respondents currently hold jobs which require a basic knowledge of (ICT). The findings indicate that basic digital literacy is becoming increasingly crucial toward the empowerment of marginalized communities in Malaysia. However, the relevant initiatives toward this are sorely lacking. Thus, service learning has a great potential to address the current gap.

Keywords: Service Learning, Digital Literacy, Marginalized Communities, Malaysia, ICT Training, Empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

Service learning (SL) refers to a type of experiential learning wherein practical experiences are consolidated within the academic curricula. The theory and practice related to (SL) are derived from experiential education and the constructivist theory (Furco, 2001). This provides students with a means to harness their knowledge within communities and comes with the benefits of community engagement as well as experiential learning. Students begin by identifying pertinent issues faced by the community and then act to address such issues, usually in collaboration with co-partners. i.e., the community itself, official agencies, industrial partners, etc. (Felten et al., 2016). This immersive learning experience is capable of fostering high impact practices within curricula that facilitate the establishment of critical thinking, effective social interactions, innovativeness, creativity, entrepreneurial behaviors, perseverance, open mindedness, emotional intelligence, etc. (Awang-Hashim et al., 2019). Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in high impact practices within the educational sector globally, for instance (SL) (Bringle & Clayton, 2020). The present Malaysian educational blueprint includes initiatives that are meant to enhance (SL). This is due to the perception of this pedagogical strategy as being capable of achieving the country's educational objective of producing graduates who are equipped with the relevant skillsets and employability (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). In keeping with this, the education ministry came up with 'SULAM' (Service Learning Malaysia - University for Society) which is a set of guidelines concerning (SL) among (HEIs) in the country (Department of Higher Education, 2019). In addition, some Malaysian (HEIs) have also drawn up their own set of (SL) guidelines which are seen as being more appropriate within their specific contexts.

Over the past twenty years or so, the (ICT) sector has been growing at an exponential rate and has led to massive changes within labor markets across the globe. Digitalization has altered the key aspects of various different jobs, which in turn has led to the development of labor markets that are more inclusive. It also paves the way for job patterns that are more flexible, along with a newer range of jobs and roles (Meager et al., 2007). Consequently, basic digital literacy has become imperative for current job seekers and new entrants into the job markets (Garido et al., 2012). One group of people who have been profoundly affected by the current technological developments

¹ Saito University College, Malaysia
Email: vinitha@saito.edu.my

are those from marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2018). Marginalized communities, as a subset of society, have the right to be independent, which may be a feat that they cannot achieve by themselves. Thus, one way of empowering those from marginalized communities is by providing them with the basic digital literacy training toward leading a more independent and dignified existence (Ta et al., 2011). Empowering the marginalized by providing them with basic digital literacy would help them demonstrate their capabilities as individuals and enjoy public service benefits as well as effectively function within society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a WHO report (2018) more than one billion people across the world are marginalized, and the employment gap between such individuals and the rest of the population is approximately 24 %. Here, the likelihood of women securing employment was found to be less than men (UN,2020). A large percentage of individuals from marginalized communities were found to be living below the poverty line, and typically could not access vital necessities like healthcare, education, as well as employment (ILO, 2018). The poor education levels and lack of skills seen in marginalized communities further compound their difficulties in securing jobs within developing nations (ibid). A UNESCO (2019) report states that the unemployment rate among marginalized individuals is approximately 90 % in developing nations and 70 % in developed nations. With Malaysia experiencing a surge of urbanization, the greatest obstacles for marginalized communities is poverty and a lack of education (Shiratuddin and Rahman, 2017).

Several studies have shown that the rise of new technology has created large possibilities for the marginalized communities to participate in the labor force (Kassim et al., 2013). However, barriers faced by the marginalized at jobsites are reflected by their raised unemployment rates, prejudices concerning their productivity levels and poor accessibility to job settings. For instance, in the UK, approximately 80 % of individuals in the working age with mental ailments are not employed (Santvoort, 2019). Additionally, these individuals receive less pay when compared to the rest of the population. Since these marginalized hold low-paying jobs, their accessibility to social and regulatory guarantees are less (ILO, 2018). The large numbers of marginalized individuals experiencing various hurdles related to their day to day activities, prompted the Canadian government to undertake actions and programs toward providing work access and tertiary education opportunities these individuals. As a result, marginalized individuals managed to surmount some of the common socio economic challenges experienced due to such marginalization (Turcotte, 2014). Similarly, the US Labor Department has worked extensively to increase job opportunities for marginalized communities by providing the necessary accessibility to training, educational opportunities, job support, assistive technologies, consolidated employment, SME opportunities, etc. (Martinez, 2019).

Findings have shown that individuals who obtain jobs that are relevant to their skills and capabilities provide considerably toward the development of their working environment (ILO, 2011). Those who are not employed are likelier to lose out on the benefits of participating within the job market, which in turn serves as a vital component of social integration (Turcotte, 2014). Fundamentally, the objective of The International Labor Organization (ILO) is to ensure that everyone is given the necessary rights to obtain decent work, which includes individuals from marginalized communities. This is in accordance with the principles of equal opportunity and treatment as well as community participation by means of promoting and advocating equitable labor standards (ILO, 2018).

Studies have consistently shown that marginalized communities are likelier to face more socio economic deprivation when compared to the rest of society (Deloitte, 2017). Hence, they require the necessary backing toward attaining their basic rights. Also, such individuals are likelier to be jobless and even if they do find jobs, are paid lower salaries (WHO, 2019). Majority of the marginalized communities within the Asia-Pacific region have little accessibility to education, jobs, proper accommodation, transport, health care, etc., resulting in their complete socio-economic isolation. According to the WHO (2019) report, the key reason for the exclusion of marginalized communities from the job markets is the lack of education and training, especially within the ever expanding ICT sector.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lord & Hutchison (1993) state that when seen as a change process, empowerment predominantly indicates an enhancement of the available possibilities which could facilitate individuals in managing their own lives. Simply put, empowerment allows people to lead independent and dignified lives. The empowering of marginalized individuals include providing them with the necessary knowledge and information toward developing the relevant abilities and skillsets as well as positively shifting their lives. The empowerment process is imperative toward strengthening the marginalized communities' abilities within society and stabilizing their socio-economic status (Sen, 1999).

According to Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), empowerment consists of two phases; the former related to enhancing an individual or community's capability of making choices and the latter related to such choices being transformed into actions and desirable outcomes. Hence, an individual could be empowered if they have the capacity to choose. This will be followed by the outcomes which arise out of their choices. The researchers add that the capacity of individuals to make choices is influenced by two factors, i.e., agency which is their capability of making relevant choices from the available options and opportunity structure which is the overarching contexts within which they function.

This study attempts to uncover the potential for basic (ICT) training as a (SL) component in the empowerment of Malaysia's marginalized communities. Though basic digital literacy allows marginalized individuals to become more competitive within job markets, they face various obstacles to obtaining the necessary training. The focus of this study is on whether ICT training via (SL) helps marginalized individuals make the appropriate choices and whether having a basic digital literacy attains the desirable outcomes, i.e., living independent and dignified lives. Within this context, (SL) serves a crucial role in the accessibility of (ICT) training and allows the marginalized individuals to benefit from its advantages. The skillsets to navigate the digital domain and utilize computers are foreseen to facilitate marginalized individuals in living independently which in turn translates to empowering them.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach was utilized in this study to explore the potential of basic (ICT) training among marginalized communities in Malaysia and their consequent empowerment. The marginalized communities focused on in this study were, disabled individuals, those from the lower socio-economic strata, single mothers and senior citizens. The purposive sampling technique was employed in this study to shortlist twenty respondents. Data was gathered using direct interviews and involved information concerning sociodemographic attributes of the respondents, their awareness levels, and their involvement with and usage of (ICT). Also, the study explored the advancement opportunities that basic digital literacy had brought into the respondents' lives. After getting the consent of the respondents, all of the interviews were recorded, followed by their transcription into texts and subsequent analyses.

V. FINDINGS

5.1 Lifestyle Changes and Living Independently

The findings indicate that basic digital literacy has contributed significantly to the respondents' integration within society by improving their employability and increasing their community participation. Respondents also mentioned that they have attained a measure of independence and are more in control of their lives. Some respondents stated that they have regained their dignity, especially because they now enjoy a new level of financial freedom. The respondents also spoke about their independence having led them to being more self-confident and respected within society.

One respondent with learning difficulties spoke about how basic ICT knowledge allowed him to communicate using WhatsApp and other social media platforms which are today extensively intertwined with daily life. Digital literacy is not bounded by a specific knowledge domain and basic (ICT) skills can be obtained without the need for any specialization. All of this study's respondents did not have any (ICT) background. However, they acquired the fundamental skillsets related to this domain due to such skills having become a prerequisite within today's job

market. This involves a basic understanding of the usage of computers to process data, i.e., data input, organization, storage, etc., along with using the internet to source information. These skillsets are required for practically all positions including cashiers. Hence training marginalized individuals in these skills as a part of (SL) will provide them with a much needed boost.

5.2 Self-Worth and Community Respect

According to one respondent, basic digital literacy is vital for all types of jobs, without which it becomes extremely hard to get employed. The findings indicate that marginalization was not seen as an impediment by some of the respondents, but in fact, as a motivation to achieve something. Some studies have shown direct links between motivation and the aims which drive a person to work (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The respondents were aware of the importance of digital literacy and job prospects. Some of them attended free (ICT) courses offered in their schools or by non-profit organizations. The respondents were convinced that such courses greatly contributed to their job prospects. Hence, this strongly implies that with training in basic (ICT) skills, marginalized individuals will have greater opportunities to compete within the labor market due to the diversity of options that exist.

Employability provides marginalized individuals with a diverse range of benefits. For instance, by achieving the ability to address personal and familial financial needs and by allowing them to take part in community development initiatives among others. According to one respondent, he is no longer dependent on others for financial assistance, and in fact, he pays tax and zakat as well as contributes to charities. Self-esteem extends from an individual's desire to change for the better, perhaps by developing their skills or acquiring knowledge. The yearning for self-esteem in spite of being marginalized could motivate others to help a marginalized individual's self-development. The respondents also stated that being employed allowed them to participate in community development activities, besides raising their self-esteem levels.

Hence, it is possible for marginalized individuals to shift from a dependent role and become empowered if they possess a strong desire to change. This desire in turn could be leveraged by the relevant programs like (SL) toward ensuring that marginalized individuals become valuable members of society.

VI. DISCUSSION

Technological advancements have generated fresh prospects within the job markets across the world. However, marginalized communities are faced with various obstacles when it comes to getting employed, for instance, financial constraints and a lacking knowledge concerning basic (ICT) skills. Basic digital literacy has become an important requirement within today's job markets. This underpins the importance of equipping marginalized communities with basic (ICT) skills in order to make them more competitive within the job markets.

The issue here is that the necessary (ICT) skills are not accessible to a large portion of marginalized communities. This is compounded by the fact that most marginalized communities within developing nations have never received any type of vocational training (Powers, 2008). Hence, a majority of them face social exclusion and abject poverty. In view of this, the current study sought to uncover the potential of (SL) specifically through the provision of basic (ICT) training toward empowering the marginalized communities in Malaysia.

In this study the notion of empowerment is addressed from several viewpoints. Here, two facets of the phenomenon are dealt with, i.e., the potential for digital literacy to actively empower marginalized individuals and the relative inaccessibility of (ICT) services for the marginalized individuals. Here, digital literacy is taken to be a viable mediator that empowers marginalized communities. Digital literacy is also assumed to play a crucial role in the empowerment of marginalized individuals by facilitating their employment. Marginalized communities could be empowered by digital literacy which provides accessibility to information, resources, services, etc., which were erstwhile unavailable. Fittingly, empowerment signifies independence and dignified living for the marginalized, and is a transformation process from a state of helplessness to one of ability. Providing the marginalized with basic (ICT) training toward getting employed and becoming empowered necessitates two fundamental conditions: the provision of training and marginalized communities benefitting from such opportunities.

Considering that digital literacy has become among the key criteria sought for within job markets, it has become imperative to train marginalized communities in this particular area. This is where service learning should come into play. From the contexts of (SL) among Malaysian (HEIs), this would fall under the category of ‘Direct SULAM’. Besides the benefits to the marginalized communities, the students stand to enhance their skills practices, for instance by learning to care for others, being dependable, improving their social and problem solving skills as well as “Big picture” learning. Since funding is seen as a major obstacle to the provision of (ICT) training, the Education Ministry could step in and allocate the necessary funds when it comes to service learning which involves such training.

VII. CONCLUSION

Empowerment is a multi- dimensional notion with various socio-economic and psychological ramifications. This study found digital literacy to have a great potential to empower marginalized Malaysians by making them more employable. The study respondents emphasized that this has given them more control over their day to day lives, as well as increased their self-worth and drive. The respondents also asserted that basic digital literacy has significantly shifted their lives, allowing them to live independently. The findings also indicate that beside empowerment, digital literacy also fosters social integration by facilitating the participation of marginalized individuals in social activities. Hence, (SL) initiatives in Malaysia should definitely focus on setting up the relevant programs to provide basic (ICT) training for marginalized communities.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alsop, R. (2005). *Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3510.
- [2] Awang-Hashim, R., Kaur, A., & Valdez, N. P. (2019). Strategizing inclusivity in teaching diverse learners in higher education. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 16(1), 105-128.
- [3] Bringle, R. G., & Clayton, P. H. (2020). Integrating service learning and digital technologies: Examining the challenge and the promise. *RIED. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia*, 23(1), pp. 43-65. <https://doi.org/10.5944/ried.23.1.2538>
- [4] Deloitte. (2017). *Youth Progress Index 2017. Executive Summary*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-yqi-report-2018.pdf>
- [5] Department of Higher Education Malaysia. (2019) *Service learning Malaysia: University for society*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- [6] Felten, P., Gardner, J. N., Schroeder, C. C., Lambert, L. M., & Barefoot, B. O. (2016). *The undergraduate experience: Focusing institutions on what matters most*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, Wiley.
- [7] Furco, A. (2001). Advancing service-learning at research universities. In M. Carada & B. W. Speck (Eds.), *Developing and implementing service-learning programs*. *New Directions for Higher Education* (No. 114, pp. 67–68). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- [8] International Labor Organization (ILO). (2011). *Achieving Equal Employment Opportunities for PWDs Through Legislation*. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/ed_emp/ifp_skills/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_162169.pdf
- [9] ILO, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, (2018).
- [10] Raja Kasim, R. S., Azham, Z., Zulazli, H., Wan Nursafiah, W. I., & Sophie, E. Y. (2013). *Youth in the marginalized communities: Towards regenerating youth development*
- [11] Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2015). *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)*. Retrieved from <http://hes.moe.gov.my>.
- [12] Martinez, K. (2019). *Employment of People with Disabilities: Federal Efforts to Increase Job Placements*. *Autism Advocate*, 1216.
- [13] Meager, N., Hill, D. & Wilson, S. (2007). *ICT Strategy, Disabled People and Employment in the UK*, IES Working Paper: WP14, 1–25. Retrieved from <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/ict-strategy-disabled-people-andemployment-uk>
- [14] Sen, Amartya K. (1999). *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [15] Shiratuddin, N., & Abd Rahman, Z. S. (2017). Youth in marginalized communities: Participation through web TV, web Radio and web journalism. *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, 2(12), 63–67.
- [16] Ta, T. L., Wah, L. L., & Leng, K. S. (2011). Employability of PWDs in the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia: Employers’ Perspective. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 22 (2), 79–94.

- [17] Turcotte, M. (2014). Insights on Canadian Society Persons with Disabilities and Employment. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2014001/article/14115-eng.pdf> UNESCAP. (2008). Disability Fact Sheet.
- [18] UN (2020). Disability and development report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, by, for and with persons with disabilities, 2020. 12
- [19] UNESCO. (2019). Global Report Opening New Avenues for Empowerment ICTs to Access Information and Knowledge for Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002197/219767e.pdf>.
- [20] WHO. (2018). World Report on Disability. Malta. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/disabilities/world-report/2011/report.pdf>
- [21] WHO, Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak, 2020; ILO et al., Disability-inclusive social protection response to COVID-19 crisis, April 2020.