The Civic Mission of Universities:
Transdisciplinary Communication in Practice

Genejane ADARLO

Health Sciences Program, Ateneo de Manila University
Quezon City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The civic mission of universities has gained renewed prominence as higher education institutions confront the imperative of contributing to society. Beyond their traditional functions of teaching and research, universities are increasingly recognized as anchor institutions that generate public value by fostering engaged citizenship and addressing complex societal challenges. This article examines the civic mission of universities through two interrelated pathways: service-learning and transdisciplinary communication. Service-learning, defined as the integration of community engagement with academic instruction and critical reflection, strengthens students' disciplinary learning while cultivating civic-mindedness. In parallel, transdisciplinary communication provides the epistemic and practical framework to address wicked problems in society by integrating diverse academic perspectives with community knowledge in the co-production of solutions. Taken together, these approaches underscore how universities can fulfill their civic mission in ways that are educationally transformative and socially responsive.

Keywords: Higher Education, Civic Mission, Service-Learning, and Transdisciplinary Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Universities occupy a critical position in society. As agents of social change, they are not only repositories of knowledge but also institutions tasked with forming responsible citizens capable of confronting complex societal challenges [1, 2]. However, their traditional roles of producing knowledge and contributing human capital need to be configured to meet the interconnected problems of inequality, environmental degradation, public health crises, and social fragmentation [1].

These global challenges have intensified the call for universities to adopt educationally transformative and socially responsive roles [3]. Doing so necessitates reimagining universities as learning systems that are open, adaptive, and communicative. As self-organizing systems, universities are expected to operate with a feedback loop between their internal processes (teaching, research, and administration) and their external environment (communities, industries, and policy institutions) to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

The civic mission of universities has gained renewed importance as they are urged to contribute to the public good and strengthen democratic life by providing economic, cultural, and social stability. This civic role extends beyond the dual functions of teaching and research toward what is now often referred to as the "third mission," which is a social and civic mandate that positions universities as anchor institutions within their communities [4].

Service-learning operationalizes this civic mission at the pedagogical level by linking academic instruction to community engagement through structured reflection and reciprocity. Transdisciplinary communication, in turn, provides the epistemic and relational framework for integrating multiple forms of knowledge to address wicked problems in society. The synergy between these two approaches exemplifies how universities can become dynamic systems of knowledge exchange [5].

With these in mind, this article revisits the civic mission of universities through two interrelated approaches: service-learning and transdisciplinary communication. First, it reframes the civic mission of universities by situating it within systems theory and democratic ideals of the public good. Second, it examines service-learning as a community-based pedagogy that connects experience, reflection, and reciprocity in student formation. Third, it discusses transdisciplinary communication as the collaborative infrastructure through which diverse actors integrate their knowledge to address wicked problems in society. Fourth, it proposes ways to integrate these two approaches by emphasizing organizational learning through feedback. Fifth, it applies these insights to Philippine higher education, particularly within Jesuit universities, by illustrating how Ignatian pedagogy complements systems thinking in advancing civic engagement. Finally, this article concludes with implications for institutional transformation and the continuing evolution of universities as adaptive, socially embedded systems.

2. REFRAMING THE CIVIC MISSION OF UNIVERSITIES

The notion of the university as a civic institution has deep philosophical roots. Early universities served as centers for moral and civic formation, shaping individuals not only as skilled professionals but as ethical citizens. Yet, the industrial and technocratic evolution of higher education led to an increasing separation between academic inquiry and public life. In recent decades, this gap has drawn criticism, prompting calls to reorient higher education toward civic engagement and the public good. The contemporary discourse on the civic mission of universities underscores that institutions must function as social institutions rather than ivory towers by directly contributing to community well-being and democratic renewal [3].

The modern university's third mission extends beyond the familiar dyad of teaching and research. It foregrounds social responsibility and co-responsibility with communities, linking institutional resources to public needs through sustained partnerships. This third mission entails civic engagement as not an extracurricular add-on but a core expression of institutional identity. Such reframing is consistent with contemporary transdisciplinarity movements that reject unilateral flow of knowledge by calling for academic and non-academic actors to co-define problems and co-create solutions. Such a shift is not merely procedural; it is epistemic and ethical. It validates lived experience and local wisdom alongside disciplinary expertise by reorienting the university toward outcomes that are both scientifically sound and socially legitimate [5].

The civic mission of universities extends beyond mere academic instruction, serving as a cornerstone for democratic societies. By fostering an environment that encourages critical thinking, open dialogue, and ethical decision-making, universities play a crucial role in shaping informed and engaged citizens. This process of civic education enables students to actively participate in addressing societal challenges, thereby contributing to the continuous improvement of their communities. The emphasis on deliberation and inclusion ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more comprehensive and equitable solutions to complex social issues [6].

This civic orientation repositions education as a system that thrives on feedback between academic expertise and societal needs. Feedback ensures that universities remain relevant and responsive to the ever-changing demands of the world beyond their campuses. By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, universities become dynamic centers of learning that not only impart knowledge but also actively contribute to societal progress [7].

Embracing their civic mission necessitates reflexivity. Universities must reflect on how their knowledge practices affect society and how feedback from their community reshapes their own priorities. This reflexive process entails "learning with society," where universities engage in dialogical cycles of knowledge co-production [5]. It aligns with the cybernetic notion of second-order learning, in which institutions question not only what they know but how they come to know it [7].

3. SERVICE-LEARNING AS A CIVIC PEDAGOGY

Service-learning is a pedagogical innovation grounded in experiential learning and social constructivism. It is drawn from Deweyan pragmatism and Freirean critical pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of experience and reflection in one's learning [8]. By transforming educational experience into a participatory encounter with the world, service-learning can facilitate the civic mission of universities as it allows abstract learning to become an embodied civic practice [9].

Service-leaning connects academic coursework with community service and structured reflection, enabling students to synthesize disciplinary concepts through praxis [10]. The alignment between course learning outcomes and identified needs of the community not only brings about disciplinary mastery but also civic-mindedness among students [9, 11]. Structured reflection translates students' experience of community engagement into academic and civic outcomes, prompting them to interrogate previously held assumptions, analyze structural causes, and connect their professional identity with social responsibility [11, 12]. It ensures that students not only do but learn from doing in ways that foster critical consciousness [8].

From a systems perspective, service-learning functions as a feedback mechanism that links theoretical inputs (curricular content) with social outputs (community outcomes), allowing iterative recalibration through reflection. The process begins with a concrete experience of community engagement, wherein students immerse themselves in real-world situations and interact with diverse stakeholders. This hands-on engagement provides a rich foundation for learning as students encounter challenges, observe dynamics, and gain firsthand insights into community issues. Students then engage in reflective observation, which involves critically examining their experiences and processing the information gathered through multiple perspectives. Afterwards, students synthesize their observations and reflections to form new understandings. This process of abstract conceptualization consists of receiving feedback from peers, mentors, or community partners, which helps refine their new understandings and arrive at innovative ideas to address community needs. Finally, active experimentation allows students to apply their newly formed understandings and

adapted strategies in subsequent community engagements to further enhance their approach [13].

Through service-learning, education becomes a dialogical process where knowledge is co-created between universities and communities. Students engage with marginalized groups, local organizations, and civic partners to address authentic social needs while benefiting academically and civically from analyzing structural causes of injustice. Such engagements allow for the sharing of resources and expertise, enabling communities to benefit from the academic insights and technical support that universities can provide, while universities gain an understanding of social systems and their role as agents of change [14]. This involves respecting and incorporating local knowledge into the learning process, which can lead to more sustainable and impactful community outcomes [15].

4. TRANSDISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

Complex societal challenges cannot be addressed by single disciplines alone. They demand integrative approaches that combine the analytical rigor of academia with the contextual knowledge of practitioners and communities. While service-learning foregrounds student formation and civic engagement, transdisciplinary communication focuses on epistemic collaboration across boundaries. Transdisciplinary communication thus becomes the bridge through which diverse forms of expertise converge to produce actionable and context-specific knowledge [5].

Transdisciplinarity differs from interdisciplinarity by extending collaboration beyond academic silos to include non-academic voices. Local knowledge, indigenous perspectives, and lived experience are treated as legitimate and necessary sources of insight [16, 17]. Communities and practitioners are not afterthoughts or passive recipients; they are co-researchers and co-designers [5]. This inclusivity transforms the research process from knowledge dissemination to co-production [18]. As such, universities engaged in transdisciplinarity are not isolated producers of solutions but as conveners of dialogue and co-learners with society [17].

Communication and relationship-building lie at the heart of this practice. Effective transdisciplinary collaboration requires clear articulation of perspectives, mutual listening, and the capacity to negotiate differences in values, priorities, and epistemologies [19]. These processes of dialogue and deliberation cultivate trust and enable the emergence of shared understanding [20]. The emerging result is an expanded capacity to frame problems appropriately and to avoid technically elegant but socially misaligned solutions [5]. Transdisciplinary communication thus functions not only as a methodological approach but as an ethical commitment to inclusivity and respect [19, 20].

5. INTEGRATING SERVICE-LEARNING AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

Although distinct in focus, service-learning and transdisciplinary communication share a common ethos: both are relational, dialogical, and action-oriented. Service-learning situates students within community contexts, while transdisciplinary communication structures the collaborative processes that make such engagement transformative. When integrated, they provide a comprehensive framework for universities to fulfill their civic mission at multiple levels: pedagogical, institutional, and societal.

At the pedagogical level, service-learning can serve as an entry point for transdisciplinary collaboration. Courses that embed community engagement can invite students from different disciplines to work together with community partners, guided by principles of inclusivity and respect. This not only enriches course learning outcomes but also prepares students for real-world collaboration in complex environments. The emphasis on reflection helps students understand not just what they are doing but how knowledge and values interact in addressing societal issues.

At the institutional level, embedding transdisciplinary service-learning within curricula and research agendas encourages structural alignment with the university's civic mission. This requires creating enabling systems, such as supportive policies, faculty development, community partnerships, and evaluation frameworks, to sustain engagement. Institutionalizing such practices ensures that civic engagement is not episodic but an enduring expression of the university's civic mission.

Finally, at the societal level, the integration of service-learning and transdisciplinary communication enhances the capacity of universities to contribute to systemic change. When academic expertise and community wisdom intersect, they generate socially responsive innovations. These collaborations exemplify the ideal of co-responsibility between universities and society, wherein both act as agents in pursuit of the common good.

Six interrelated principles emerged for effectively integrating service-learning with transdisciplinary communication. First, co-definition of problems ensures that communities are engaged from the outset so that course learning outcomes align with real societal priorities. Rather than imposing predetermined frameworks, faculty and students work with community partners to identify shared concerns and collaboratively design interventions that are both contextually grounded and educationally meaningful [5]. Second, role clarity and reciprocity can promote accountability and shared ownership of outcomes [21]. Third, structured communication protocols and reflective documentation allow academic and non-academic actors to sustain

dialogue even when they differ in technical language or worldviews. Fourth, iterative reflection allows the partnership to remain responsive to shifting contexts and insights [23]. Fifth, holistic assessment ensures that evaluation extends beyond cognitive outcomes to include civic, affective, and systemic dimensions of learning [9]. Finally, sustainability of partnerships depends on institutionalizing long-term collaboration frameworks and building enduring relationships with community stakeholders [5].

Embedding these principles of engagement within universities represents a fundamental shift in institutional approach and culture. Rather than treating community engagement as isolated or fragmented initiatives, universities must integrate it into their core functions and decision-making processes. This systemic approach permeates all aspects of the university, from curriculum design and research priorities to administrative policies and community partnerships. Cybernetically, this represents a shift from first-order to second-order learning: learning how to learn from engagement. This meta-learning allows universities to adapt more effectively to changing societal needs and expectations.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILIPPINE HIGHER EDUCATION AND IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY

In the Philippine context, the civic mission of universities intersects with broader goals of national development, democratization, and social justice given that the country faces persistent challenges of inequality and resource disparity [10]. These societal challenges create opportunities for universities to act as transformative agents by aligning academic work with social realities.

Jesuit higher education provides a distinct moral and philosophical grounding for this civic mission. Guided by Ignatian pedagogy, it emphasizes reflection, discernment, and action rooted in compassion and justice. Service-learning operationalizes this civic mission by situating learning in real-world settings and by inviting students to confront inequality and co-create responses that respect human dignity [9]. Transdisciplinary communication equips students with the dialogical competencies to collaborate across disciplinary, institutional, and cultural differences and to de-center the universities in favor of genuinely shared inquiry. The result is not merely charitable outreach but justice-oriented partnership working toward structural change [5].

Specifically, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation corresponds closely to the systems theory cycle of input, process, output, and feedback [5, 9]. This correspondence is not accidental: both frameworks assume that learning and transformation emerge from dynamic interaction rather than linear transmission. Service-learning within Jesuit higher education serves as the mechanism through which students engage the context of lived realities. By immersing themselves in communities, students gather experiences that feed into the institutional learning system. Transdisciplinary communication then functions as the processing layer, translating these experiences into shared understanding across disciplines and stakeholders. Faculty, students, and community partners collaboratively interpret experiences to generatie insights that guide both curriculum improvement and social action. Finally, reflection and evaluation allow the university to recalibrate its pedagogical and social priorities [9].

Through this recursive process, the Jesuit higher education becomes a living, self-regulating system where spirituality, intellect, and praxis converge toward social justice. It exhibits what cybernetics terms second-order learning: learning that transforms the student's way of learning. Students not only acquire disciplinary knowledge but also develop meta-cognitive and ethical capacities to analyze how knowledge itself is produced and applied in contexts of inequality and difference.

From an organizational standpoint, this Jesuit model encourages universities to establish structures that support feedback and learning across individual, programmatic, and institutional levels. It underscores the ethical and spiritual dimension of systemic integration. Feedback in cybernetic systems is not purely informational; it is also value laden. Through its practices of discernment and compassion, Jesuit higher education ensures that its systemic learning processes remain oriented toward human dignity and the common good. The outcome is a university that is both scientifically rigorous and morally reflexive: a system capable of continuous self-renewal in service of society.

7. CONCLUSION

The civic mission of universities is a living tradition that continues to evolve in response to the needs of society. As the boundaries between academia and community become increasingly porous, higher education must cultivate pedagogies and partnerships that sustain mutual learning and shared responsibility. Service-learning and transdisciplinary communication together can offer a path forward.

Service-learning transforms the student experience through direct participation in social realities. It grounds education in lived experience and ethical action through community engagement and reflection. Meanwhile, transdisciplinary communication connects the university to broader networks of knowledge and action. It ensures that the community engagement in service-learning informs and transforms collective knowledge. When combined, they reposition the university as a catalyst for social transformation: one that educates for citizenship, dialogue, and justice.

Ultimately, the fulfillment of the civic mission demands that universities see themselves as integral parts of the communities they serve. By fostering a culture of civic engagement and social responsibility, universities can become catalysts for positive change in their communities, embodying the ideal of higher education as a public good that benefits society as a whole.

8. USE OF GENERATIVE AI

Paperpal was used for literature search and proofreading.

9. REFERENCES

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