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Applying Community-Engaged Service Learning to Enhance Students' Knowledge, Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility

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This study demonstrates methods to enhance students' knowledge, civic engagement, and social responsibility in international business education, based on community-engaged service learning. Reflecting on best practices of engaging 127 students through community-engaged service learning, we show the power of aligning course learning outcomes with real-world challenges, beyond problem-based learning. This reflection highlights the role of community-engaged service learning in academic capability building, suggesting that integrating such approaches contributes to addressing complex global challenges and nurturing socially responsible leaders. The recognition of this approach, shortlisted for the 2023 AIB T&E SIG Teaching Innovation Award, underscores its impact.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global landscape, higher education must prepare students to face real-world challenges. Traditional classroom settings often fail to provide the hands-on experience, civic engagement, and social responsibility that are essential in international business education. Community-engaged pedagogy, combined with service learning, addresses this gap by integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application. This approach not only enhances academic understanding but also fosters a deep sense of civic engagement and social responsibility. As finalists for the 2023 AIB T&E SIG Teaching Innovation Award, we demonstrate how this pedagogical approach was implemented in the International Business Management Seminar subject at Universiti Utara Malaysia and its significant impact on student learning outcomes, civic engagement, and social responsibility, equipping students to tackle global challenges more effectively. [Table 1](#) shows comparison of learning approaches.

[Table 1](#) compares traditional learning, problem-based learning, and community-engaged service learning across key aspects such as focus, teaching method, and community engagement. Traditional learning, typically lecture-based, emphasizes content mastery, with outcomes measured through exams and papers. Problem-based learning shifts to a student-centered approach, focusing on problem-solving skills, though it offers limited community engagement. In contrast, community-engaged service-learning is an experiential approach that prioritizes civic engagement and measurable real-world impact, with reflection as a core component of the learning process. This comparison highlights how this method not only enhances

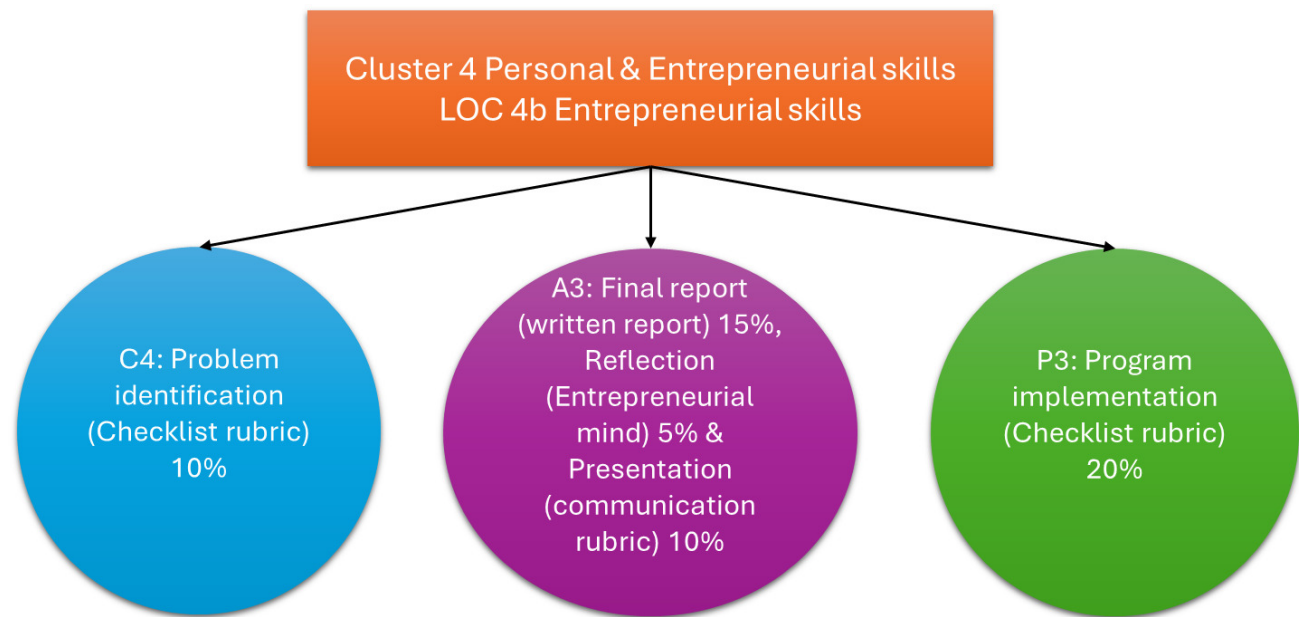
academic learning but also fosters deeper community involvement and social responsibility among students.

This approach builds on Experiential Learning Theory and the Community of Inquiry model, both of which emphasize learning through reflection and action (Kolb, 1984). Honnet and Poulsen (1990) highlighted that service and learning complement and transform each other through structured reflection designed to achieve specific outcomes, expanding on traditional community service. Godfrey et al. (2005) argued that service learning pedagogy addresses the narrowness of business education by broadening students' perspectives and preparing them for complex real-world challenges. More recently, Dieleman et al. (2022) emphasized the significance of service learning in international business education, demonstrating its value in bridging academic and civic outcomes. In this context, "service" refers to structured, community-focused activities where students apply academic knowledge to address practical issues, fostering both learning and societal impact. This study contributes to the growing body of work illustrating the transformative potential of community-engaged service-learning.

This pedagogical approach is employed in the International Business Management Seminar, an undergraduate core subject designed for final-year students. In this course, students are tasked with identifying and addressing real-world business challenges. The course has four course learning objectives (CLOs), one of which relates to this project, specifically explaining how firms respond to issues and challenges in the international business environment. This CLO is directly aligned with the goals of community-engaged service learning. Through structured service activities, students engage with business owners, develop solutions, and reflect on their experiences, thereby deepening

Table 1. Comparison of Learning Approaches

Learning Approach	Focus	Teaching Method	Community Engagement
Traditional Learning	Content Mastery	Lecture-based, exams and papers	Limited to none
Problem-Based Learning	Problem-Solving Skills	Student-centered, project-based	Limited
Community-Engaged Service-Learning	Civic Engagement & Real-World Impact	Experiential, reflective, hands-on	Extensive, deep community involvement

**Figure 1. Course Learning Outcome and Assessment Methods**

their understanding of international business dynamics. The other three CLOs are assessed through different methods, including quizzes, forums, and a mid-term test. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the course learning outcomes and assessment methods used in the community-engaged service learning approach.

[Figure 1](#) represents the assessment structure for a learning outcome focused on developing entrepreneurial skills within a broader set of personal and entrepreneurial competencies. It details three key components: Problem Identification, which accounts for 10% of the grade and is evaluated through a checklist rubric; the Final Report, which is divided into a written report (15%), a reflection on the entrepreneurial mindset (5%), and a presentation (10%); and Program Implementation, which contributes 20% and is also assessed using a checklist rubric. Each component is designed to evaluate different aspects of entrepreneurial skills, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of students' capabilities in problem identification, program implementation, and reflective and communication skills within an entrepreneurial context. The community-engaged service-learning project constitutes 60% of the total course evaluation. The remaining 40% is allocated to quizzes, the mid-term test, and forum discussions.

PROCESS MODEL

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the process model for implementing community-engaged service-learning in the International Business Management Seminar (IBMS) subject.

[Figure 2](#) represents a process model that outlines the timeline and key activities involved in a student project. The timeline spans from Week 1 to Week 14, with specific tasks assigned at different stages:

- Week 1: The process begins with the instructor explaining the project to the students and sharing the guidelines for the report. Students are also tasked with identifying and securing a community partner for their project.
- Weeks 4 & 5: During these weeks, students present the problem they have identified from their chosen company or community partner to the instructor. This presentation marks the approval stage, where students receive consent from the instructor to proceed with the project.
- Weeks 6-11: This phase involves the implementation of the project. Students actively work on their projects, applying their skills and knowledge, while also beginning to draft their final report.

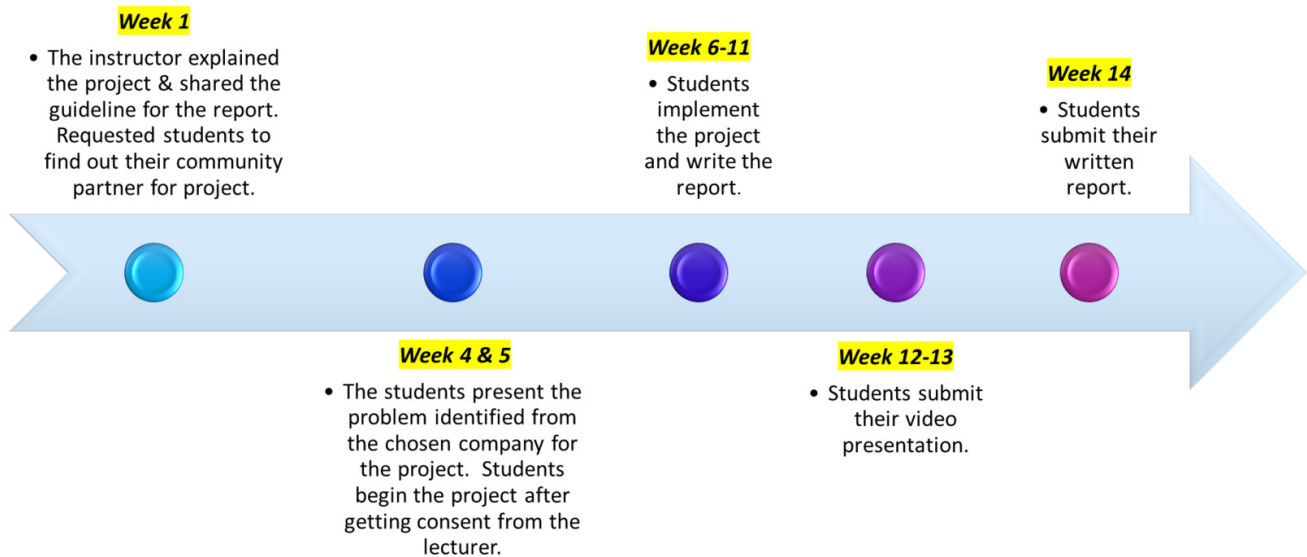


Figure 2. Process Model

- Weeks 12-13: Students are required to submit a video presentation of their project. This submission likely serves as a mid-point evaluation or as a supplementary component to the final report.
- Week 14: The process concludes with the submission of the final written report, which encapsulates the entire project, including outcomes, reflections, and any supporting documentation.

This model emphasizes a structured approach to integrating community engagement service-learning, ensuring that students are involved in problem identification, planning, implementation, and reflective reporting throughout the semester.

HOW DO STUDENTS GAIN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY?

The integration of community-engaged service-learning into the curriculum has had a profound impact on students, enhancing not only their academic performance but also their civic engagement and sense of social responsibility. [Table 2](#) illustrates the significant improvement in student grades following the implementation of this approach. The data shows a marked increase in the number of students achieving higher grades (A and A-), rising from 12% before implementation to 27% afterward, while those receiving lower grades (B+ and below) decreased from 88% to 73%. This improvement highlights the effectiveness of this teaching method in deepening students' understanding of course content and enhancing their overall academic performance.

Beyond academics, community-engaged service-learning fosters deeper civic engagement and social responsibility among students. By directly interacting with local businesses and community organizations, students are exposed

Table 2. Student Outcomes Before and After Implementation

Grade	Before Implementation	After Implementation
A and A-	7 (12%)	16 (27%)
B+ and below	50 (88%)	44 (73%)

to real-world challenges that require them to understand and address the needs of others. For example, students who worked with a local bakery identified critical issues in financial management and pricing strategy. By applying their classroom knowledge, they proposed solutions that led to increased profitability for the business. Similarly, another group helped a waffle business increase its sales by 30% through targeted marketing improvements. These experiences allow students to see the tangible impact of their work, reinforcing the importance of civic duty and social responsibility.

Reflective practices are also integral to this approach, as they encourage students to critically analyze their experiences and connect their service work with broader societal issues. Activities such as journaling and group discussions help students internalize the significance of their contributions, fostering a deeper sense of responsibility toward their communities. Additionally, the collaborative nature of these projects teaches students the value of teamwork and collective responsibility, demonstrating how their efforts can lead to significant positive changes.

In a multicultural learning environment, such as the one in my class, which includes students from diverse backgrounds – Malay, Chinese, Indian, and international students from Indonesia, the Middle East, and Africa – this approach promotes understanding, cooperation, and respect among students. These shared experiences build relation-

ships that contribute to a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, ultimately enhancing students' compassion, empathy, and respect for others.

The long-term impact awareness fostered by community-engaged service learning encourages students to continue engaging in socially responsible activities beyond the classroom. By seeing the positive results of their efforts, such as improved business practices or enhanced community services, students gain a deeper understanding of how their actions can lead to long-term positive changes. This not only benefits their personal growth but also aligns with the broader goals of academic institutions, which can demonstrate their social responsibility and contribute to the "University for Society" motto.

Moreover, this approach aligns with the societal impact emphasized by international accreditation bodies like AACSB, EFMD, AMBA, EQUIS, THE, and QS rankings. By adopting community-engaged service-learning, the global International Business community can foster a more holistic and interconnected relationship between universities and society, while nurturing a sense of global citizenship among students.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Just as companies must strategically allocate resources to optimize growth, academic institutions and educators should carefully plan how to maximize the impact of their initiatives on students' development. Integrating community-engaged service learning into the curriculum has demonstrated significant benefits, enhancing students' academic performance, civic engagement, and entrepreneurial mindset. These outcomes are not simply the result of introducing projects into coursework but stem from a deliberate strategy to connect academic objectives with real-world challenges. For educators looking to implement community-engaged service learning in their courses, here are five key actionable insights that provide clear steps and practical guidance.

First, **establishing specific learning outcomes** that align with both academic and civic engagement goals is essential, and this can be effectively achieved using the principles of Constructive Alignment theory (Biggs, 1999). Constructive alignment ensures that learning activities and assessments are purposefully designed to achieve intended outcomes, creating a seamless connection between what students learn and how they apply it. For example, a civic engagement goal such as enhancing international trade capacity can align with a CLO, based on Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), where students analyze export processes and propose solutions. Activities might include market research for a local business entering international markets, identifying trade barriers, and developing export strategies. These activities allow students to apply theoretical concepts like global marketing, trade regulations, and cultural considerations to real-world scenarios. This alignment reinforces academic learning and creates a pathway for students to see the real-world relevance of

their coursework, fostering local economic growth through global engagement.

Second, **building strong community partnerships** is crucial for creating meaningful and impactful service learning projects. Early and sustained collaboration with community and businesses provides students with real-world contexts and challenges, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship. These partnerships should be formalized through agreements and maintained with regular communication to ensure alignment of objectives and expectations. For instance, a partnership with a small business aiming to expand internationally could involve students developing an export pricing strategy by applying principles of international market analysis and trade cost management. This collaboration helps the business optimize its pricing for foreign markets while offering students valuable hands-on experience in applying theoretical knowledge to real-world international trade challenges. To further strengthen these partnerships, educators can organize joint planning sessions, assign faculty liaisons to facilitate communication, and develop memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that clearly outline roles, expectations, and deliverables. Such structured partnerships ensure that both academic and community objectives are effectively met, enhancing the overall impact of the projects.

Third, **integrating reflection** as a core component of service learning is vital for enabling students to connect their experiences with academic content, fostering critical thinking and aligning with authentic assessment principles. Effective reflection encourages students to analyze their challenges, solutions, and learning processes in depth. For example, questions such as "What challenges did you encounter during the project, and how did you overcome them?" or "How did your theoretical knowledge help address the real-world issue, and how could it be improved?" guide students in critically evaluating their experiences. Additionally, asking, "What did this project teach you about civic responsibility and its importance in your field of study?" helps students internalize the significance of their contributions. Incorporating reflective practices such as journals, structured discussion forums, or multimedia presentations allows students to articulate their learning journey while developing essential skills like problem-solving and ethical reasoning. These activities deepen students' understanding of the subject matter and equip them to assess their growth and contributions to broader societal goals.

Fourth, **leveraging technology** is essential for broadening the scope of service learning, as it facilitates collaboration, communication, and project management, even across distant communities. Tools and platforms can enhance the learning experience by streamlining processes and fostering engagement. Collaboration tools such as Google Workspace, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom enable virtual meetings and document sharing, while project management tools like Trello and Asana help organize tasks and monitor progress effectively. For reflective practices, platforms like Padlet and Miro provide visual boards where students can post insights and receive peer feedback, en-

couraging deeper engagement. Furthermore, AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini assist students in brainstorming ideas, drafting proposals, and refining reflections, while Copilot supports coding or technical aspects of projects, ensuring efficiency and high-quality outcomes. For instance, students collaborating with a rural cooperative could use Zoom for check-ins, Trello to track deliverables, and ChatGPT or Gemini for reports or creative solutions. By integrating these technologies, educators create dynamic environments that extend beyond traditional boundaries, engaging students meaningfully with real-world challenges.

Fifth, **customizing projects to local contexts** is essential for maximizing their relevance and impact, as it allows educators to address specific community or industry challenges effectively. Conducting a needs assessment helps align these challenges with course objectives. For example, students could create an export plan for a small handmade textile business aiming to enter international markets. By applying principles of export documentation, market research, and global marketing strategies, students identify potential markets, analyze competitive advantages, and propose solutions to export barriers. This project builds practical skills in export management while fostering global entrepreneurial spirit and ethical responsibility in trade. Tailoring projects to local needs ensures students gain academically and socially valuable skills, delivering tangible benefits to the community. This approach enhances the learning experience by connecting theoretical knowledge to practical applications, preparing students to tackle real-world challenges effectively.

In sum, by strategically planning and implementing community-engaged service learning, educators can create a learning environment that not only enhances students' academic and professional skills but also fosters a strong sense of civic responsibility and community engagement. These efforts contribute to the broader goal of developing socially responsible graduates who are equipped to make meaningful contributions to society.

SCALABILITY OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SERVICE LEARNING

The scalability of community-engaged service learning is not limited to academic institutions or specific communities. This approach can be adapted to various contexts, including public and private institutions, and across different geographic regions. While challenges such as obtaining company support and managing project timelines may vary depending on the institution's context, the core principles of community-engaged service learning remain consistent. Key factors that influence scalability include the institution's reputation, faculty competencies in stakeholder management, and the availability of resources. For educators in international business looking to scale this approach in their courses, it is important to consider these factors and tailor the method to fit their specific context.

CONCLUSION

As educators and innovators in business education, we are constantly seeking methods that bridge the gap between theory and practice while also instilling a deep sense of civic responsibility in our students. Being a finalist for the 2023 AIB T&E SIG Teaching Innovation Award has highlighted the transformative potential of such initiatives. As discussed, the implementation of community-engaged service learning in International Business courses has significantly enhanced student engagement and academic performance, while also fostering the development of socially responsible global citizens. However, this is just one aspect of the broader impact that experiential learning can have on higher education (Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2008).

The principles underlying this approach are not confined to a single discipline; they can be extended across various educational contexts to cultivate critical skills such as problem-solving, leadership, and ethical decision making. While challenges such as building strong community partnerships and managing project timelines exist, they are surmountable through strategic planning and collaboration. The potential to scale this approach across different disciplines and industries is vast, offering a pathway for the widespread adoption of experiential learning.

As more educators recognize and implement this approach, its influence will undoubtedly extend beyond the classroom, shaping future business leaders who are prepared to address global challenges with a strong sense of civic duty. Perhaps it is time we systematically apply our academic theories to the practice of education itself, ensuring that our teaching methods not only convey knowledge but also foster the values necessary for students to make meaningful contributions to society. By embracing this approach, we can build a solid foundation for informed decision making and leadership in education, ultimately equipping our students to navigate the complexities of the global business landscape with a commitment to both professional excellence and social responsibility.

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