Chapter 8

The Tamaula Project:
Service Learning in Central Mexico – A Report on the Service-Learning Approach at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Irapuato Campus

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses an experience in service learning in a rural community in central Mexico, developed by students from a private university located in the area. The aim is to identify if this educational approach builds on interactions that support individual and collective improvement simultaneously. Service learning was introduced and tested at this institution to enhance the academics' educational tool box. This development was embedded in a core (not elective) module focused on developing students writing and research skills. Problems emerged when students were asked to organize and execute a project. They started planning based on preconceived ideas before visiting the place. As a result, the project initially involved a top-down design for restructuring a community. Even though this might be useful, the project required incorporating service learning principles. These consider issues such as capacity building that may start from community needs or aspirations; a bottom-up approach that was not recognized initially by students. The expectation was to develop something 'different' in a community that had been receiving aid from different sources and had not yet thrived.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2009, a group of students from a private university in central Mexico participated in a course which was adapted to suit service learning purposes. The project took place in a rural community called Tamaula, one of the poorest small villages in the state of Guanajuato. Its lack of resources, mainly

water, was addressed previously by other organizations, and even though some progress was achieved, no fundamental improvement could be claimed yet. The community had been accustomed to receiving financial aid from several organizations, creating some dependencies to external support that did not strengthen its resilience and viability.

Students from the nearby Tecnológico de Monterrey, branch campus in Irapuato, wanted to help the community in any way they could, starting with the basic idea of a philanthropic intervention. This approach evolved as they were instructed in learning service principles, involving a collective participation that evolves within the community and strives for internal collective capacity building.

Students began collecting observations on community's needs and focused on identifying and developing activities that were feasible to do with their limited resources. An important aspect to evaluate inside the module was that the project should have an impact in the community in the short and long term.

BACKGROUND

Before analyzing how the project at the Tecnológico de Monterrey and the Tamaula community took place, the terms related to service learning needs to be contextualized. Although there is no common agreement on what service learning means, nor on its precise methodology, it can be related to community engagement, community based research, social project development, and community learning.

Service learning is mostly perceived as a positive educational activity that favors engagement and development, although some theorist suggest that the general public does not recognize the term nor understand fully what service learning means (Furco & Billig, 2002). This has led to confusions, due to the lack of substantial research to fully comprehend the impact of these types of projects in communities (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

For the purpose of this project, service learning can be considered as a response to the many needs of our faltering democracy (Wade, 1997); a non political or apolitical form of engagement with the community, which entails civic learning and democratic engagement (Finley, 2011), and as a form of experiential learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994) beyond the classroom (EPA, 2000) from the point of view of chaos and complexity theories in open systems (Fleener et al. 2011).

The Institution

Tecnológico de Monterrey is one of the leading private universities in Mexico. It is an educational system founded in 1943 in the city of Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León. Currently, it has 31 campuses distributed throughout Mexico. Its mission statement is the following:

The mission of Tecnológico de Monterrey is to educate persons with integrity, ethical standards and a humanistic outlook, who are internationally competitive in their professional field and, who, at the same time are good citizens committed to the economic, political, social and cultural development of their community and to the sustainable use of natural resources. (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2014)

Tecnológico de Monterrey is one of the most highly regarded institutions in México (Watson, Hollister, Stroud, & Babcock, 2011). Its main activities are directed towards promoting innovation, technol-

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