

Students and Communities: Evaluating the Mutual Benefits of Service-Learning Project in a Social Media Branding Course

Nur Athirah Diyana Mohammad Yusof¹, Nur Ayuni Shamsul Bahri^{2*}, Roslina Mohammad²

¹Department of Creative Artificial Intelligence, Faculty of Artificial Intelligence, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, Jalan Sultan, Yahya Petra, 54100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Department of Management of Technology, Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, Jalan Sultan, Yahya Petra, 54100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: n.ayuni@utm.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24135> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24135

Published Date: 15 December 2024

Abstract

In the dynamic landscape of higher education, the integration of service-learning has emerged as a cornerstone for fostering holistic student development while contributing to community empowerment. This study evaluates the influence of a Social Media Branding course on students' service-learning experiences and the reciprocal benefits experienced by community partners. Employing qualitative document and thematic analyses, the study explores how students perceive the course's impact on their engagement with service-learning projects and how communities evaluate the outcomes. The findings highlight that student gained a heightened awareness of the practical application of theoretical concepts, applying social media branding strategies to address real-world organizational challenges. This process bridged the gap between theory and practice, significantly enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Equally important, feedback from communities underscored the tangible benefits of the projects, including improved organizational branding and increased community engagement. These insights offer valuable implications for curriculum design, emphasizing the dual benefits of service-learning for students and community partners, and highlight the transformative potential of experiential learning within higher education.

Keywords: Service-learning, Community, Social Media, Qualitative research, Thematic analysis

Introduction

Service-learning is a dynamic teaching methodology that merges community engagement with structured academic learning, promoting holistic development in students across intellectual, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Heffernan, 2001). As a

transformative approach in higher education, it offers students an opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge into practical applications, fostering deeper learning and professional readiness (Salam et al., 2019). This experiential model is pivotal in equipping students with the critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills essential for thriving in the contemporary workforce. Furthermore, the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 highlights the strategic importance of experiential learning, including service-learning, as a means of cultivating well-rounded graduates equipped with robust soft skills. Rooted in the philosophy of "learning by doing," service-learning emphasizes the integration of practical experience with academic inquiry, thus fostering not only cognitive and emotional growth but also a commitment to societal well-being and democratic values (Yob, 2014). Recognized globally as a high-impact educational practice, service-learning engages students in meaningful, transformative experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom boundaries (Amran et al., 2018). Unlike conventional community service, which primarily addresses the needs of recipients, service-learning emphasizes reciprocal benefits, ensuring both community needs and student learning outcomes are achieved (Maharam et al., 2018).

In Malaysia, the integration of service learning into academic curricula gaining prominence through the launch of the Service Learning Malaysia (SULAM) program in 2019 (Rahim et al., 2023). This initiative reflects a growing response to the challenges faced by Malaysian graduates, particularly in the realm of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability (Abdullah et al., 2020). By embedding service-learning into higher education, institutions provide a structured platform for students to bridge classroom knowledge with practical applications, addressing real-world challenges within communities (Ismail et al., 2021). In this context, the Social Media and Branding co-curricular course represents a novel approach to integrating service-learning into the curriculum. This study explores the influence of this course, which incorporates a service-learning program, on enhancing students' learning experiences and their capacity to address community needs effectively. By focusing on a practical yet academically rigorous framework, the course serves as a model for leveraging service-learning to develop socially responsible and industry-ready graduates.

Social Media and Branding Course Overview

The Social Media and Branding course (UKQ2212) is a co-curricular program offered at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, as part of the SULAM initiative. This compulsory course for second-year diploma students carries 2 credit hours and spans 14 weeks. It equips students with the knowledge and skills to manage personal or business branding on social media, emphasizing strategy development across various industries. Table 1 outlines the three course outcomes of this course.

Table 1

UKQF2212 Course Outcomes

Course Outcomes (CO)	Outcomes
CO1	Organise relevant and updated facts on media social and branding through information search from various sources.
CO2	Analyse the practices of sustainability principles that have been acquired through a variety of extracurricular activities in proposing service-learning activities.
CO3	Respect group members, cooperate and carry out responsibilities well through community engagement activities.

The course includes five assessments (as in Table 2), with 60% of the total marks allocated to service-learning-related tasks, such as project execution, reporting, and reflective presentations.

Table 2

Lists of UKQ2212 Assessments

Type of Assessments	Percentage
Learning Portfolio	20%
Group Project	20%
Service-learning Project	30%
Service-learning Report	20%
Reflection Video Presentation	10%

As indicated in Table 2, 60% of the assessment marks are based on the students' service-learning project, which includes the project, report writing, and a reflection video. The course schedule is divided into several topics, as detailed in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Course Activities

Weeks	Topics
<i>Fundamental of Social Media and Branding Strategies</i>	
1	Introduction to Social Media
2	Introduction of Branding
3	Social Media and Branding
<i>Social Media Audience Analysis</i>	
4	Targeted Audience and Audience Analysis
5	Facebook and TikTok Ads Analysis
6	Application of AI in Audience Analysis
7	Content Creation – Part 1
8	Content Creation – Part 2
<i>Implementation of Knowledge through Service-learning Activities</i>	
9	Service-learning – Identification Issues
10	Service-learning – Preparation

11	Service-learning – Project Execution
<i>Service-learning Reflection</i>	
12	Service-learning – Reporting and Reflection
13	Presentation and Report Submission
14	Reflection

The Social Media and Branding Course is designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of social media strategies and branding concepts through a structured 14-week program. The course is divided into four main themes, each focusing on specific aspects of social media branding and culminating in a service-learning project that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical application. The first theme, Fundamentals of Social Media and Branding Strategies, spans weeks 1 to 3. During this period, students are introduced to the core theories and case studies related to personal and product branding from various industries. These foundational sessions aim to strengthen their understanding of branding principles and their application in real-world scenarios. Students are tasked with creating digital portfolios and designing video content, which serve as practical assignments to enhance their learning and creativity.

From weeks 4 to 8, the focus shifts to Social Media Audience Analysis, where students engage in hands-on activities to develop practical skills. These sessions include audience targeting, ads analysis, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to aid content creation. Students learn step-by-step methods for crafting effective branding strategies on popular social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. They also explore advanced techniques to analyze advertisements and identify key audience demographics, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical execution. In weeks 9 to 11, students move into the Implementation through Service-Learning phase. Here, they apply their acquired knowledge to address real-life community issues identified earlier in the course. Guided by their lecturer, students design and implement a service-learning project tailored to the needs of the community. This project provides a platform for them to practice problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership skills while contributing meaningfully to society.

The final phase, Reflection and Reporting, takes place during weeks 12 to 14. Students document their service-learning experiences and reflect on their impact through detailed reports and video presentations. These reflective exercises not only help consolidate their learning but also allow them to assess the effectiveness of their strategies and their personal growth throughout the course. Overall, the course structure ensures a balanced integration of theory, practical skills, and real-world application, equipping students with the necessary tools to excel in the dynamic field of social media branding.

Research Method

Participants

This study involved a total of 25 second-year diploma students from SPACE UTM, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, enrolled in various disciplines, primarily engineering, with over 80% from engineering fields. These students participated in the Social Media and Branding co-curricular course during the 2022/2023 Semester 2 session. The course, a compulsory part of their curriculum, spanned 14 consecutive weeks and included a mandatory service-learning program with an external community. To ensure the success of the service-learning

component, three staff members who also the service-learning participants from Pusat Khidmat Alor Gajah, Melaka were actively engaged in the project. These staff members, primarily responsible for running the center's operations, provided essential insights into their challenges with social media and branding. They were interviewed as part of the project to understand their needs, gauge the program's relevance, and obtain feedback on its outcomes.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To address the research question of this study; What is the impact of this service-learning program module on students and communities?. A comprehensive analysis of reflection documents and feedback from the community was undertaken. The primary data sources included group-written student reflection reports and interviews with community representatives. A total of eight groups were formed from the 25 participating students, and each group submitted a detailed self-reflection report. Additionally, three staff members from Pusat Khidmat were interviewed to gain insights into the community's perspective on the program's outcomes and its relevance to real-world needs. These online interview sessions were conducted smoothly, with participants providing thoughtful and detailed responses. The student reflections were been recorder and analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), a well-established qualitative method for identifying patterns or themes within data. TA has been a cornerstone of qualitative research since 1985 (Daplus, 1985), with formal procedures introduced by Arronson in 1994. For this study, the structured framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed, ensuring a systematic and reliable process.

Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to TA was applied as follows:

1. Familiarising with the data: The reflection reports and interview transcripts were read multiple times to fully understand the perspectives of both students and community participants.
2. Generating codes from the data: Significant segments of text were systematically coded to highlight key insights and recurring ideas.
3. Constructing themes: The codes were grouped into broader themes that encapsulated the core findings from both the student reflections and community feedback.
4. Reviewing potential themes: The themes were reviewed to ensure coherence and alignment with the data from both sources.
5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined and labeled to reflect its essence, ensuring it accurately represented the insights from students and the community.
6. Producing the report: The final themes were synthesized into a narrative to address the research question comprehensively.

The inclusion of community feedback added depth to the analysis, providing an external perspective on the program's effectiveness. The community participants expressed appreciation for the students' contributions, highlighting their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to address real-world challenges. The feedback also emphasized the mutual benefits of the program, with both students and the community gaining valuable learning experiences. By integrating reflections from students and insights from community representatives, this study offers a holistic understanding of the impact of the service-learning module. The findings underscore the transformative potential of experiential learning, fostering not only academic growth but also meaningful community engagement.

Findings and Discussion

Eight student reflection reports, each representing a group, were compiled and analyzed as part of this study. Following the thematic analysis (TA) framework detailed earlier, the first phase familiarization was undertaken to process the qualitative data. This step required gathering and isolating statements that directly addressed the research questions (RQs) posed in the study. The process began with an in-depth, focused reading of all student reports, systematically identifying relevant statements for further analysis. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, this phase involved multiple readings of the text, accompanied by detailed note-taking to capture key observations. A summary of these familiarization notes, derived from the students' reflections on the UKQ2212 course, is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Extraction from Student's Reflection Report

Notes Extract from Students' Reflection Report

..learned that we need to have a **lot of confidence to speak up and communicate** with those people. Doing this kind of thing was totally out of our comfort zone and a whole new thing for us. (G1)

Speaking out loud and communicating with strangers was so hard, but this social media and branding course literally **built our confidence** fully (G1)

.... can add new knowledge about **how to edit** a good video and how to use Canva. (G1)

We have learned that we need to build and **encourage trust** first with each other on the team. Value truth and authenticity are more likely to trust and build stronger relationships with each other. (G1)

....gained more understanding and more skills which as **utilizing various social media** platforms to attract more target audiences. (G1)

....we know **how to handle the program** in the future after we have got this new experience. It helps us to do different tasks, solve a problem that happens that day, and always **make a backup plan**. (G1)

.... able to **take on the challenge of teaching someone** who is older than us. (G1)

..exposure to **creating videos** and branding on social media platforms. (G2)

..**assisted older individuals** in expressing their creativity and opinions through video. (G2)

..**developed communication and cooperation** skills through interaction with community and professional groups. (G3)

...adapted communication style for different audiences. (G3)

...enhancing our **social skills with others** because when the second session takes place, we guide participants calmly through '**Canva**' and '**Capcut**' when they need help. (G4)

... earned to carefully **select images and videos** that reflect my values and identity and make my digital identity more cohesive and stronger. (G4)

... Helped improve **communication skills**, especially in the context of visual communication...able to convey message more clearly and effectively through the images and videos produced, strengthening the appeal and impact of the message to convey. (G6)

We progressed in improving our **public speaking and communication abilities**. We also improved our teaching abilities and gained more self-confidence. (G7)

... the program itself taught us **how to edit photos and videos**. For example, how to set up a program from start to finish. Since we have all made mistakes in the program, we can do it more properly in the future. (G7)

*G is stands for group

Table 4 shows examples of students' reflections on the program, addressing the research questions. Not all student responses are included in Table 4, as some were irrelevant or unsuitable for this study. This phase involves Thematic Analysis, where qualitative data is read and re-read to identify accurate statements before researchers extract codes and themes. Based on Table 4, the next step is coding, where researchers group similar statements under one code. Table 5 below summarizes the codes and themes derived from the data in Table 4.

Table 5

Example of Codes Development

Notes Extract from Students' Reflection Report	Codes
.... can add new knowledge about how to edit a good video and how to use Canva. (G1)	Video Editing Skills
..exposure to creating videos and branding on social media platforms. (G2)	Video Creation for Branding
...enhancing our social skills with others because when the second session takes place, we guide participants calmly through 'Canva' and 'Capcut' when they need help. (G4)	Video Editing, Canva
... earned to carefully select images and videos that reflect my values and identity and make my digital identity more cohesive and stronger. (G4)	Content Creation
.... the program itself taught us how to edit photos and videos. For example, how to set up a program from start to finish. Since we have all made mistakes in the program, we can do it more properly in the future. (G7)	Video Editing Skills

Table 5 showcases the evaluation and coding process of students' reflective descriptions. Statements from different groups with similar objectives were assigned identical codes. To ensure accuracy and avoid redundancy, researchers meticulously reviewed the data multiple times. Once the initial codes were developed, related codes were grouped into overarching themes. For instance, codes associated with "Technical Skills" were merged into a single theme. Through this process, the study identified five major themes highlighting the impact of the service-learning program within the Social Media and Branding course. These themes emerged from student reflections submitted during week 13.

The five key themes identified through analysis are as shown in Table 6:

Table 6

Key Themes

Key Themes	No. of Statement
Confidence Building	4 statements
Teamwork Skills	3 statements
Communication Skills	6 statements
Technical Skills	5 statements
Problem-Solving	2 statements

Table 6 summarizes the key themes identified from the students' reflections, highlighting the impact of the service-learning program. Communication skills emerged as the most significant theme, with six student statements emphasizing its development. Students reported that engaging with older participants, using simple vocabulary, and interacting with various community and corporate members helped enhance their communication abilities. These real-world experiences, often absent in traditional classroom settings, prepared them to communicate confidently before entering the workforce.

Technical Skills were the second most developed, with five statements showcasing improvements in this area. Students noted their ability to teach and apply social media and branding knowledge effectively to participants, aligning directly with Course Outcome 1 (CO1). This highlights the program's success in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. The third significant skill was Confidence Building, supported by four student statements. The program challenged students to step out of their comfort zones, requiring them to present and teach unfamiliar community members. This experience contributed to their personal growth and reinforced the importance of incorporating service-learning as a core objective of university co-curriculum activities. Other skills, such as Teamwork and Problem-Solving, also saw notable improvements, demonstrating the program's comprehensive benefits. These findings affirm that the Social Media and Branding course successfully achieved its intended objectives. In addition to the student data, feedback from the community was collected through online interviews with three community members. Three participants from communities were contacted for follow-up feedback regarding the application of knowledge and skills they gained from the service-learning program conducted. Figure 1, 2 and 3 shows the feedback taken from the community's participants via online Whatsapp platform.



Figure 1: Feedback from Participant A

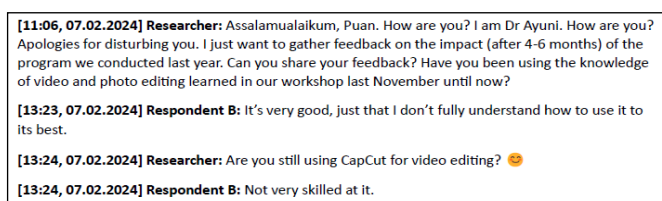


Figure 2: Feedback from Participant B

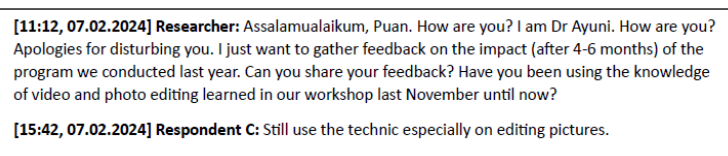


Figure 3: Feedback from Participant C

Based on the feedback reported above, Participant A, shared that they still actively use the photo-editing skills learned during the program. Additionally, Participant A frequently utilizes the Canva application introduced by the speaker during the event. These skills have been applied to design posters for the service center's programs and improve photography techniques, resulting in more visually appealing and organized photos. Participant A also mentioned that the knowledge and skills gained have been helpful in producing well-structured and attractive financial and program reports for the service center, using Canva as a tool. Participant B, on the other hand, highlighted that the knowledge and skills shared during the program were extremely valuable and useful. However, they mentioned facing some challenges due to the short duration of the program, which left them still in the learning phase of fully mastering the skills. Meanwhile, Participant C expressed that they are actively applying the skills taught by the program speakers, particularly in photo editing. Participant C also noted that they have taken the initiative to share and teach these skills to others at the service center, further amplifying the program's impact.

Overall, the service-learning project conducted under the Social Media and Branding Co-curriculum Course was deemed a successful initiative based on the positive feedback from participants and the community. The program not only proved to be relevant and essential in today's digital age but also stood out as an inclusive platform where participants of all skill

levels and ages could benefit. The knowledge and skills imparted during the program have provided significant advantages to the participants, who are staff members at the service center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the service-learning program under the Social Media and Branding Co-curriculum Course has proven to be a valuable and impactful initiative. The feedback gathered from the three participants highlights the program's effectiveness in equipping them with practical skills such as photo editing, report design, and the use of Canva, which they continue to apply in their daily responsibilities. The participants' ability to not only implement these skills but also share them with others demonstrates the program's ripple effect within the service center and the broader community. The program's relevance in the digital era, combined with its inclusive nature, underscores its importance as a platform for lifelong learning. The knowledge and skills gained have significantly improved the quality of work at the service center, fostering better communication, reporting, and community engagement. These outcomes affirm that the program successfully met its objectives, serving as a model for future initiatives aimed at enhancing community skills and fostering meaningful collaborations between educational institutions and local communities.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS), grant number FRGS/1/2023/SKK06/UTM/02/3 funded by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia, and the part of this research is supported by the GUP, grant number Q.K130000.2743.04K10, Potential Academic Staff Grant, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

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