

# **SERVICE-LEARNING-AN EMERGING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TOOL**

**Phinu Mary Jose**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**CHRIST (Deemed to be University)**  
**Bangalore-India**

## **ABSTRACT**

Service-Learning is a commitment that has engaged all stakeholders equally at CHRIST (Deemed to be University). CHRIST established Centre for Social Action way back in the year 1999 in order to practice the ideals preached by our Patron Saint, Kuriakose Elias Chavara a social reformer, who, much ahead of his times, initiated service through learning-for- all.

Various Academic Departments also actively engage in Service-Learning through their respective discipline-based modules. Exemplary efforts towards this is highlighted in the Departments of Social Work, Sociology, Psychology, Education, Sciences, Engineering and Commerce-Business Management to name a few. Contextualizing the text prescribed in the curriculum has been charted and designed to suit the needs of the community. Their daily experiences have been the source of their propelling themselves into the world of community engagement in Service-Learning. The initial phase of streamlining and investigation did reveal a lot of challenges and opportunities in this field which helped in the proper planning and preparation of this effort. Implementing the service activity has been equally an adrenaline pumping phase and pushed each faculty and student at CHRIST to do better resulting in a concrete reflection of the magnitude of the entire Service-Learning Programme.

This paper is an attempt to capture some of the experiences of a few academic departments that radiate the power of change that Service-Learning manifests in all its stakeholders. The journey traversed has been evidence of the trajectory of growth portrayed, which the paper seeks to present as experiments in Service-Learning. Finally, the paper also lays down the roadmap for the future of Service-Learning at CHRIST in the form of expectations from both academic and social space.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The interest in Service-Learning as a tool to enhance learning experiences is the sole reason this paper was envisioned. Service -Learning (henceforth mentioned as S-L) is an important concept of teaching-learning practices of Indian Culture, whether it is the Gurukula system or the much-evolved higher education institutions. Education caters to primarily the need to understanding of oneself and others around the self, the manifestation of all learning need to be reflected in the way of life that the learner exemplifies. S-L is a terminology that started appearing in pedagogic literature in order to strengthen the case for application-oriented learning, presently facilitated in different formats at various stages of learning. From Elementary Education to University levels, learners are engaged in learning through service, this not only makes it experiential but also long-lasting in its outcome-orientation. Learners carry with themselves, lifetime experiences that shape their thought-processes and in some cases, career aspirations too. This paper introduces Christ University's initiatives in S-L and the efforts thereof that helped the primary stakeholders-students to learn through social outreach. The structure of the paper encompasses information about Christ University and philosophy and history of S-L through the Centre for Social Action-the nodal centre for training and orientation of S-L, followed by observations on the four departments that highlight S-L as a good practice in their pedagogy, with a closing remark on the way forward for S-L.

### **About CHRIST**

CHRIST (Deemed to be University) was born out of the educational vision of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, an educationalist and social reformer of the nineteenth century in South India. He founded the first Catholic indigenous congregation, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), in 1831 which administers CHRIST (Deemed to be University).

Established in 1969 as Christ College, it undertook path-breaking initiatives in Indian higher education with the introduction of innovative and modern curricula, insistence on academic discipline, imparting of Holistic Education and adoption of global higher education practices with the support of creative and dedicated staff. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of India conferred Autonomy to Christ College in 2004 and identified it as an Institution with Potential for Excellence in 2006. In 2008 under Section 3 of the UGC Act, 1956, the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India, declared the institution a Deemed to be University, in the name and style of Christ University. One of the first institutions in India to be accredited in 1998 by the NAAC, and subsequently in 2004 and 2016, CHRIST (Deemed to be University) has the top grade 'A' in the 4-point scale.

The multi-disciplinary University which focuses on teaching research and service offers Bachelors to Doctoral programmes in humanities, social sciences, science, commerce, management, engineering, education, and law to over 21000 students. The campus is a living example for the harmonious multiculturalism with students from all the states of India and around 60 different countries. CHRIST (Deemed to be University) publishes six peer-reviewed research journals and has published more than 300 books in Kannada and English. A promoter of sports, music and literary activities, it is a nurturing ground for creative excellence. CHRIST hopes to reinvigorate the true spirit of Service-Learning in the coming years as well consciously living our Motto-Excellence and Service

**CSA-Centre for Social Action**, the nodal centre for training and orientation of S-L programmes, is a Centre that promotes volunteerism at all levels and ensures that at the end of the academic journey of a student he or she also traverses the path of social responsibility thereby creating empathetic individuals and citizens who are agents of social liberation. CSA engages in social outreach programmes in the urban slums and rural areas spread across the country. The centre provides a platform for all students to engage in community-based interventions, through its flagship programme-Educate a Child Sponsorship Programme, environmental consciousness and experience societal dynamics at the grassroots.

### **HISTORY OF SERVICE-LEARNING AT CHRIST**

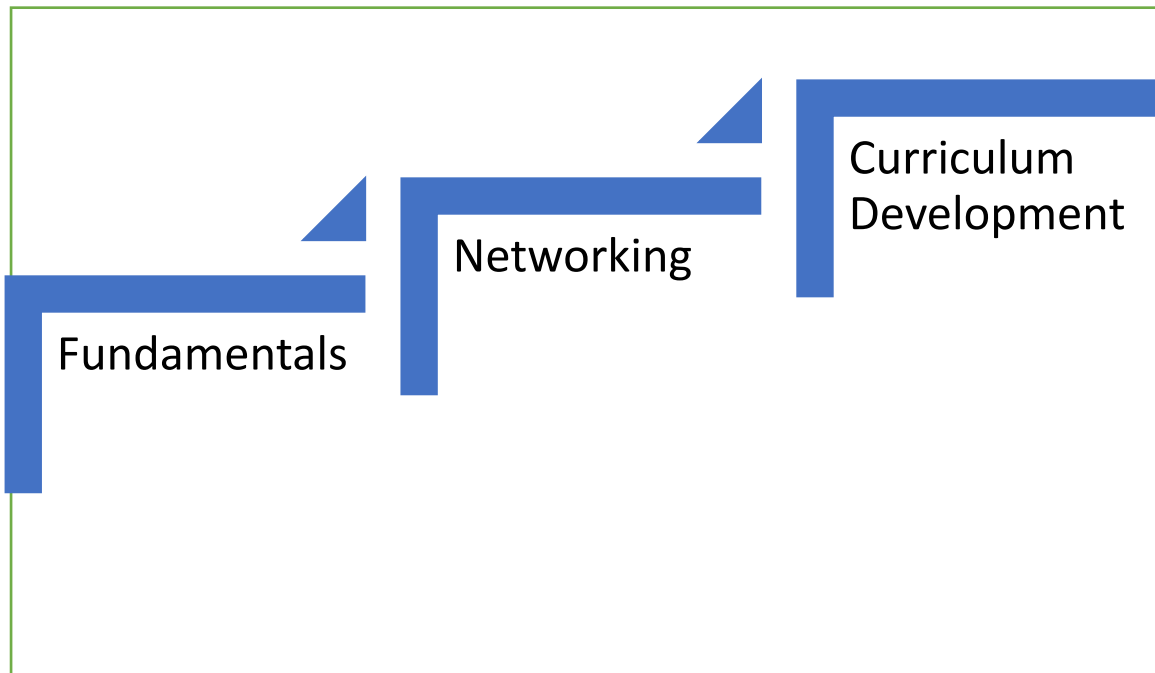
The seed of Service-Learning was sown by United Board's Grant to CHRIST to support various initiatives by the departments in order to fuel the Strategic Plan of the University and align with the graduate attributes designed.

The management at Christ was unequivocal in its commitment to the cause of S-L since it justified the motto of Excellence and Service. The support from Deans and Directors was sought for implementing and institutionalising the concept of S-L in academic departments.

The first orientation done on S-L was for this cohort of Administrators at all departments followed by another meet organized for those faculty members inclined towards including S-L in their respective curriculum, in some cases, those members who were already doing interventions on the lines of S-L but never named it thus.

In the process of institutionalising S-L at Christ, a series of events and programmes were organised.

**Flowchart depicting the journey of S-L at CHRIST**



- i. **Learning Fundamentals with Stakeholders-Faculty, Students by Experts**  
A series of sessions were conducted by experts in order to understand the foundations of S-L for Faculty Members who would drive the concept, for students who would participate and learn from the experience and also the Community Based Organizations who would partner in this academic endeavour.
- ii. **Networking with Colleges and Universities practicing S-L**  
The best practices of S-L followed by some Higher Education Institutions were captured for study and analysis including on-site exposure visits for Faculty Members.
- iii. **Building foundations with community organizations both onsite and offsite for delivery of curriculum**  
The last phase was connecting with Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organizations that would provide a platform for application of the S-L course

The efforts taken at Christ were facilitated by Centre for Social Action by initiating dialogue with Administrative Representatives and presenting before them the possibilities of exploring S-L as a tool to engage better with all stakeholders of higher education.

As is typical in enforcing a S-L orientation the following procedure was followed,

- a) **Streamlining and Investigation:** Faculty members and students investigate the community issues that they might potentially address. Investigation typically involves members in brainstorming on suitable course content/theory that best connects to address the needs of the community and its stakeholders. It's an activity in itself to explore experiential learning opportunities at Institutional and Community Settings
- b) **Planning and Preparation:** Teachers, students, and development organizations plan the learning and service activities, and address the administrative issues needed for successful completion of a project.
- c) **Action (Implementing the Service Activity):** The “heart” of the project: engaging in the meaningful service experience that will help students develop important knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and will benefit the community.

- d) **Reflection:** Students understand the service-learning experience and think about its meaning and connection to them, their society, and what they have learned in during their classroom sessions and its relevance in understanding and addressing the needs of community. This is done through either group discussion presentations or through submission of reports.
- e) **Evaluation:** Evaluation is key to the sustainability of service-learning. It clarifies priorities, enhances accountability and impacts accreditation. It also conveys results to stakeholders and the public, supporting the case for additional funding, expansion, growth and possible redirection. Assessment helps identify any changes that should be made and motivates participants by documenting progress and gains.
- f) **Demonstration:** The final experience when students, community participants and others publicly share what they have learned on a public (platform) forum, the results of the service-learning project, and look ahead to the future.

### **GOOD PRACTICES OF S-L**

As S-L began to gain precedence as a learning tool at various departments of Christ, it became imperative for CSA to give increased support to those participants who would invest time and effort consistently and continuously in developing their curriculum.

The best experiments in S-L involved *precision* in planning, *meticulous* implementation and *insightful* reflection.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As part of the process of putting this paper together, a few examples from departments that applied S-L to their curriculum were chosen on the basis of their commitment to the future of S-L in the curriculum and the level of impact seen thus far. Syllabus and Course Plans of the departments were referred for understanding the evolution of the course contents, Sample Reports to gauge the learning outcomes of the same.

### **EXAMPLES OF SERVICE-LEARNING AT CHRIST**

#### **E-SAIL (Engineering in Service Assisted Integrated Learning)**

E-SAIL is an exceptional attempt by the Faculty of Engineering to integrate learning into service, primarily through HealthCare, Agriculture, Water and Disaster Management.

It is a volunteer-based approach to learning, in the sense that registrations to be a part of E-SAIL are based on voluntary interests submitted by students.

Problem-Identification, Solution-Building and Multi-disciplinary approach has been the strength of E-SAIL

The future plans include exposure to international forums and building prototypes on field.

**SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE** as part of the Rural Studio Programme, have developed sustainable structures for areas plagued by nature's fury or even tough terrains. Bamboo which is called *Green Steel* is a material that was used to build structures in an eco-friendly and economically-viable mode. Projects like these not only help beneficiaries of the community but also build in the learners a sense of empathy as future professionals.

#### **LEGAL AID**

The School of Law at Christ University, offers its learners a wonderful opportunity to not only disseminate legal awareness among the community stakeholders but also provides a platform for them to learn about societal issues through Legal Aid Clinic. It is mandatory programme for all graduating students of law.

Legal aid clinics are set up in the villages. Surveys are conducted in the village by the students. The aim of the survey is to identify the legal issues of the villagers and to provide appropriate aid accordingly. These include but not restrict to elementary legal education and career counselling for children, educating villagers about their basic rights and duties, setting up of a Right to Information portal, Road Safety Awareness programme.

The evidence to the journey of empowerment that both students and the beneficiaries proclaim is evidence of the outcome of this effort.

### **CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

The students of final year undergraduate studies in Sociology are offered an elective paper on Social Problems.

The course deals with issues surrounding the broad themes of population, health, development. In relation to population and health this paper would cover issues like aging, reproductive health, HIV AIDS, euthanasia, drug abuse, etc. Through service-learning the students are expected to get some practical knowledge about the issue and the solutions that are provided by various organizations. This can help them in grasping reality; contemplate on it and come up with newer/better ways to deal with it. The curriculum requires them to spend 20 hours of the total 60 hours on field work categorised as Service-Learning. Education, Citizenship and many other issues are analysed by students who execute the S-L initiative on field. Practical manifestation of the problems in the society is what challenges them to apply their classroom deliberations to action on ground.

### **FINANCIAL LITERACY**

The Post Graduate students of Finance Management learn Bank Management and as part of the course a financial literacy camp is held. Students of MBA-FM create awareness among the students, teaching and housekeeping staff in Christ University regarding different aspects in finance in relation to the current scenario of the economy. As an extension, they are also engaged in reaching out to beneficiaries of banking services, those from underprivileged backgrounds. Students hold sessions on Financial Awareness and Bank Transaction Processes in order to ease the handling of personal finances by these beneficiaries. It helps budding managers to be exposed to problems, both small and big, and handle them rationally as policy makers of tomorrow.

### **DISCUSSION**

The way forward for S-L at Christ can only be through the involvement of central leadership aligning with individual academic departments that network well with community-based civil society organizations.

The basic premise for S-L should be on each member of faculty who commits themselves to the curriculum development on his/her own interest and builds the course of action around the systemic environment at Christ. At the same time, there needs to be leadership commitment for liberal decisions of the member to make the course stronger for learners.

The design and development of the curriculum needs to be envisioned by a team from the same faculty so that the authenticity of its implementation can be reinforced by multiple stakeholders.

The budgetary constraints that inhibit certain new members to take the plunge need to be worked upon collectively by the academic departments and the central leadership.

### **CONCLUSION**

Service-Learning is a commitment that has engaged all stakeholders equally at CHRIST. Our commitment to S-L has been reinforced by Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's goal is to get the individual to form themselves rather than being formed will be our focus through this Service-Learning commitment to form a world more humane.

We need to commit ourselves to a world free from oppression, a world more humane and peaceful, a world more profoundly connected and concerned, a world living in harmony irrespective of the zillion differences. And in this framework of common orientation, CHRIST desires to create a socially relevant model of Academic Rigour that reinforces the need for each one to integrate oneself into the larger scheme of the community or neighbourhood that one belongs to. The charism of education that the congregation orients itself is emancipated in the realm of things that are possible in Service-Learning.

Christ University is a fertile ground for cultivating Service-Learning as an experiential tool for learning. More importantly, there is a congruence of values and culture conducive to developing such novel mechanisms of academic discourses. This will also facilitate long term relationship between University and Community, which is the purpose of any higher education institution.