

Fostering community and developing networks: Intercultural service learning



Project Update

Building on feedback from Pilot 1, in-class reflections, surveys, and co-creation sessions, a second pilot was delivered in Fall 2023. Pilot 2 welcomed more learners, with 15 successfully completing the course.

To help facilitate placements for the increased number of learners, a Service Learning placement coordinator was added to the team. Abby Popowich played a crucial role in facilitating a positive and supportive experience for both the learners and the community organizations involved. Abby provided career coaching and assistance to learners, helping to match them with organizations to maximize their learning opportunities. The coordinator also served as a liaison, acting as a point of contact to promote effective communication and address any concerns.

Based on feedback from the first cohort of learners and drawing on practices and relationships established in Pilot 1, the length of individual Service Learning placements was extended from four to six weeks in Pilot 2. This offered learners more opportunities to gain Canadian workplace experience, develop a deeper understanding of workplace culture, and build stronger networks. Learners also had more access to employment related resources that had been identified by the co-creation team.

During this phase, the co-creation team expanded, with the addition of five learners from Cohort 2 and several more community organization participants. This broader representation ensured a more diverse range of perspectives were incorporated.

Lastly, knowledge mobilization activities were undertaken, including workshops at conferences such as ATESL (Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language), TESL (Teachers of English as a Second Language) Ontario and presentations at Pathways to Prosperity and AASIA (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies). The team is currently offering workshops to the public, community organization employees, and language instructors through Tutela and internal channels.

Project Team

- Diane Hardy (Project Lead)
- Dr. Katie Crossman (Researcher)
- Dr. Rida Abboud (Developmental Evaluator)
- Danica MacDonald (Program Chair)
- Iftu Hargaaya (Instructor - Equity, Diversity and Inclusion)
- Jason Andrews (Instructor - English for Specific Purpose)
- Abby Popowich (Instructor - Service Learning Placement Coordinator)
- Jennifer Acevedo (Instructor)
- May Wang (Research Officer)
- Helena Shoraj (Research Assistant)
- Izuchukwu Igwe (Research Assistant)

Co-creation Team

- 6 Learners from Pilot 1
- 5 Learners from Pilot 2
- 6 Community organization participants

Project Partners

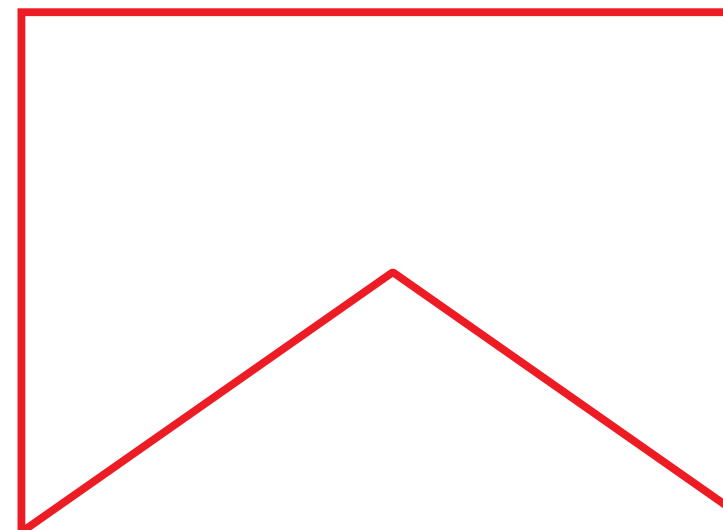
- ActionDignity
- Filipinos Rising for Inclusion and Equity to Nurture Democracy (FRIENDS)

Funder



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Key Concept: Transformative Learning

Transformative learning refers to a process that leads to more inclusive and reflective frames of reference with which to make meaning of one's self and one's world (Mezirow, 2000). Ideally, Service Learning is a transformational journey for both learners and organizations.

In this program, Service Learners reflected about how their perspectives changed throughout the program. An analysis of their reflections highlighted four key areas of transformation: Confidence, Intercultural Communication, Civic Engagement, and Empowerment. These aspects are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, contributing to a holistic and transformative learning experience.

Confidence - Learners reported improved language skills through in-class learning and practice during Serving Learning placements, which boosted their confidence in life and work.

"Service Learning helped me lose my fear of talking to other people in English."

"I worried about communicat[ing] with new people because my English needs some improvement...This feeling was changing because I found friendly people...After that I liked to deal more with people who were supporting me, especially my manager in the workplace in Community Service. I used a lot of information [from] this program in my workplace such as boundaries, values, power..."

Intercultural Communication - Learners reported that their communication skills, intercultural awareness, and understanding of Canadian workplace culture improved. This may also positively support their integration into Canadian culture and the workplace.

"I developed communication skills, and I learned about Canadian workplace values and culture during my placement."

"In my placement, I was able to develop my collaboration and communication skills by engaging with staff and women seeking support, as well as actively listening to their concerns and needs. I also learned how to communicate effectively and prioritize tasks."

Civic Engagement - By actively engaging with the community through the program, learners reported a sense of personal growth and fulfillment and a heightened desire to contribute to the community. We also know from following up with learners that many continued to work or volunteer at their Service Learning organizations beyond the program.

"As a newcomer, I didn't think I could help people in a country that I immigrated to. It was a unique experience. I didn't use to volunteer in my own country, but helping people in Canada, I was able to learn a lot about Canadian culture, especially people who are underprivileged. It was eye opening. At home, I never connected with people who needed support from the government or organizations. It was good to be a part of it."

"My service-learning placement provided me with a great opportunity to support women in need and engage with a community. It was a rewarding experience as it made me feel part of a community, allowing me to positively impact the lives of others and grow as a person."

A Sense of Belonging - Being able to help the community and provide service gave some learners a sense of purpose and belonging. They felt empowered and that their work mattered. This is likely to have a positive influence on how they view their future in Canada.

"I feel like I become more critical thinking, problem solving...This [placement] improve[d] my decision-making skills in real life...It was a very nice experience because I developed more communication skills and I feel that I got engaged with the community...Now I think I have gained work experience that might be useful in the future. I really appreciated the opportunity."



Photo: filipinosrising.ca

Project Partner – FRIENDS

FRIENDS (Filipinos Rising for Inclusion and Equity to Nurture Democracy) is a volunteer-based non-profit organization in Alberta, Canada. Their mission is to promote social justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity for both the Filipino community and all Albertans. Through advocacy, community engagement, and partnerships, FRIENDS works towards addressing systemic issues and fostering positive change. During the COVID pandemic, FRIENDS initiated programs to offer vital assistance to vulnerable families, helping them access resources and navigate challenges brought on by the pandemic.

FRIENDS is a grassroots organization platformed by ActionDignity. Members from FRIENDS played an active role in our co-creation and Service Learning placement process.

References:

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3–33). Jossey-Bass.