

International Practice Article

Reflections on Deconstructing Reciprocity: Dialogues With Community Partners on the Reality of Campus-Community Power Dynamics



Cynthia Chang-Huda



Jason Ng



Pamela Loh

Cynthia Chang-Huda¹, Jason Ng¹ and Pamela Loh¹

Abstract

This paper offers the experiences of Service-Learning at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) as an example of one university's approach to engage reciprocally with its community partners. We discuss the national context within which the approach to service-learning at SUSS emerged; and describe how a decade of annual dialogues with community partners have functioned as a consistent approach to update the mutual understanding between campus and community of what it means to engage reciprocally with each other,

through evolutions in the University's programme models for service-learning.

Keywords

reciprocity, service-learning, community engagement, community partnerships

Community engagement and service-learning in Singapore schools

In Singapore, community engagement was made compulsory from the primary to the pre-tertiary levels through the Community Involvement Program (CIP), launched by the Ministry of

1. Singapore University of Social Sciences

Education (MOE) on 1 October 1997. Part of Singapore's National Education narrative, the initiative aimed to build social cohesion and inculcate civic responsibility in students. Through active participation and involvement in community service, the programme aspired to enable students to develop a strong social conscience and a sense of belonging and commitment to their community, society, and country via experiential learning.

In mandating community service education in Singapore, unintended consequences such as episodic community service and lack of student voice arose. As a result, the programme evolved over three phases, with each reframing of the program reflecting a response to the unintended consequences identified in earlier phases (Chang & Yap, 2017).

Community engagement and service-learning in higher education

The adoption of community service and service-learning in institutions of higher learning grew steadily since the concept was first championed in Singapore by the National Youth Council in 1999 and adopted by MOE in 2000. Although the MOE does not mandate community engagement in tertiary institutions, most institutions have woven themes of

community engagement into selected courses, student programs, or other aspects of the student experience (Chang & Yap, 2017). In Singapore, community engagement evolved from being mostly voluntary service between the 2000s to 2010s; to a non-credit graduating requirement in the mid-2010s; to reach a tipping point from the 2020s where some form of credit-bearing community engagement or service-learning is mandated in the formal curriculum in most institutes of higher education.

In 2000, the Singapore Management University made completing 80 hours of community service a graduating requirement for students. In 2005, service-learning was introduced as a graduating requirement for all pre-service student teachers at the National Institute of Education, and as a significant milestone of student life at Republic Polytechnic. In 2014, SUSS incorporated service-learning as a graduating requirement for its full-time undergraduates. By 2016, Ngee Ann Polytechnic had committed to having every diploma course it offered include at least one module with a service-learning element. In 2021, the National University of Singapore introduced the Communities and Engagement Pillar in its undergraduate general education. In 2022, Singapore Institute of Technology introduced a Social Innovation Project

course for all undergraduates. In 2023, SUSS integrated service-learning in its undergraduate core curriculum (Chang & Yap, 2017; Mokhtar & Tan, 2024; National University of Singapore, n.d.). See Figure 1 for a timeline of the development of community engagement and service-learning in institutions of higher learning in Singapore.

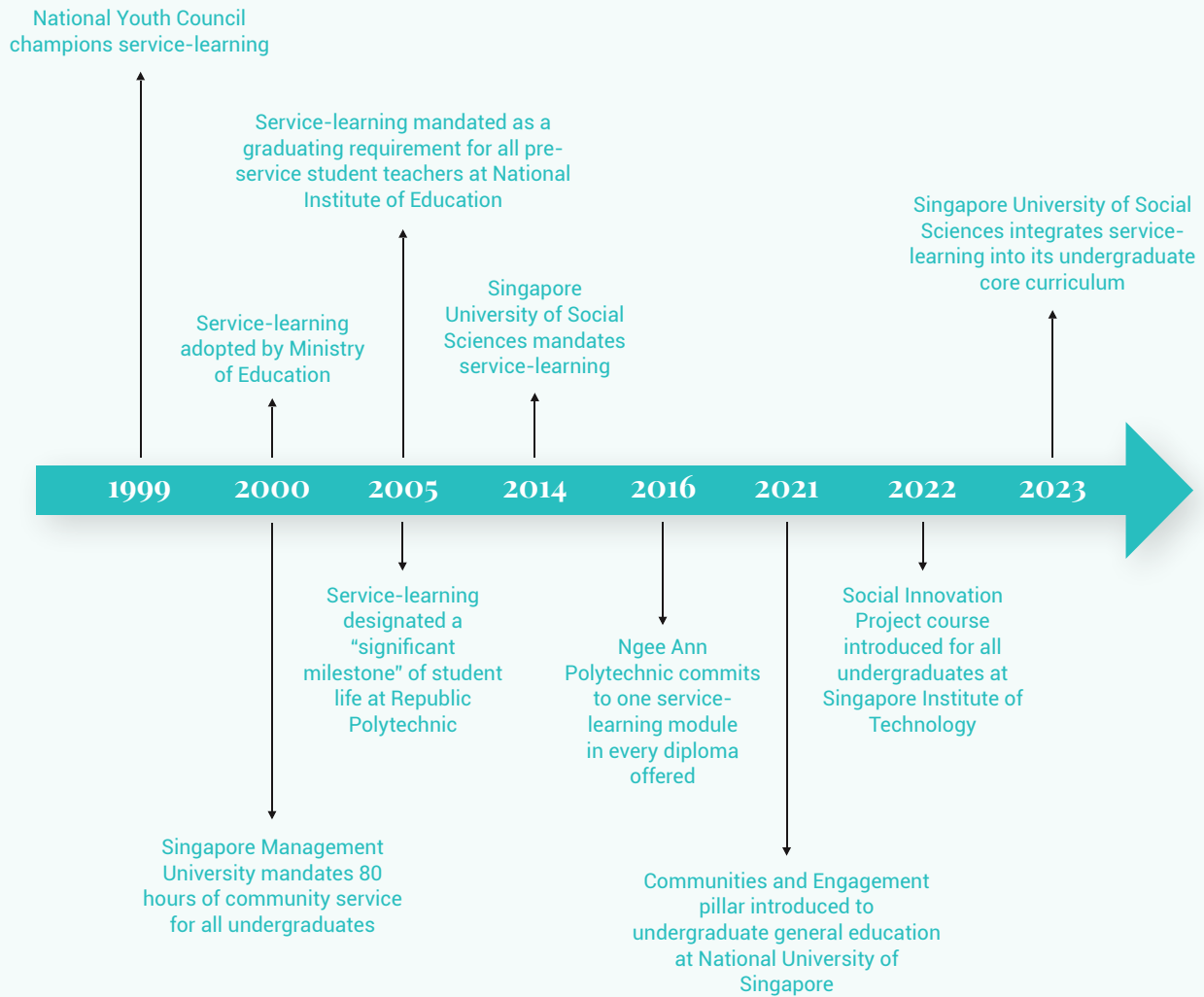
Power imbalance between educational institutions and community organisations

A pertinent issue in community service and service-learning in Singapore is an unequal balance of power between educational institutions and the community organisations that host students (Chang & Yap, 2017). At institutions of higher learning, institution-determined criteria (including those constrained by institutional structures such as conforming to the academic calendar or assessment schedules) tended to be the primary determinants of how community service and service-learning requirements were structured.

Noting the unequal balance of power between educational institutions and community partners as a challenge for community service and service-learning in Singapore, Chang & Yap (2017) posited that while prioritising the concerns of the educational institutions



Figure 1 | *A Timeline of the Development of Community Engagement and Service-Learning in Institutions of Higher Learning in Singapore*



over those of community partners should by no means be accepted as a given, they observed that this was seldom questioned and was more often than not accepted as a matter of practicality – akin to the instrumental partnerships that Clayton, et al., (2010), and Kniffin, et al., (2020) defined as transactional at best, and exploitative at worst. This reflected both a cultural bias in Singapore that prioritised education, and by extension educational institutions and their faculty and staff above all else; and a lack of institutional emphasis, practitioner awareness, and community organisations' lack of voice regarding their own role in service-learning.

With community engagement being mandated from primary to pre-tertiary levels, combined with similar mandates at the tertiary level, the absence of community voice in the design of community service or service-learning programs and requirements posed a risk of producing large numbers of service activities that could be potentially disruptive to the community. For example, community organisations still struggling to meet the needs of their service users would also need to juggle the requests by and projects of student volunteers who may lack insights and commitment to undertake sustainable service that would meet the real needs of the community. Such instrumental

partnerships could be defined as transactional at best, and exploitative at worst (Clayton, et al., 2010; Kniffin, et al., 2020); and would be a loss for community, students and educational institutions alike. By contrast is the transformational relationship where both develop from deeper and more sustained commitment (Enos & Morton, 2003), a stance which aligns with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification position that community engagement is,

"only possible when relationships are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes" which are "characterised by collaborative community and higher education definitions of: (1) problems, opportunities, and goals; (2) strategies and solutions; and (3) measures of success" (Engagement Australia, n.d.).

In Singapore, Chang & Yap (2017) similarly contended that the voices of community organisations and the role they saw for themselves in community service and service-learning should not be relegated to an afterthought. Since social issues do not exist within a vacuum, service-learning program design (including iterative redesign) had to be connected to the larger ecosystem within which social issues exist, including, most crucially, not treating communities as mere practice contexts

for the application of academic theories, but to respect communities as true partners.

Given Singapore's small size as a city-state, each educational institution's policies on community engagement create systems, structures, and cultures that have an outsized impact on Singapore's community engagement landscape. It was thus imperative that universities recognised their influence on the community engagement ecosystem as a social responsibility. Taking the national context into account, when SUSS incorporated service-learning as a graduating requirement in its full-time undergraduate degree programs in 2014, the strengths, issues, and unintended consequences observed in earlier phases of community engagement in Singapore were significant influences in the university's service-learning program design (Chang & Yap, 2017). Recognising that the community engagement practices of each institution have a sector-wide impact, in 2017, several institutions agreed to come together as an informal community of practice.

Background: The establishment of the SUSS service-learning program

Formerly a private university established to serve the educational aspirations of working adults through part-time



tertiary education, in 2017, SUSS became the newest publicly funded autonomous university through an act of Parliament (Singapore University of Social Sciences Act, 2017). Originally described by its founding President as a “*university for the people*” (SIM University, 2005), this remains an apt description. In the context of Singapore, higher education policy from the 1990s to 2010s saw the MOE carefully calibrating university access to a birth cohort participation rate of around the top 20% of academic performers (Loke & Gopinathan, 2017). In 2012, SUSS was tasked by the MOE to expand its offerings to full-time undergraduates, an opportunity that the university embraced as its contribution to increasing the birth cohort participation rate in higher education from 27 to 40 percent (Davie, 2012), and in so doing, increasing opportunities for social mobility. More than 21,000 students are pursuing their full or part-time studies with SUSS (Singapore University of Social Sciences, n.d.).

The SUSS full-time undergraduate programs were designed to include the following components: (1) a professional major or major-minor combination, (2) team building, (3) core curriculum, (4) work attachment, (5) overseas experience, (6) integrative course, (7) applied project, (8) service-learning, (9) career development and (10) e-Portfolio. It is within this

context that the SUSS Service-Learning program was established in 2014, to support the introduction of service-learning as a graduation requirement of the university’s full-time undergraduate programs. Students from every matriculating cohort of approximately 1000 full-time undergraduate students complete a service-learning experience with a community partner of their choice. To date, more than 450 part-time students have also opted-in to undertake service-learning.

Three phases of the SUSS service-learning program

A phased approach was designed for the implementation of service-learning in SUSS. This evolution took place across three overlapping phases over a ten-year span. Note that the phases overlap as graduation requirements correspond to each matriculating cohort of students at point of matriculation, thus, when changes were made to the program, there would be an overlapping period of three to four years between the introduction of a new phase and the full phase-out of the previous phase.

Phase 1

In Phase 1 (2014-2021), the graduation requirement was designed as a non-credit bearing community service-learning experience guided by an inquiry/issue-based approach to service-learning. Students began their

journey with pre-service preparation, including a Foundations of Service-Learning workshop, a service-learning fair, talks by resource persons, senior students and community partners, learning journeys, and staff consultation sessions. Students were encouraged to use service-learning as a platform to make connections between their prior experience, interests and skills, their first-year core curriculum courses, their professional majors, and issues of social responsibility relating to a social issue or community group of their interest. They synthesised and capitalised on these connections to propose a service-learning initiative that was to be sustained over a period of at least 18 months.

Phase 2

In Phase 2 (2018-2026), recognising individual learners’ changing circumstances, diverse options of both credit-bearing and non-credit pathways were developed in collaboration with faculty, career specialists, various university departments and community stakeholders to enable students to utilise skills acquired from their disciplines to engage the community through a program model that was adaptive to learners’ changing needs. In this phase, service-learning initiatives were primarily led by students, with the support of staff advisors and community partner mentors.

Table 1 | *The Evolution of the SUSS Service-Learning Programme Model*

	Phase 1 (2014 - 2021)	Phase 2 (2018 - 2023)	Phase 3 (2023 - Present)
Model	Non-credit bearing, graduation requirement	Non-credit bearing, graduation requirement	Credit-bearing
Defining feature	Longer duration (18 months)	Diversified pathways	Part of SUSS core curriculum

Phase 3

In Phase 3 (2023-present), credit-bearing academic service-learning was implemented as part of the SUSS core curriculum. As such, the programme resides within the SUSS College of Interdisciplinary and Experiential Learning, an academic unit charged with the responsibility of the university's core curriculum. In this programme model, students choose from a range of themes within the same course - NIE301 Learning With Communities; and propose how they will work in collaboration with the community partners curated for their chosen theme. The process is facilitated by their course instructors and community partner mentors.

Table 1 summarises the evolution of SUSS Service-Learning programme model since its inception. The main

goals of the SUSS Service-Learning programme are to further develop students' social consciousness and civic responsibility, grounded in real-world ideas and practices to contribute meaningfully to society. The theoretical underpinnings of the programme design are an educational experience and process by which community groups and individuals build sustained relationships, applying collective vision for the benefit of community. Through the SUSS Service-Learning program, students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service experiences that meet actual community priorities and are coordinated in collaboration with the university and the community. The university-community partnership involves the community as co-educators to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and resource-sharing,

to achieve mutually reciprocal goals of enhancing society's well-being and guiding students in their journey of growth in community-mindedness.

The SUSS service-learning collaboration ecosystem

Towards the end of the first phase of the service-learning at SUSS, Chang and Yap (2017), proposed that if service-learning was to be characterised as the interplay of service and learning, not only within individual projects but also within the broader institutional goals of community engagement, then social responsibility through service-learning could not be seen as the sole domain of students). As Furco (2002) characterised this first stage of institutionalising service-learning, very few faculty members understood how service-learning differed from



community service. Recognising that service-learning requires the educational institution to appreciate the role of the community as a co-educator, the early designers of service-learning at SUSS endeavoured to embrace the implications of this view, particularly in how the institution designed, defined, and assessed service-learning; and how it sought to understand how community organisations saw the role of educational institutions and their students in relation to the broader goals of their work.

The SUSS service-learning program design considerations

Reciprocity between the institution and its community partners was adopted as one of five key elements for service-learning programme design, alongside other key elements of reflection, meaningful service, community voice and student voice (Chang & Yap, 2017). Programme practices undergirding a commitment to reciprocity included:

1. Eschewing a deficit-based approach for an asset-based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight (1993), community organisations were not treated as “problem sponsors”, but rather as co-educators guiding students in a journey of mutual growth – the mutuality that Crabtree (2008), and Sharpe & Dear (2013) refer to – to develop and apply values, skills and knowledge in service with society. This was an intentional reversal of the typical view that community is the domain of the problem and the university is the domain of the solution; recognising instead that both campus and community partners must understand that they are part of the same community (Enos & Morton, 2003).
2. Not treating communities as a “practice context” – by design, students were required to research, discuss and propose their community collaborations in consultation with community partners. This meant that in proposing an appropriate initiative, students were required to meet the priorities of the community identified by their community partner over a period deemed sustainable by the community partner, whilst balancing that with a commitment level that is also realistic, achievable and sustainable for the student.
3. To empower students to negotiate a commitment with the community partner that prioritises the needs of the community over institution-mandated requirements, there was also no minimum number of service hours to fulfil. Instead, the period of engagement was an agreement between the community partner and the student based on the principle of serving the priorities of the community and balancing what can be achieved on a sustainable basis.
4. In deciding how appropriate it is to commence engagement with a community organisation, students were expected to consider: (1) if the organisation has the capacity to work with their group, and if their presence would be a burden to the staff, (2) that their engagement should not burden the community partner to accept more members than they are willing and able to, and (3) if the engagement supports the community to become better able to serve themselves and others.
5. The institutional investment of a dedicated Service-Learning unit enabled a programme model that ensured a SUSS staff advisor for every student and community partner.

Close to a decade later, the outcomes of the above programme practices and resourcing are supported by feedback from a focus group discussion conducted with community partners, where SUSS staff advisors were viewed as playing a crucial role of boundary-spanners who consistently worked to translate and mediate between the different priorities and knowledge

cultures of the different stakeholders: the community partners, the university and the students.

Case study: Annual dialogues as responsive institution-community partner engagement

While other institutional investments were made in service-learning, this paper focuses on the case study of SUSS Service-Learning's annual dialogues with community partners

as a consistent and national context appropriate strategy for responsive engagement with its community partners. Since its inception, SUSS' dedicated Service-Learning unit has curated the university's annual Community Partner engagements. These engagements have taken the form of three modalities which align with the three phases of the SUSS Service-Learning programme model. Table 2 summarises this shift in modalities.

Phase 1: Engagement through workshops

In these early years of programme and partnership building, the prevalent community-school partnerships landscape focused on engagement through community service. Furco (1996) described the primary focus as being:

"...on the service being provided as well as the benefits the service activities have on the recipients. The students

Table 2 | *The Evolution of the Annual SUSS Service-Learning Community Partner Dialogues*

	Phase 1 (2015 - 2017)	Phase 2 (2018 - 2021)	Phase 3 (2022 - 2023)
Modality	Workshops	Breakout conversations	World Café with Panel
Defining feature	Capacity-building community partners	All stakeholders as assets to each other	Reciprocal partnership
Focus and terminology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principles of service-learning Case studies Student-driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amplifying community voice to student leaders Adopting a more strengths-based approach for both community partners and students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-educators Reciprocity
Stakeholders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community partners Student leaders 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community partners Student leaders 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community partners University leaders Student leaders



receive some benefits by learning more about how their service makes a difference in the lives of the service recipients" (p.11).

Consequently, the SUSS Service-Learning unit found it pertinent to share the ethos of the SUSS Service-Learning programme (particularly how it differed from community service) with its network of community partners.

In contrast to community service, service-learning emphasises reciprocity between the service recipients and the students – both would mutually benefit from a service-learning initiative (Furco, 1996). The message to community partners aimed to positively disrupt the existing landscape so as to move away from community service to service-learning and (given how it differed from the norm at that time) to equip community partners with the mindset and competencies for doing so. Thus, the purpose and impact of the initial years of the university's annual community partner engagement was to "capacity-build" community partners. This "capacity-building" approach was also less imposing on community partners. Rather than force a singular institution-determined agenda, it presented a sharing of skills and knowledge that community partners could consider in their engagements with students. For example, in 2016, the anchor programme of the community

partner mentor engagement session was a mini service-learning workshop with the outline shown in Figure 2.

The terminology that guided the "Workshops" engagement modality was:

1. **Principles of service-learning** – so community partners may illustrate the driving intention behind the design of the University's service-learning programme, as they acquired the skills and competencies aligned with this intention, to enhance the impact of their community-based work.
2. **Case studies** – which concretised the principles for community partners.
3. **Student-driven** – to activate and amplify "Student Voice" by enabling students to co-create, organise and share at these engagement sessions.

Phase 2: Engagement Through Conversations

In 2018, when the service learning programme transitioned to community engagement to create more "pathways" for students to fulfil their graduation requirement, the modality of the community partner engagement sessions had to be adapted. There was a need to enable community partners to understand the different pathways and optimise how they could continue

to involve students in their work through this expanded range of options. However, to design the community partner engagement sessions as just programme information dissemination would come across as unidirectional.

In order to be consistent with the principle of reciprocity in service-learning (such that community benefits are as focussed upon as student benefits), the service-learning unit avoided reinforcing this bias through conducting the annual engagement in a basic information session format. Instead, to address the imbalance, the sessions in this phase were conceived to be more conversational, giving raise to the next modality - "Dialogues". In this way, the sharing could be bidirectional. While the Service-Learning unit shared and explained the new aspects of the new programme model, more crucially, the unit also sought to amplify "Community Voice", which could be diminished with an overemphasis on students' learning. The community partners at these dialogues could also share their experiences and suggestions for mutual learning. It also provided a platform for community partners who had demonstrated the principle of reciprocity well in their work with SUSS students to share their best practices, and in so doing, would enable other community partners and students to recognise and appreciate the value of reciprocal partnerships. Inherent to

Figure 2 | *Outline of Mini Service Learning Workshop in 2016*

1. **Share one joy and one struggle of serving**
2. **Brief introduction to service-learning:**
 - Honnet & Poulsen's (1989) Central Claim of Service-Learning
 - 3 Principles of Service-Learning
 - 5 Key Elements of Service-Learning
3. **The role of community partner mentors in service-learning:**
 - growing learners, strengthening the work of & support for your sector
 - not just administrative - the relational aspect of mentoring
4. **Sharing on the objectives, approach, strategy and reflections of mentoring a service-learning group by a community partner mentor) with a service-learning student leader**
5. **Service-learning quadrant case study:**
 - Community partner mentors and service-learning student leaders from the same sector to co-write a case study of a typical service-learning project in their sector
 - Case studies are exchanged between sectors and each group to carry out case study tasks
 - Post-activity reflection

this modality was the strengths-based approach of the Service-Learning unit – how it perceived the community partners and students alike as assets who could exemplify the ethos of service-learning that continued to underline the new programme model.

To optimise the sharing interactions, the dialogues took place in small breakout groups, each comprising a mix of community partners, students, and staff members. This format also translated well to the online format when in-person meetings ceased during the period of Covid-19 social distancing.

The terminology to guide the “Dialogues” engagement modality was:

1. Amplifying community voice to the students – to strengthen the reciprocal intent of the partnerships.
2. Emphasising a strengths-based approach for both community partners and students – to enable all the stakeholders to acknowledge that they could draw on one another as assets; learning together through dialogue.

Phase 3: Engagement through World Café, With Panel

In 2021, a panel comprising internal, external, local and international members was commissioned to review the SUSS education. Broadly, a revamp of the curriculum was recommended,



and in 2022, in tandem with a change in University academic leadership, the recommendation was translated into an actionable curriculum plan. Part of the curriculum revamp included an expansion of the University's core curriculum, which presented the opportunity to integrate some of the University's existing graduation requirements into credit-bearing courses of the core curriculum. This elevated the status of service-learning within the University to that of the formal curriculum and provided an opportunity to more clearly define the intended learning outcomes. At the same time, the programme became subject to compliance with university-

defined standards of academic rigour and structures.

With this change, the guiding pedagogy for the programme reverted to service-learning and was integrated within a purpose-developed credit-bearing course - NIE301 Learning with Communities. A potential unintended consequence of this transition was that the "reciprocity" that the Service-Learning unit had cultivated as the hallmark of its programme faced being compromised. Credit-bearing academic programmes tend, by design, to prioritise student learning over community impact, given that the latter is not a defined metric of the average academic course.

To preserve the element of reciprocity, from 2022 onwards, the community partner engagement sessions took on a new modality: as a "World Café", building on the previous "Dialogue" modality. This format entailed at least two rounds of breakout group dialogue, with each group of participants discussing a specific topic (The World Café, 2015). Through this modality, community partner input could be sought on a variety of subtopics related to the larger theme of "reciprocity". In 2022, there were three breakout group topics, discussing the guiding questions in Figure 3.

In tandem, the Service-Learning unit also expanded invitations to more

Figure 3 | Discussion Topics in the World Cafe in 2022

Topic 1: Community partners as co-educators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What's your definition of the term "co-educators?" 2. How has the role of co-educator value added you as an individual and to your organisation? 3. How can we as (an institution) support your role as co-educator?
Topic 2: Partnerships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does 'partnership' mean to you as a community partner? 2. What does it mean to have a 'reciprocal' relationship?
Topic 3: Best practices	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some good practices you appreciated through your experience when working with institutions?

University leaders to attend the annual community partner engagement sessions and participate in the World Café breakout discussions. This provided University leaders with insights to the “Community Voices” shared during the World Café discussions. They would hear first-hand the affirmation, priorities and concerns of the University’s community partners. In these sessions, numerous community partners shared how they valued their role as “co-educators”, an outcome of the unit’s longstanding practice of reciprocity. This achieved the unit’s event design goal of enabling community partners themselves to emphasise the value of reciprocity as a defining feature of service-learning upon the leaders, students, fellow community partners at the engagement session, and to motivate all stakeholders to reinforce reciprocity in the transition to credit-bearing service-learning.

To amplify salient points arising from these discussions, and offer a trigger for deeper conversation, a panel segment was included in the 2023 dialogue as a prelude to the World Café discussions. The panel comprised a community partner, a social sector practitioner, a student, a university leader, and an academic. The profile of panellists was intentionally curated to emphasise the critical role all these stakeholders in

cultivating and sustaining reciprocity. Figure 4 summarises the key points from the panel and World Café dialogue discussions.

The terminology to guide this engagement modality (“World Café with Panel”) is:

1. **Co-educators** – to enable both the panel and the World Café to recognise the value of community partners as co-educators.
2. **Reciprocity** – to amplify the voices of the various stakeholders on how they had and/or desired to continue to mutually benefit from the service-learning partnerships.

Discussion: Deconstructing reciprocity

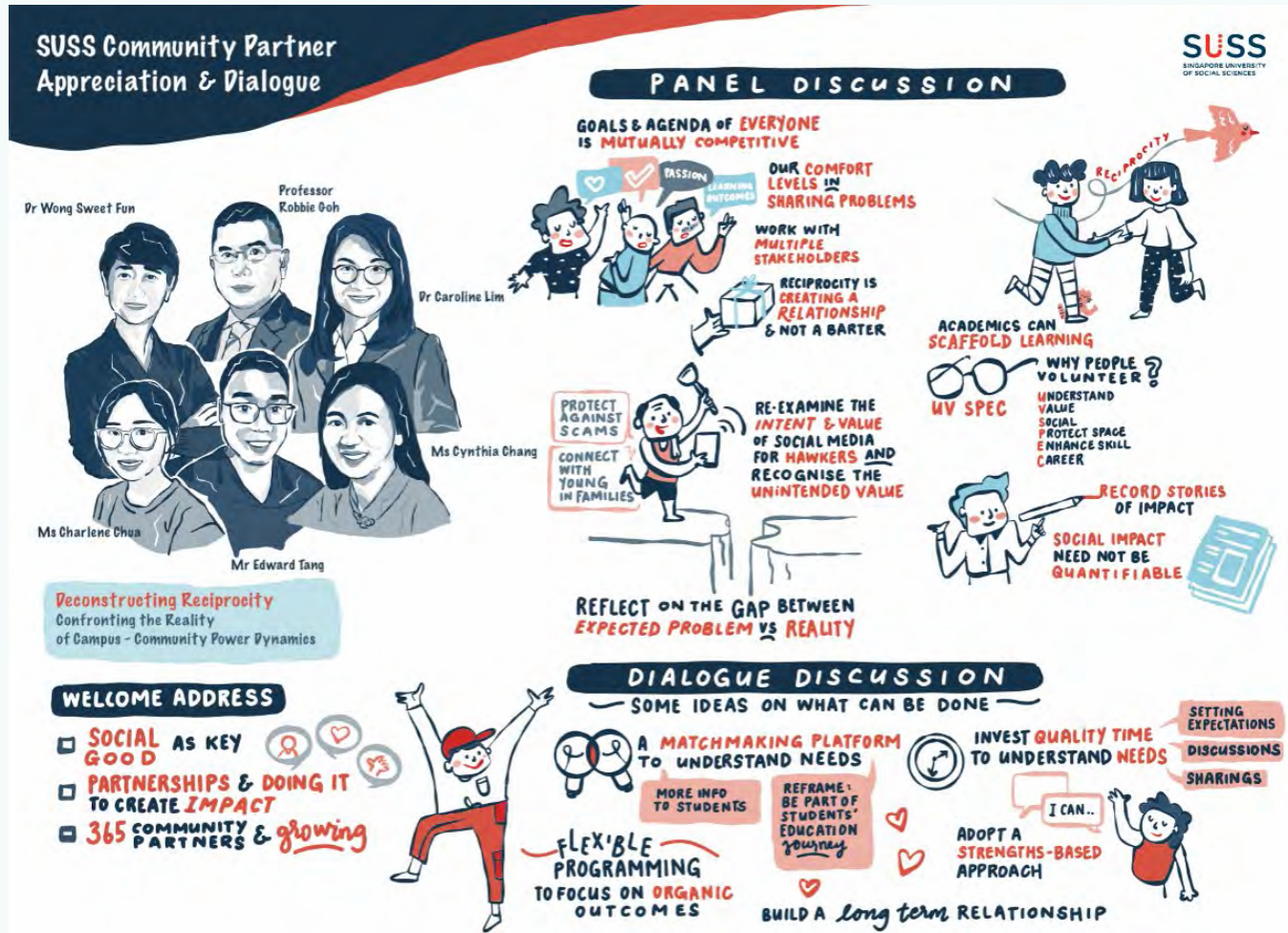
Although reciprocity has often been described as the key differentiator between service-learning and volunteering, how reciprocity is to be defined in service-learning has been less clear cut – various definitions of reciprocity have been articulated. An early slogan – “*I serve you in order that I may learn from you. You accept my service in order that you may teach me*” (Stanton, 1992, as cited in Stanton & Giles, 2016, p. 6) – attempts to level the power relations between participants, the university and the community; challenging the notions of who is serving and who is being served;

who is teaching and who is learning. It emphasises humility and respectful engagement that not only preserves but enhances the dignity of the community. Community members are seen as people with assets from whom others can learn, not mere recipients with needs to be served (Chang & Yap, 2017). Reflecting ethical concerns in the field, Jacoby (2015) emphasised reciprocity as a spirit of partnership that “*implies that the community is not a learning laboratory and that service-learning should be designed with the community to meet needs identified by the community*” (p. 4).

Rethinking service-learning in the context of the phenomenon of globalisation, Keith (2005) sought to update reciprocity with terminology deemed more appropriate for the changing times, proposing a reconceptualisation of the relationship between service-learning partners as one of interdependence rather than reciprocity. More than levelling the power relations, interdependence acknowledges an interconnectedness that recognises that all partners, not just the served, are affected by social injustice. In this regard, the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification definition of community engagement as being “*only possible when relationships are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and*



Figure 4 | Visual Recording of Key Points of the Panel and World Cafe Discussions in 2023



outcomes", and defining reciprocal partners as being "characterised by collaborative community and higher education definitions of: (1) problems, opportunities, and goals; (2) strategies and solutions; and (3) measures of success" (Engagement Australia, n.d.) goes a significant way in connecting reciprocity with interdependency. Taken together, the Carnegie definitions of community engagement and reciprocal partnerships can be interpreted as asset-based, deeply reciprocal and non-hierarchical approaches to campus-community partnerships, towards a broad array of outcomes that are mutually beneficial to the wider community of which both campus and community partners recognise that they are part (Enos & Morton, 2003).

At times described as an "*idealised assumption*" (Hartman & Kiely, 2016), some critiqued reciprocity, not for its inadequacies as terminology, but rather for the need to go beyond an "*ethos of reciprocity as a guide*" towards what Crabtree (2008) identified as learning "*...the theories, methods, and on-the-ground strategies that are more likely to produce mutuality in process and outcomes*" (Crabtree, 2008; Sharpe & Dear, 2013).

What is critical to take away from the discussion on definitions and evolution in approaches to reciprocity, is each

educational institution's recognition of its own positionality with respect to its approaches to engaging with community – to confront espoused values versus practices and outcomes with both internal stakeholders and from perspectives of community partners alike.

Learning from a decade of dialogue with partners

The annual community partner engagement events could very well have been conceived purely as a unidirectional appreciation event. Instead, under the curation of the University's dedicated Service-Learning unit of practitioner-educators (who both individually and collectively functioned in the role of boundary workers between campus and community), from its very first iteration, the annual dialogues were designed with reciprocity as a continuous loop in mind. Respectful appreciation was conceived as going deeper than a nice meal, a token of appreciation and a photo opportunity; and instead took the form of capacity-building (Phase 1), acknowledgement of mutual assets (Phase 2), and the amplification of community voice (Phase 3). This three-phase evolution parallels dimension four of Furco's (2002) rubric for the institutionalisation of service-learning in higher education, which considers the depth of interactions between the educational

institution and community partners:

- (1) **Stage One** – critical mass building, where community partner awareness must be built up,
- (2) **Stage Two** – quality building, where there is some understanding between campus and community; and,
- (3) **Stage Three** – sustained institutionalisation, where appropriate community agency representatives are formally welcomed and encouraged to serve as advocates and ambassadors for institutionalising service-learning and provided substantial opportunities to express their agency needs.

Phase 1: Workshops to capacity-build community partners in service-learning

In the early stages of partnership, reciprocity was expressed as a platform for partners to workshop their understanding of service-learning together with peers and other stakeholders. At a focus group discussion conducted with community partners, several community partners recalled the pivotal role of these early workshops as influential opportunities that influenced their practices from that of a volunteer resource manager toward that of a service-learning co-educator, not only in their engagement with SUSS students, but also with students from other educational institutions.



Phase 2: Understanding stakeholder's assets and how they can be leveraged

By positioning all stakeholders in the dialogue as assets with strengths to contribute, the modality of dialogues emphasised reciprocity of both learning and service. Community partners at a focus group discussion described how these sessions shifted their perception of students as one-off resources for short-term "plug and play" organisational needs, to that of partners with assets whom community partners could co-create longer term goals with, even if some parts of those goals may only be implemented by succeeding groups of students.

Phase 3: Amplifying community voice to navigate university leaders' perspectives

While the shift to credit-bearing service-learning was a coup for the institutionalisation of service-learning at SUSS, there was a real concern that doing so within preexisting University structures would result in the prioritisation of compliance with University-defined standards of academic rigour and structures and may compromise its commitment to reciprocity. As Mitchell & Donahue (2016) identified, *"the irony is that to become institutionalised, service learning must conform to 'ideal'*

practices that limit its potential." (p. 464). In this respect, the decision to engage more University leaders in phase three of the annual dialogues can be viewed as an extension of the consistent communication practice to provide community input to the University as an approach to influence, as Mitchell (2013) imagined, the way *"faculty members teach and research... students learn and develop, and the... lines between campus and community are blurred and reconfigured"* (p. 263).

Conclusion

The University's annual dialogues have become a consistent and significant mechanism to balance the power dynamics between campus and community and address emerging partnership priorities: be it capacity-building by promoting peer learning between community partners; collecting, documenting and amplifying perspectives to the relevant stakeholders; or attempting to influence the structural conditions for reciprocal engagement.

In many ways, the SUSS dialogues with community partners were reflective of a programme model that acknowledged the gap between the ideal and reality. These dialogues functioned as consistent attempts to enable the ideal (ethos) to be responsive to reality. As a platform for the translational

work of connecting ideal with the real (stakeholders), the dialogues function as a practice strategy to create the enabling conditions that might transform the guiding ethos of reciprocity into reality.

In outlining the three phases of growth in the institutionalisation of service-learning at SUSS, this paper provides an example of a university navigating the boundary-spanning work of deconstructing an ethos of reciprocity for translation into practice in the context of Singapore, with practical implications for service-learning practitioners navigating the same need to contextualise their approaches to specific national, regional and community contexts and stages of development.

If reciprocal partnerships are to be "characterised by collaborative community and higher education definitions of: (1) problems, opportunities, and goals; (2) strategies and solutions; and (3) measures of success" (Engagement Australia, n.d.), then the consistent act of dialogue between community and higher education is a practice of consistently and collaboratively co-creating these goals and outcomes by constructive deconstruction – the act of revisiting, refreshing and reconstructing our assumptions of how they are to be defined.

Dr Cynthia Chang-Huda
**Assistant Dean, College of
 Interdisciplinary & Experiential
 Learning, SUSS**

Dr Cynthia Chang-Huda was the founding Head of Service-Learning at SUSS. Her work seeks to nurture enabling environments at educational institutions and social purpose organisations in Singapore and the Asia Pacific for reciprocal engagement with communities through harnessing effective cross-sector engagement in approaching complex societal issues. She speaks and convenes on issues in service-learning and community engagement, facilitating learning across a wide spectrum of learners: from primary students to undergraduates; civil society leaders in Bhutan; higher education practitioners in Taiwan and Indonesia; and mid-career professionals from across the Asia-Pacific. A Community Fellow of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, she received her doctorate in educational leadership and innovation from New York University.

Jason Ng
**Specialist (Experiential Learning),
 College of Interdisciplinary &
 Experiential Learning, SUSS**

At SUSS, Jason facilitates students in their Service-Learning and Community

Engagement projects, particularly those belonging to the themes of "Diversity and Inclusion", and "Community Building". He is a strong believer in bringing together communities to improve their own communities, an outlook coming from the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. It is also his aspiration that students, Community Partners and educational institutions could also come together as self-driving communities, continually enabling and inspiring one another for more meaningful social change.

Pamela Loh
**Head (Service-Learning), College
 of Interdisciplinary & Experiential
 Learning, SUSS**

Pamela Loh has been with the educational ecosystem for more than 15 years. As a Service-Learning and Outdoor practitioner, she is a firm believer of experiential learning as a pedagogical approach for teaching and learning. She specializes and has keen interest in guiding learners towards purposeful Service-Learning and Community Engagements through strengths-based approach and reciprocal engagement. She believes every individual's learning can be developed and stretched through impactful and meaningful experiences. In her time as an educator, she had the privilege to head the Community and

Leadership Development programmes in a number of secondary and tertiary schools.

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