

# Co-Producing Multilingual Big Books through Service Learning

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## Abstract

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is the strategic use of the learner's mother tongue and additional languages for literacy and instruction. This study examined the service-learning (SL) experience of a university that involved collaborative production of mother tongue big books (enlarged picture books for shared reading) in four locations in the Philippines. The study found that participatory 'big book' making requires five critical events that begin with the preparation of participants and culminate in the turnover of the big books to the community. The project produced 22 big book titles in 8 languages. Though the big books provided materials for reading exercises, they also told stories about the environment and discussed critical issues like discrimination experienced by indigenous children. The student participants revealed that the service-learning experience uncovered myths about indigenous people that have been normalized through faulty school texts.

## Introduction

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is the strategic use of the learner's mother tongue and additional languages for literacy and instruction. The practice has been linked to various advocacies and development agendas: inclusion and equity, sustainable development, language revitalization, multiliteracy and multilingualism, and 21st Century Learning (Garcia & Lin, 2016; Hornberger, 2009). According to the Enhanced Basic Education Act (RA 10533), the mother tongue is defined as "any language or languages first learned by a child which he/she identifies with of which he/she is identified...which he/she knows best or uses most. This includes Filipino sign language..." (RA 10533). Over the last decade, the Philippines has been institutionalizing MTB-MLE to address the limitations of its past bilingual education policy. A primary challenge to the program is the linguistic diversity of the country with 182 living languages (Eberhard et al., 2019). The Department of Education (DepEd) addressed this problem by directing schools to develop instructional materials, which should be original, written in the local languages, and contextualized (DepEd Order 74 s.2009). The task requires partnerships with the community, NGOs and higher education institutions.

With the passage of the MTB-MLE policy, some universities have started incorporating MTB-MLE in their teacher education programs (see MMSU, 2016). The government provided grants to universities to develop curricular programs and MTB-MLE resources. In particular, the College of Education of the University of the Philippines has incorporated MTB-MLE in various areas. This study thus describes the processes involved in a service-learning experience that includes a collaborative production of mother-tongue big books.

## **The MTB-MLE framework and participatory materials development**

Key literature that informed this study related to three areas: the MTB-MLE framework, the participatory process in materials development, and service-learning in higher education. Two of these areas are discussed here while service-learning, as the conceptual framework, is discussed in the next section.

MTB-MLE instruction requires certain conditions: a writing system, instructional materials, language-appropriate assessment system, continuing teacher training, and support from the broader community (DepEd Order 74 s.2009). The approach utilizes a literature-based reading program that requires the use of 'big books.' Dequilla et al. (2015) wrote that big books are materials that children can touch, featuring enlarged text and pictures, and can make learning "a wholesome and exciting learning adventure."

MTB-MLE Materials development requires a synergy between the insiders (the speakers of the language who are able to tell a story) and the outsiders (not part of the community but can offer technical expertise). The process involves story writing, editing of the stories, formatting typesetting, adding illustrations, and field-testing. The language insiders should ensure that the materials are indeed their own and useful for the instruction of their learners Casquite (2010).

## **Service-learning as a conceptual framework**

MTB-MLE materials may be developed through service-learning (SL), which is a teaching-learning strategy that combines academic learning and community service (Salam, Iskandar, Ibrahim & Farooq, 2019). SL finds its roots in educational philosophies held by radical thinkers. Paulo Freire (1974), in particular, wrote that education involves a process of developing critical awareness, and such dialogue and informed action (praxis). Cruz and Giles (2000) wrote that many studies on service-learning do not give attention to the impact of service-learning on the community. This disregard of the community can give the impression that communities are exploited and become sources for free education. It also subscribes to the charity model of service, reinforcing a helpless image of the community (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009).

Service-learning was adopted as both the conceptual framework and the process through which this study was affected. It was selected as it represented a teaching strategy that fosters engaged learning by integrating classroom learning and field research through community service. It integrates meaningful community work with instruction and reflection to enrich learning while strengthening communities. In this particular SL project, it was hoped that the community would end up with culturally responsive materials, and that university students would experience deep and transformative learning.

## **Methodology**

This study utilized team-effort qualitative research, specifically narrative inquiry, to describe a well-grounded and holistic picture (Webster & Mertova, 2007). As a method, narrative analysis takes as the starting point the lived experiences of individuals using reflection notes, field notes, and document and artifact analysis. The researcher collects the stories, analyzes them, and "restories"

them in a framework that makes sense (Creswell, 2012). The team approach is beneficial in providing a holistic view, and it enhances reflexivity as researchers discuss the study from different interpretive frameworks (Whitehead, 2004). To meet the objectives of this paper, the researchers examined the four separate occasions of big bookmaking workshops from 2015 to 2019.

There were two sets of participants. One group consisted of graduate students from the University of the Philippines enrolled either in Sociocultural Foundations of Education or Nonformal Education, both taught by the author (Arzadon). The other group consisted of participants from ethnolinguistic communities: Ayta Mag-antsi, Ayta Mag-indi, Iwak, and Bikol. About 40-50 individuals participated in each workshop, with half coming from the university and the rest from the community. The main workshop event took place at the village where the language groups reside.

A total of 93 students participated in the service-learning activity. All of the researchers in this study were part of the workshop. In addition to texts from reflection papers and reports, analysis of the stories and images provided other sources of data. Interviews with some community representatives were also conducted. The researchers of this paper collected and organized the data from October 2019 to February 2020. During that period, several face-to-face and online meetings took place to discuss findings and analysis. Gaps were addressed by conducting follow-up interviews. The group identified themes that responded to the questions raised by the study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The study found that analyzing the narratives of service-learning experience in the co-production of multilingual literacy materials would entail the restorying (Creswell, 2013) of the whole process, highlighting some critical events. A holistic narrative involves focusing on the stories of the big books, the responses of the community, and the quality of reflections provided by the students. In this section, we combine the findings and discussion to provide more nuanced narratives.

### **Critical tasks in participatory big book making**

In the course of big book production, five critical stages were identified. The primary tasks involved in each phase have been summarized in Table 1. A more detailed description of the entire participatory big book making process can likewise be seen in a report by Arzadon, Borela, & Seva (2020).

Critical Phase	Tasks Involved	
	Graduate Students	Community Participants
<b>1. Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- study topics on MTB-MLE and materials development</li> <li>- initial meeting with community leaders</li> <li>- learn the protocols of engaging with indigenous cultural minorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- decide on the time, venue, and selection of participants</li> <li>- prepare for lodging and ensure the safety of students</li> </ul>
<b>2. Workshop Proper</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- travel to the community, scan the site, courtesy call with leaders</li> <li>- elicit stories from the community participants</li> <li>- clarify meanings and contexts</li> <li>- finalize the structure of stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- narrate stories based on suggested themes by the community leaders and local teachers</li> <li>- show real objects cited in stories</li> <li>- write stories in the mother tongue</li> <li>- translate stories in a language known to students</li> </ul>
<b>3. Refinement and Translations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- edit and revise the texts of the stories</li> <li>- translate into a vernacular language, Filipino, and/or English</li> <li>- add illustrations to complement the written texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide avenues for continued communication like phone calls, SMS, emails, visits</li> <li>- respond to questions raised by the students</li> </ul>
<b>4. Printing and Binding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- layout the story, print and bind the first copy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide feedback before the final printing of the book</li> </ul>
<b>5. Returning the Big Books to the Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- present the printed big books to leaders</li> <li>- facilitate big book reading</li> <li>- share high-resolution digital files</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- use the books for literacy events and teacher training</li> <li>- field-test, revise and reproduce the big books</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Critical Phases in the Big Book Making Process.**

During the storytelling workshop, the most challenging task was structuring the narratives so that they conformed to the structure of a complete story as spelled out by Malone (2004). It was also crucial that the students had to photograph actual places and objects cited in the story. Tasks like editing, translating, illustrating, printing, and binding required tapping into some resources in the university such as artists, language specialists, and digital printing providers.

## 22 Big book titles involving 8 languages

Overall, the four occasions of collaborative big book making produced 22 big book titles involving 8 languages: Ayta Mag-antsi, Ayta Mag-indi, Iwak, Bikol, Kapampangan, Ilokano, Filipino, and English. All the books had colorful illustrations, were printed on large paper, and were book bound. The stories, though narrated by people in four places, converged on some common topics: family, livelihood, schooling experience, and intercultural relationships. Cultural knowledge and practices like arranged marriages, healing, relating with spirits, and competitive sports also featured. There were stories relating to environmental issues like natural and human-made disasters.

A common theme within stories told by indigenous groups was the challenges that come with schooling, such as difficulties experienced by school children walking long distances along mountain trails. And when in school, they experienced being taunted because of their dark skin and wavy hair. At the same time, they are learning to use smartphones and social media. There are stories of dropping out of school, early marriage, and the death of a child. Some are about human prevailing, girls who dropped out of school in their youth yet resumed their schooling through the adult education program, and a community member who became a professional yet retained their indigenous knowledge and practices.

Returning to the site to hand over the big books and see them be opened and read for the first time before a group of children can be an elating experience. The community leaders would always say that it was the first time big books featuring their own language and stories had been made. One participant wrote her observation about the book launch:

*It was heartwarming to see the sparks of excitement as the elders and their children read their own stories in their own language. They read stories about their friend, neighbor, son/daughter... We thought that the turnover ceremony was the end of it but they asked that we come back to conduct a big book making workshop so that they can produce more materials (including their customary laws in story form). They will gather their fellows from other sitios (villages) and will find resources to support the training needs.*

Such a request for training of potential big book makers in the community was also expressed in other places. It is unfortunate, though, that due to time limitations, the service-learning program could not respond to such needs. In the years that followed, we got the report from a daycare worker that the Ayta Mag-antsi big books have been reproduced and are being utilized in five daycare centers. The books are also used during Indigenous Education events in the province.

Interestingly, the Bikol big books were leveraged more effectively. Ms. Rose Olitoquit, the leading story writer, reported that the five multilingual big books produced have been read and displayed during public readings and book exhibits. The town mayor allotted funds for reproduction and the development of a sequel of one story. The big books were also utilized as exemplars in the training of writers and illustrators for the entire province.

**Students' Critical Reflections** In contrast to passive learning in classrooms, service-learning guides students to integrate academic knowledge with community engagements through a process of reflection (Cress, 2005). Three significant recurring themes surfaced from the reflection papers of the students. First was that the activity led to a more profound realization of the student's positionality:

"It made me realize that my preconceived notions of the Ayta community, generally acquired from school and reading, were not all true...it changed my stereotypical perception of them based on what I have learned from my schooling experience."

The second theme was that it opened the student to the realities their partner communities were facing and how these were poorly represented in both print and non-print forms of media:

*The most meaningful part was when we were conceptualizing the story, I realized that my experience of growing up, bringing snacks to school and envying other kids bringing money to school is the same as the kids/parents of the Ayta community. We share the same experience and dilemma.*

As a result of hearing and writing stories together, one student came to realize the extent of "oppression that they have to deal with every day, just for having different hair types." At the same time, some students realized that though the IPs are disadvantaged in many ways, they demonstrate some capacities: use several languages spoken in the province, care for the environment, develop sophisticated tools, adapt to new technologies, and equip their children to deal with discrimination in school.

In the end, the service-learning experience provided insights regarding the teacher's role in relation to the community:

*I realized that this experience sheds more light on what community education is truly like...It required me to work with other people, despite our differences. It became necessary to learn new skills, and to learn them quickly: communicating with others, learning about their history, picking up fragments of their language, translating stories, studying how to design and layout a book in a day.*

## **What is feasible in a one-semester service-learning activity**

The study found that the set of steps proposed by Casquite (2010) regarding participatory materials production is workable in a one-semester service-learning context. However, due to time limitations, field testing had to be done by the partner community. To meet the deadline for the submission of big books, the students had to expedite some tasks and take over some critical functions like adding illustrations, printing, and binding. Finding an illustrator who can draw people and facial expressions posed a significant challenge for the big book makers. Some students had to use cartoon figures and free images available on the Internet.

Big books produced in a short period that conform to the requirements of MTB-MLE materials production (Malone, 2004) and are acceptable to the community can only happen when the process taps into the resources of the participants. The community participants must be willing to participate in a two-day workshop and be available to attend follow up meetings. They should respond to editing concerns, which means answering their emails, SMS, and phone calls. The university participants should draw from their specialized knowledge of literacy, learning processes, and organizing skills. The whole process requires extensive planning, coordination, and funding. The output in terms of the number of big book titles may not be many, but they had a ripple effect — the materials are reproduced, provided exemplars, and used in teaching and learning.

## **Beyond teaching the phonemes**

In the two-track method that comes with MTB-MLE instruction, big books are used to teach listening, reading, and writing. After reading the story, the teacher would isolate words and provide drills to strengthen phonemic awareness. However, the study found that big books provide profound lessons that can be explored more deeply beyond decoding exercises. One student wrote that she realized the big books do not just teach reading skills. They can potentially develop a sense of confidence for the speakers' mother tongue not only as a heritage but as a means for knowledge production. Furthermore, the stories give a sense of place, enact history, probes into ecological issues, and address social issues like discrimination and poverty. In this way, the stories offer generative themes that can stir critical consciousness (Freire, 1974).

## **Culturally relevant teachers**

Before the field visits, the students had read and discussed issues in class (and in their previous courses) related to languages, indigenous identity, and equity in education. However, the service-learning experience that provided face-to-face encounters with marginalized sectors still provoked some sort of an awakening. The students realized that before the SL experience, they had minimal contact with indigenous people, and what they had in mind were misrepresentations. Their reflections revealed that their notions about the indigenous people turned out to be myths that were perpetuated in faulty school texts. If such myths remained unexamined, teachers will have a deficit or distorted view of marginalized groups and will perpetuate inequality in school and society (Ryan, 2006). The fact that actual engagement with the community enabled students to confront their unexamined beliefs argues for the use of service-learning as a non-negotiable strategy in teacher training. In other words, service-learning is a prerequisite learning-teaching experience in raising teachers equipped to teach in a multilingual and multicultural setting.

## **Conclusion**

This study described the processes involved in producing mother tongue materials through university-community collaboration. It suggests that SL can be a means to develop literacy materials in the mother tongue, especially among indigenous communities where very few printed materials are available. It also highlights that the service-learning experience can potentially disrupt the students' long-held unquestioned beliefs about unequal power relations involving less dominant ethnolinguistic groups. This study recommends that a topic on MTB-MLE with a well-planned

service-learning involving minority language groups should be a component of a teacher preparation program.

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