Delivering online community service from community perspective: A critical review

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This study presents a sharp and critical analysis of community service activities conducted by Indonesian university actors through zoom platform. Since the onset of the 2020 pandemic, community service activities have been compelled to transition to online platforms due to the necessity of maintaining social distancing. Even after the pandemic subsides, some campuses continue to engage in these activities. The research question addressed in this study is whether these methods align with the needs of the community. To answer this question, the study critically analyzes various scholarly articles that explore the implementation of community service through online teaching methods. The use of online media, such as Zoom, for community service training poses challenges from a community perspective. Firstly, it primarily benefits middle to upper-class communities who have the necessary equipment like smartphones or laptops with internet access, which contradicts the goal of reaching marginalized communities with limited resources. Secondly, the online format hinders active participation from both university and community actors, raising concerns about meaningful engagement. Moreover, selecting only a few individuals as representatives of the entire community further complicates community representation in online community service. The case studies lack clarity on how these participants effectively represent their communities and address their needs.

Kata Kunci
Community engagement
Community service
Innovation
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Pemberian pengabdian masyarakat secara online dari perspektif komunitas: Sebuah tinjauan kritis. Kajian ini menyajikan analisis yang tajam dan kritis terhadap kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat yang dilakukan oleh para pelaku terutama mahasiswa dan dosen yang melakukan kegiatan tersebut. Pemberian pengabdian masyarakat melalui platform online memberikan efek positif, namun tetap harus mempertimbangkan isu-isu yang timbul. Meskipun demikian, beberapa masalah masih terus menjadi perhatian. Penerapan metode pengabdian masyarakat secara daring dan digital harus selalu diperketat dengan cara-cara yang tepat untuk memberikan dampak positif bagi masyarakat.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of community service as part of university-community engagement (UCE) has been increasingly prevalent at the university and national levels worldwide (Bennworth & Osborne, 2014; Bhagwan, 2018; Koekkoek et al., 2021). This is primarily aimed at reducing barriers between universities and the surrounding communities (Bruning et al., 2006; Chupp et al., 2021; Patsarika & Townsend, 2022). However, when the pandemic occurred in 2020, it became challenging to carry out community service programs that typically involved university actors working and learning directly with the community. Social distancing measures and health concerns during the pandemic have made community service as a part of university program and activities difficult to implement (Rahimah et al., 2020). Similar to the shift from traditional classroom teaching to online platforms (Jin et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2020), community service activities have also moved online (Ngibad, 2020; Waldner et al., 2012).

However, the implementation of community service in online platform have some barriers (Sumalinog, 2022). Firstly, there are technological barriers, which encompass challenges such as inadequate internet connectivity, limited access to devices, and a lack of technical skills in navigating online platforms. Secondly, attitudinal barriers arise, including issues like procrastination in completing school tasks promptly, difficulties in managing time effectively, and a lack of motivation. Lastly, environmental barriers come into play, involving factors such as disruptive background noise, a scarcity of suitable workspaces, and distractions within the online environment (Sumalinog, 2022).

As a concrete example, community engagement initiatives are undertaken by a healthcare team affiliated with one of the universities in Java Island, Indonesia (Sarilita et al., 2022). The primary objective of these initiatives is to disseminate biological knowledge to educators via the Zoom platform. While these activities have garnered positive feedback from some participants, it is essential to acknowledge that they have also elicited negative responses. Notably, certain participants perceive significant limitations in these initiatives, particularly concerning the restricted interaction between participants and instructors. These limitations have the potential to impede participants’ comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Sarilita et al., 2022).

Moreover, online platform appears to deviate from its ideal mission when considering the objectives of community service itself (Dailey-Hebert et al., 2008). The execution becomes distanced, and the direct interaction between university actors and the community is lost. The essence of community service seems to disappear (Dailey-Hebert et al., 2008).

This study aims to delve deeper into the issue of effectiveness of using online platform to conduct a community service. It seeks to answer the main research question: is the online community service platform aligned with the needs of the community in providing community service? To address this question, the study employs critical and in-depth reflection on cases of community service programs conducted through online teaching.

The study commences with an introduction that sets the stage for the study by providing context and background information, following the research method used. Subsequently, the study proceeds with the presentation of results and discussion sections, which operate in tandem to explore the findings and their implications. Finally, the research culminates with a conclusion that synthesizes the key takeaways.

METHOD

Review studies have been extensively conducted and can serve as standalone research (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015; Knopf, 2006; Kraus et al., 2022). Review studies are typically categorized into two types: systematic and non-systematic (Kraus et al., 2022) or systematic and narrative review (Rother, 2007). Systematic reviews are carried out using rigorous procedures, such as following the PRISMA guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2022; Rother, 2007). Additionally, systematic reviews often employ analytical tools like “Rayyan” and “Publish or Perish” software to aid in the analysis process (Jacsó, 2009; Kraus et al., 2022; Waddington et al., 2012).

Non-systematic literature reviews (non-SLRs) are characterized by the absence of a systematic procedure or protocol (Kraus et al., 2022; Rother, 2007). Instead, these reviews bring together pertinent literature by relying on the author(s)’ critical evaluations and subjective choices (Kraus et al., 2022). Through a process of discovery and critique, non-SLRs examine the literature, highlighting inconsistencies, questioning assertions, and challenging beliefs. These reviews are influenced by the author(s)’ exposure, expertise, and experience, which shape their judgment calls (referred to as the “3Es”) (Kraus et al., 2022). Consequently, non-SLRs essentially serve as critical evaluations of the existing literature (Kraus et al., 2022).

This study adopted a non-systematic review approach to critically examine the implementation of online community service through the analysis of previous articles. To fulfill the judgment experience criterion, the author has actively engaged in community service as part of UCE for over 7 years since the inception of this study. Additionally, to meet the judgment expertise requirement, the author has published several scholarly articles on community service [see, for example, (Wahyuni & Chariri, 2019)]. Currently, the author is pursuing doctoral studies focusing on UCE, and over the past two years, has extensively reviewed hundreds of scholarly articles on UCE.

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Furthermore, the author serves as a research member in the Research Center, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Szeged (see https://eco.u-szeged.hu/english/faculty/organizational-structure/research-centre/research-centre). One of the key areas of focus within the research team is the institutionalization of UCE. Through extensive exposure to relevant literature on community service, particularly UCE, as well as collaborations with fellow researchers within the research center specializing in UCE, the author fulfills the judgment exposure component (see Fig. 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data extracted from articles discussing online community service is presented in the results. Subsequently, a critical analysis of the data is elaborated upon in the discussion section. All online training sessions included in this study were conducted using the Zoom platform (Aslamiyah & Dzulquarnain, 2020; Budiarti et al., 2022; Dasmen et al., 2021; Fauziah et al., 2020; Hadiwidodo et al., 2020; Madi et al., 2020; Perkasa & Apriani, 2021; Sarilita et al., 2022; Wulandari et al., 2022). Online training sessions primarily targeted individuals from various organizations, institutions, and government bodies (Budiarti et al., 2022; Dasmen et al., 2021; Sarilita et al., 2022). For example, there were training sessions on ensuring internet security for employees in companies (Dasmen et al., 2021), enhancing specific knowledge for teachers (Sarilita et al., 2022), and improving technology-related skills (Budiarti et al., 2022; Hadiwidodo et al., 2020; Madi et al., 2020).

In one case, a training session on plastic waste management involved independent learning by the community, who were provided with a guidebook by the academic actors (Fauziah et al., 2020). Subsequently, online guidance and discussions were conducted via Zoom, focusing on the community’s achievements and challenges. However, the article does not elaborate on whether the academic actors provided solutions to the community’s challenges in online meeting (Fauziah et al., 2020).

In another training session (Aslamiyah & Dzulquarnain, 2020), only two individuals representing the target village community participated out of a total of 22 Zoom participants. These two individuals were members of the local youth organization, Karang Taruna, while the backgrounds of the other 20 participants were not specified (Aslamiyah & Dzulquarnain, 2020). This imbalance in community representation raises questions about the effectiveness of their representation and the overall community engagement in the training session.

Additionally, in a different training session (Perkasa & Apriani, 2021), 25 participants attended an informative session on waste management. However, no details were provided regarding the participants’ age, gender, or their roles within the community (Perkasa & Apriani, 2021). Thus, the article lacks clarity on community representation in both of these community service cases.
In another training session conducted via Zoom, a hybrid community service approach was adopted (online and in-person method) (Wulandari et al., 2022). Three university lecturers engaged in community service for a small-scale shoe production business. However, all three lecturers were not physically present at the company's location during the community service activities. Consequently, the training on calculating the cost price of the shoe products was conducted online. The article did not include screenshots of the company employees participating in the Zoom training session; only two screenshots of the lecturers' faces were provided. Towards the end of the mentoring period, one of the lecturers visited the shoe company to teach the owner how to calculate the cost price of their products. The evaluation indicated that the owner, who had previously been selling shoes based on market prices without accounting principles, learned to calculate the cost price of shoes following the training. However, it was not explained why the existing method, which allowed the business to survive for more than 30 years (1990-2022), needed to be changed to align with the "academic knowledge" possessed by the university actors. The authors stated that the business had been operating smoothly with a continuous cash flow (Wulandari et al., 2022), raising further questions about the need for a change in methodology.

The participants of the online training sessions were individuals who were already employed and had better abilities, educational levels, and economic status compared to marginalized communities such as beggars and street children. See, for example the online training of community service: (Budiarti et al., 2022; Dasmen et al., 2021; Hadiwidodo et al., 2020; Madi et al., 2020). From the cases, online training requires specific resources and facilities. At the very least, participants must have a laptop or smartphone and internet access to participate in and apply the outcomes of the training (Budiarti et al., 2022; Hadiwidodo et al., 2020; Madi et al., 2020). Therefore, the criteria for online training participants, who are from middle to upper-class communities, align with the online medium that requires the availability of online equipment.

This indicates that these online training as a part of community service program, are conditional. In other words, online community service is inaccessible to poor communities that do not have access to laptops, smartphones, and internet access. This means that community service activities are only suitable for certain communities: those that have the means to access online resources.

However, one of the main objectives of community service itself is to empower urban poor communities (Benneworth & Osborne, 2014; Research and Community Service Team, Directorate of Research, Technology, and Community Service, Academic Directorate of Vocational Higher Education, 2023). Community service programs as part of UCE are expected to empower the surrounding communities, particularly those who have limited access or are considered hard to reach (Benneworth & Osborne, 2014). This becomes challenging, if not impossible, for impoverished communities if they need to provide their own laptops or smartphones to participate in the training programs.

For some communities in Indonesia, affording daily meals is a struggle (Mukhtar et al., 2019; Suyanto, 2001). They even have to borrow money to meet their daily needs (Suyanto, 2001). This means some Indonesian society still face the poverty problems until now. Therefore, advanced smartphones, let alone laptops, are luxury items for impoverished communities in Indonesia, where the average daily expenditure is 17,851 IDR (1 USD) (Alaydrus, 2023).

Furthermore, a critical observation of all these online community service activities is that there is a lack of active participation from both actors: the community and the university side. In one community service activity, the university team only provided a guidebook to the community and expected them to carry out the training independently (Fauziah et al., 2020). The university team evaluated the outcomes of the community’s work through Zoom meetings (Fauziah et al., 2020).

In another online training session, out of the three lecturers involved in the community service team, all of them were located in different places from the target community (Wulandari et al., 2022). One of the lecturers then made a single visit to the community. The limited active involvement like this contradicts the best practices of community service, which recommend active engagement in the program. Active participation is even emphasized by many researchers as a key to the success of community service programs (Frank & Sieh, 2016; Lewis et al., 2016; Petersen & Kruss, 2021).

Furthermore, in terms of community representation, it is fragile to include only two individuals and label them as representatives of an entire village (Aslamiyah & Dzulquarnain, 2020). The needs and desires of a group are diverse, especially in cases where the target is not a small group but a larger community, such as a village. In another case involving 25 participants (Perkasa & Apriani, 2021), specific information about their identities and roles was not provided, making it difficult to understand how these 25 individuals represented their community.

The issue of community representation is complex (Málovics et al., 2021). Those who represent the community may not necessarily voice the needs of the community (Málovics et al., 2021). It is important to carefully select individuals, if necessary, to be included in community service activities and refer to them as "representatives." The best approach is to involve all members of the targeted community to ensure that all voices are heard. However, this is not easy and requires significant effort from academic actors, especially when the representation needs to be achieved through online means.

**CONCLUSION**

The use of online media, such as Zoom, as a platform for conducting training as part of community service activities presents challenges, particularly from the community perspective. Firstly, this approach is only suitable for middle to upper-class communities in Indonesia who can afford the necessary equipment to participate in Zoom meetings. Community actors need to have smartphones or laptops with internet access. This misaligns with the goal of community engagement, which aims to reach marginalized communities with limited access to such resources. Secondly, there is an issue regarding the level of engagement in the program. Online implementation limits the active participation of both university and
community actors. It is difficult to imagine active engagement in activities that rely solely on Zoom meetings, especially when only a portion of individuals is considered as representatives of the entire community. This leads to the third issue concerning the representation of the community in online community service. The included case studies do not clearly demonstrate how the participants in the online meetings can effectively represent a specific community. There is a lack of explanation regarding the characteristics of the participants and how their representation adequately reflects the needs of the community.

REFERENCES


