

Exploring Holistic Development through Service-Learning: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Student Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is widely recognised as a pedagogical approach that integrates academic learning with community-based engagement and structured reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Because service-learning is grounded in experiential and transformative learning processes, and because Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is particularly well suited to illuminating how individuals make sense of significant lived experience, this study employed IPA to examine how university students experience and interpret holistic growth through service-learning. Three undergraduate students at Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU) were purposively selected and engaged in in-depth interviews exploring the intellectual, moral, social, and identity-related (spiritual) dimensions of their development. Analysis followed established IPA procedures, generating personal experiential themes within each case and group experiential themes across cases. The findings show that holistic development through service-learning is not a linear outcome of participation, but a dynamic, interpretative process shaped by students' reflective engagement with real-world challenges. The analysis further identifies a recurring tension between institutional structures, such as hour-based requirements and grading systems and students' pursuit of genuine, internally motivated engagement. The study concludes that service learning is most likely to support holistic development when institutional frameworks prioritise structured reflection — deliberately facilitated opportunities for students to process and interpret their experience and student ownership, rather than procedural compliance alone.

KEYWORDS: service-learning; holistic development; interpretative phenomenological analysis; lived experience; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Universities have historically been conceived not merely as sites of knowledge transmission but as institutions responsible for shaping the intellectual and moral character of future citizens (Dewey, 1938). In contemporary India, this formative role has been explicitly foregrounded within the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020), which emphasises holistic development encompassing intellectual competence, ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and purposeful living. The University Grants Commission (UGC, 2022) has further operationalised this vision by recommending structured community engagement and service-learning as integral to

student formation. Service-learning is broadly understood as a pedagogical approach that integrates academic learning with community-based engagement and structured reflection that is, deliberately guided opportunities for students to process, analyse, and derive meaning from their experience, rather than simply complete it (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The model draws from experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which posits that knowledge emerges through cycles of experience and reflection, and is frequently linked with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), which highlights the

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potential for perspective transformation through disorienting or unexpected experiences. Empirical research demonstrates that service-learning participation is associated with increased civic engagement, empathy, and academic development (Celio et al., 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012). However, much of this research is grounded in outcome-based or survey-driven designs, leaving underexplored the subjective processes through which students interpret and internalise their growth. While service-learning research often emphasises measurable outcomes, fewer studies have examined the qualitative learning processes that shape how students make sense of their experiences (Choi et al., 2023; Kiely, 2005). The study of holistic development through service-learning in India remains limited, as existing research has largely centred on Western contexts, with Asian and particularly Indian settings remaining underexplored (Choi et al., 2023; Salam et al., 2019). Questions such as how students understand intellectual growth beyond academic performance, how they navigate moral complexity in lived contexts, how relational engagement reshapes their sense of self and how service-learning influences existential reflection on purpose and responsibility are central to understanding holistic growth. These questions require methodological approaches capable of exploring students' lived experiences in depth. This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how students experience and interpret holistic growth through service-learning engagement. Rather than assuming growth as a direct outcome of participation, this study investigates how growth is interpreted, negotiated, and internalised in narrative form. The research question guiding this study is: How do students experience and interpret holistic growth through their service-learning engagement. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To explore the lived experiences through which university students construct and make sense of holistic development during service-learning engagement.

- ii. To examine how students experience and interpret their intellectual, moral, social, and personal growth during service-learning.
- iii. To understand these processes through the interpretative, idiographic lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodological framework. Given the focus on holistic growth as lived experience rather than measurable outcome, IPA was well suited to the study, its commitment to understanding how individuals make sense of significant experiences, combined with its idiographic orientation, allowed the analysis to prioritise depth and detailed case engagement over breadth (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). **Participants and Sampling.** The study was conducted at Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU), where service-learning has been institutionalised since 2021. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby the university's Service-Learning Officer referred prospective participants based on three criteria: active and consistent participation in service-learning activities, willingness to participate in research, and a minimum of 100 hours of service-learning experience. The twenty individuals on this referred list were contacted, met in person, and informed both verbally and in writing about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study; written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview proceeded. For the purposes of this article, three participants who completed in-depth interviews are reported, assigned the pseudonyms Sharon, Amy, and Manoj to protect their identities. This small, purposively selected sample is consistent with IPA's idiographic focus, which requires careful, time-intensive engagement with each case rather than breadth of coverage (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Data Collection

Data were collected through an in-depth interview, with each interview lasting approximately 50 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants by email for member-checking, giving them the opportunity to verify accuracy and add or clarify information before analysis proceeded.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed established IPA procedures (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Each transcript was read and re-read to develop familiarity with the participant's account. Exploratory notes were produced to capture descriptive content, language use, and early interpretative ideas. These notes were then developed into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) within each case, and connections across PETs were examined to construct a coherent thematic structure for each participant. After completing this process for all three participants, patterns of convergence and divergence were examined across cases to develop Group Experiential Themes (GETs).

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Reflexivity was treated as integral to the analytic process, consistent with IPA's double hermeneutic, in which the researcher interprets participants' own interpretations of their experience (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher's familiarity with ADBU's institutionalised service-learning programme provided valuable contextual but also required deliberate bracketing of prior assumptions about the programme's potential outcomes during interviewing and analysis. This helped ensure that the participants' meanings and perspectives remained central to the interpretation of the data. Where the researcher's interpretation extends beyond what was explicitly stated by participants, this was identified in the findings as interpretative commentary rather than direct report. Trustworthiness was addressed in accordance with Levitt et al.'s (2018) reporting criteria for qualitative research. Consistent with IPA, the study employed a small, purposively selected homogeneous sample to facilitate an in-depth

exploration of participants' experiential meaning-making. Data were generated through an interview guide, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed through member-checking to ensure accurate representation of participants' experiences.

Analysis followed established IPA procedures, including exploratory noting and the development of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Findings are presented with contextualised verbatim quotations to enable readers to evaluate the interpretations in relation to the underlying data (Smith et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research with human participants. Institutional permission for data collection was obtained from Assam Don Bosco University prior to the commencement of the study. On the strength of this authorisation, the researcher approached the university's Service-Learning Officer with a request to refer prospective participants meeting the study's criteria, from whom the list of participants reported in this article was subsequently drawn. Within this institutional authorisation, all participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; pseudonyms (Sharon, Amy, and Manoj) are used throughout and identifying institutional and personal details have been omitted or generalised where they could compromise anonymity. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence to their academic standing and all audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored securely and were accessed for research purposes only.

RESULTS

The findings presented below integrate interpretative commentary with verbatim excerpts from participants, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in and

accountable to the participants' lived experiences.

Theme 1: From Classroom Knowledge to Real-World Meaning

The participants described service-learning as fundamentally changing how they understood academic knowledge. Ideas that felt abstract or theoretical in the classroom became more tangible and purposeful when applied in real community situations. This shift also required participants to recognise the limitations of their prior understanding, adapt their communication, and take responsibility in the field. Sharon's experience illustrates how classroom learning became practical through entry into community settings. She describes service-learning as both a curricular requirement and an opportunity for field engagement, where knowledge had to be applied directly: "To me, it is a part of a curriculum, yes, but I also see it as community engagement, getting to work in the field, because it has provided us some opportunities to actually go to the field and apply some of our knowledge..." This applied engagement also led her to re-examine previously held assumptions. Rather than feeling confident in prior knowledge, she describes learning through correction: "when I started looking into the topic in a deeper way... realized that how wrong I was about those topics, and I actually got to learn many new things through that." In Sharon's account, learning became more meaningful because it required both application and critical self-reflection.

Amy's account foregrounds learning through discomfort and unfamiliar challenge. Her experience with career counselling and crowdfunding placed her in an exposed and demanding role. She describes the experience as both unsettling and generative: "I never thought I could be comfortable asking people for money... but then, there I was forced to do it. And on doing it, I realized that I made myself vulnerable, I let myself be out there." Over time, this experience also shifted how she conceptualised education. She began to understand learning as extending beyond

academic content into real-life tasks and personal development: "Education is so much more than that, it's when they say holistic development of a child, there are no boundaries to education." Amy's account suggests that applied engagement changed not only what she did, but how she understood the very purpose of learning itself.

Manoj's narrative reveals that applied engagement is also constituted through relationships and belonging. He describes the meaning he found in service-learning through the children's responses to the team's presence: "When the children used to come and play with us, they used to say in their local dialect like 'dada agaya, dada agaya' (brother is coming) ... so like we used to feel happy..." This recognition mattered because it signalled connection and acceptance. He describes this as a form of bonding: "It gave me a sense of bonding with them, and they also used to call us..." For Manoj, the meaningfulness of learning was inseparable from the relational quality of engagement.

Across participants, academic learning became more meaningful when classroom knowledge was applied in real situations, when prior assumptions were corrected through experience, and when participants witnessed the tangible impact of their engagement on others.

Theme 2: From Moral Certainty to Contextual Judgement

Across participants, service-learning did not simply reinforce pre-existing moral positions; rather, it introduced moments of ethical complexity that unsettled simplistic understandings of right and wrong. Their experiences also exposed the gap between theoretical ideals and lived structural realities. Through this friction, participants developed a more reflexive and context-sensitive moral awareness.

Sharon's reflections reveal an emerging sense of moral responsibility tied to her evolving professional identity as an educator. She articulates an ethical principle grounded in epistemic accountability: "Since I will be a

future educator, I want to impart the knowledge to more students that are accurate and true... But do not trust my words, you go back search on the topic and see if what I have said is correct or not, because as an educator, it is my responsibility to bring good foundational knowledge to the students..." Here, moral responsibility is framed not as authority but as accountability. Knowledge must be accurate, but equally open to independent verification. However, this principled stance becomes ethically complicated in practice, revealing a further layer of moral complexity: beyond the accuracy of the information conveyed, Sharon also had to attend to how that information was received. While conducting sessions on menstruation, she recalls: "I would sometimes notice the girls being very uncomfortable... I used to feel guilty inside.

But then it was also important that they knew about those things... I have done my part, yes, but I have not actually completely done my part... it was kind of just doing it for the sake of it." Her moral conflict lies between causing discomfort and providing necessary knowledge. The absence of meaningful follow-up lingers as unresolved responsibility. Amy's account foregrounds moral ambiguity even more explicitly. She describes a clash between right and wrong when observing teachers confiscating Rubik's Cubes: "according to them... it is wrong because it is a distraction. However, if you look at it from a different perspective, it may not entirely be wrong... Is it always necessary... to think of things as right or wrong?" The binary collapses under contextual interpretation. Amy returns repeatedly to the instability of moral categorisation: "what is right for me may not be right for others... what's right and what's wrong doesn't have to be absolute... it is subjective." This questioning deepens during classroom management challenges: "I thought if I had content... they would listen. But it was actually not like that... So is it necessary for me to scream at them... because for me, that would not be ethically right... So, is it okay for me to use force..." Her dilemma is not theoretical; it is embodied and

immediate. Ethical idealism confronts pedagogical reality. Similarly, when children raise questions about discrimination and LGBTQ identity, Amy hesitates: "there was so many things there that I wanted to share, but I held back... what if ... according to the parents, what if it's ethically wrong?" Moral expression here is no longer individual conviction; it is negotiated within institutional and community structures. Ethical action is constrained by context.

Manoj's reflections extend moral analysis into structural terrain. While maintaining that "whatever is right, is right," he acknowledges that theory frequently fails under real-life conditions: "From the theories that we learn in our classroom, there are always like loopholes like in real life... that is a good theory... but in reality, there is time constraint, there is financial stress, family stress..." His observation of an Anganwadi Centre illustrates the gap between policy and practice: "...according to government standards should be at least two rooms... and they should provide mid-day meals... But it was a small room... the midday meal... she used to prepare it at home... on paper, it seems seamless... but when it comes to the ground reality..." The moral discomfort here is structural rather than personal. Ideals exist and policies exist, yet implementation depends on individual adjustment and improvisation. Manoj concludes that responsibility cannot rest solely on government initiatives; people must also "initiate themselves." His moral reasoning thus expands from individual action to collective and structural responsibility.

Across the three accounts, moral development emerges not as the reinforcement of existing values but as the destabilisation of moral certainty. Sharon experiences guilt and a sense of incompleteness. Amy confronts the limits of absolute moral categories. Manoj recognises structural constraints that complicate theoretical ideals. Together, their narratives suggest that ethical awareness deepens precisely when good intentions encounter discomfort, ambiguity, and systemic limitation.

Moral growth, in this sense, is born from friction between ideals and practice, conviction and context, policy and lived reality.

Theme 3: From Student to Contributor

Across participants, service-learning did not merely expand skillsets; it appeared to consolidate identity. Through recognition from the community and lived responsibility in unfamiliar roles, participants began to understand themselves differently not only as students fulfilling a requirement, but as emerging professionals, contributors, and moral agents. Affirmation from others and the assumption of responsibility worked together to stabilise and strengthen their evolving sense of self.

Sharon describes service-learning as giving her a future-oriented sense of direction: "...it has actually kind of given me something to look for, which is kind of like a vision of my own... to see myself how I want myself to be in the future... it has kind of somehow strengthened some of my values and principles in life that I have." Service-learning functions here as a reflective mirror through which she imagines herself as educator, person, and community member. Her developing professional identity is further reinforced through recognition from students: "ma'am, are you coming back next Saturday?... please do not forget us... it would make me feel good, that okay, at least what I have done has affected in some ways." This affirmation validates her presence and impact. Recognition from community members translates into internal confidence: "it ... gave me that confidence... given me the courage to take steps... leading my group... explain to the community people... this needs a lot of courage... come up out of my shell." The repeated emphasis on "courage" suggests that identity consolidation here involves actively overcoming self-limiting beliefs. She no longer understands herself as someone who "cannot do that," but as someone capable of occupying professional and relational spaces.

Amy's account reflects a more expansive reconfiguration of identity. She describes service-learning as dynamic and purpose-

renewing: "if I have to do something, it has to be evolving every day... the world has endless opportunities... Service-Learning... rekindle that purpose in me." She frames her growth as a clear before-and-after shift: "Before Service-Learning and after Service-Learning, I was a totally different person... you take things out of the textbook... through those inter human interactions... you will undergo changes." Through relational engagement with teachers, she also reconstructs her understanding of the teaching profession: "teaching is not just physical... it's mental, it's emotional, it's psychological, and... even spiritual... we have to also understand that they're also being pressurized from the higher authorities." Recognition operates here not merely through student affirmation, but through relational understanding of structural pressures. Her identity expands from self-focused academic performer to socially aware participant: "...before Service-Learning my mind was very limited to only myself... but after... I realized that every one of us have this potential to do something for the society... my life is not only meant to be lived only for me." Identity consolidation, for Amy, involves a fundamental outward reorientation: responsibility for others becomes part of how she now understands and defines herself.

Manoj's reflections centre on recognition through relational belonging. Initially uncertain whether community members would engage with the team, he found: "If we initiate... people are welcoming..." The repeated greeting "Dada has come, dada agaya" functions as acknowledgment from the community: "when we went for home visits, people used to welcome us... bring out their chairs..." These gestures indicate social acceptance and belonging; he is no longer an outsider performing a task, but someone expected and valued. His sense of gratitude is expressed through practical acts of giving: "we provided them with colours, papers... we didn't take them back... like a sense of gratitude... we prepared it ourselves..." For Manoj, responsibility is not individualistic but collective: "Not

individually... if we work as a team towards a shared goal, I'm sure that we will be able to bring change in the society." Identity consolidation here is tied to teamwork and shared civic agency.

Across participants, identity consolidation emerges through two intertwined processes: affirmation from others and assumption of responsibility. Sharon gains confidence through student recognition. Amy reconstructs her self-understanding through relational exposure and expanded purpose. Manoj experiences belonging through welcome and team-based contribution. In each case, participants no longer position themselves merely as students completing a requirement, but as individuals who understand themselves as capable educators, contributors, and agents of meaningful change.

Theme 4: From Assumption to Empathy

Across participants, service-learning extended social awareness beyond the self and into relational space. What began as task-oriented engagement gradually became an encounter with difference, perspective, and mutuality. Through repeated exposure to students, teachers, parents, and community members, participants describe shifts in how they perceive others, approach interaction, and position themselves within social relationships. This expansion involved not only awareness of others' circumstances but also the development of adaptability, empathy, and collaborative confidence.

Sharon reflects on a movement away from self-centred action toward relational sensitivity: "I need to be considerate of people surrounding, people's environment and people's thinking, because I cannot go and impose my idea on them just for the sake of the completion of my own course... I must present my topic in a manner that they find it useful... not just one way... it also... benefits them..." Service-learning ensures not merely a course completion but ensuring mutual benefit.

Her awareness of adaptability deepens: "different kinds of person require a different kind of approach..." Social interaction becomes

adaptive rather than prescriptive. Recognition from students also anchors her socially: "ma'am, you are my favourite teacher... we still remember what you taught us... we miss you... please come and visit us..." She describes a broader shift in her social self: "I'm a very introverted, reserved person... it has brought a lot of changes, and I can see myself changing slowly..." Relational exposure thus reshapes her self-perception, social engagement becomes less threatening and more integral of identity.

Amy's account foregrounds empathy as a practice cultivated through relational exposure. She recounts handling a student caught cheating: "just because I saw it, doesn't mean that I will snatch it and... complain and shout at her... she might be going through something else..." Rather than reacting punitively, she pauses to consider unseen circumstances, replacing moral judgment with contextual understanding. She also reflects on navigating rejection during community outreach: "people can say no... it's okay for people to say no..." Interaction becomes a space of negotiation rather than expectation. Through engagement with teachers, students, and staff, she generalises this awareness: "everyone... going through their own... phase in life, and the important thing is to be kind to them..." Relational exposure produces humility: others are no longer obstacles or roles, but individuals navigating their own pressures, and kindness becomes the organising principle of her social engagement.

Manoj frames service-learning as a platform for learning from community members on their own terms: "it has helped me understand how people think... not with a preconceived notion..." The shift here is simultaneously cognitive and relational; preconceived assumption is suspended through repeated interaction. His description of being invited into a community home illustrates the dissolution of outsider status: "Come, come, come, have tea with us... not thinking, hey, these are outsiders... she prepared tea for us and snacks... It really seemed like, at home..." Hospitality

functions as relational inclusion: the boundary between service provider and community member softens. He also describes negotiating trust with parents: “parents were like... are you sure you guys will take... we will try our best...” Communication here involves reassurance, responsiveness, and accountability. He explicitly reflects on his growth: “It helped me with my communication skills... talking with the children... talking with the parents... I was also able to... have a sense of empathy towards the people, like, understanding their point of view...” Social growth thus involves skill development intertwined with attitudinal transformation.

Across participants, relational exposure destabilised self-enclosed perspectives and cultivated awareness of social complexity. Sharon learns not to impose her approach; Amy learns to interpret behaviour through empathy; Manoj learns to suspend preconceived notions and engage collaboratively. Communication becomes adaptive, empathy becomes practised rather than abstract, and collaboration emerges as a shared endeavour rather than unilateral intervention. Service-learning, in this sense, expands the social horizon not only by increasing interaction, but by reshaping how participants understand and inhabit relational space.

Theme 5: From Compliance to Genuine Commitment

Although all participants acknowledged the growth value of service-learning, their accounts reveal a consistent tension between institutional requirements and internally motivated engagement. Service-learning was experienced simultaneously as meaningful growth and as structured obligation. The grading system, hour-based completion requirements, and procedural compliance occasionally threatened to overshadow its deeper purpose.

Sharon describes navigating structural pressures alongside her personal growth: “I had to give importance to my academic parts also, but at the same time, I could not neglect Service-Learning also, so balancing, that was one challenge... we have that limited time hour

that we have to complete... Some schools outright rejected us... when we are working in a group five to six people, there will be five to six opinions... I have to listen to all and then choose whichever is the most appropriate...” The cumulative effect of these structural demands led her to acknowledge: “sometimes Service-Learning was very stressful... it was kind of a burden to me... I didn’t know how to go or navigate through it...” Yet she simultaneously recognised that growth emerged through this navigation: “as I started navigating through it... it has brought a lot of changes in me... I have grown personally a lot...” For Sharon, institutional structure initially felt restrictive, but meaning was recovered through persistence and adaptation.

Amy draws a sharper distinction between compliance and genuine commitment. She acknowledges early limited understanding but emphasises that service-learning must not be reduced to formality: “Service-Learning shouldn’t be a burden... rather than just doing it for formality, it’s better to not do it in the first place... if I am doing it just for formality... what is the point of Service-Learning...” She reframes it instead as: “an experience to be lived... to be cherished... to apply in our everyday life...” Contrasting its real-world relevance with theoretical coursework, she suggests that service-learning is something she would “take on to the real world.” For Amy, internally motivated service transcends institutional measurement; it becomes integrated into her sense of purpose.

Manoj offers the most explicit structural critique. While acknowledging the skill development that service-learning facilitated, he challenges the grading mechanism itself: “since it is a grade type system... students have to get this many numbers of hours... the grading... the hour system should be removed... they should not be bound...” He argues that coercion fundamentally undermines meaning: “if you force someone to do something like helping the people, then it is not of use...” His observation of peers requesting signatures and completing hours instrumentally, “can we do

four hours today?... can we give us the sign... can we just come and take picture and go?" illustrates how an institutional emphasis on hours can convert service into a mere requirement to undertake.

Across participants, the structural framework of service-learning was experienced as both enabling and limiting. It created opportunity while simultaneously enforcing compliance over relational commitment. Meaningful service, in their accounts, required internal motivation, genuine initiative, and engagement that extended beyond measurable hours. The tension between structure and internal motivation thus became central to how participants evaluated the experience: service-learning was transformative when freely chosen, but hollow when merely completed.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how university students at ADBU experienced and interpreted holistic development through service-learning. The findings indicate that holistic growth was not experienced as a direct or automatic result of participation. Rather, growth emerged through what students encountered and navigated during service-learning, particularly when they applied knowledge in real settings, confronted ethical discomfort, assumed responsibility, engaged relationally, and negotiated institutional demands. The first theme demonstrates the shift from the classroom knowledge to real-world meaning. This is consistent with experiential learning theory, within which learning deepens through cycles of concrete experience and reflective observation rather than remaining at the level of conceptual abstraction (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984).

Participants described learning as becoming more "real" when they had to interact with people, adapt to context, and observe the effects of their engagement. This finding supports service-learning scholarship that emphasises the integration of academic content with community engagement as a mechanism for deepening understanding (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Within the Assam

Don Bosco University (ADBU) framework, this pattern holds distinct practical implications: given that field placements encompass heterogeneous settings ranging from formal schools and Anganwadi centres to community-based organizations students frequently encounter applied challenges unanticipated by didactic instruction alone. Consequently, student involvement in the community emerges as the primary catalyst for the deepening of critical learning regarding social reality.

The second theme suggests the gradual movement from moral certainty to contextual judgement. Participants described situations in which they felt conflicted, uncomfortable, or genuinely unsure about what the right course of action was. Such moments of disorientation are frequently identified as central to transformative learning, where learners revisit earlier assumptions and develop more reflexive moral judgement (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Participants' accounts also reflect moral reasoning becoming increasingly contextual, where values had to be negotiated within real structural constraints rather than applied as fixed principles (King & Mayhew, 2002). This dimension of moral growth is rarely captured through outcome-based instruments, reinforcing the value of phenomenological methodologies in illuminating how ethical formation actually unfolds (Mitchell, 2008). In the Indian higher-education context, where curricula are only beginning to formally integrate community-based ethics components under NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020), these findings suggest that moral development through service-learning is unlikely to occur through exposure alone: it appears contingent on programmes providing structured opportunities such as guided debriefing or reflection sessions for students to process disorienting ethical encounters rather than carry them unexamined.

The third theme highlights the enlargement of identity from student to contributor. Participants described increased confidence, courage, and a clearer sense of role, particularly

when trusted with meaningful tasks and when community members acknowledged their presence. This aligns with symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity, which propose that self-understanding develops through social interaction and the feedback of others (Blumer, 1969). Within service-learning scholarship, identity growth is similarly linked to the assumption of meaningful roles and the experience of oneself as capable of contributing (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler & Giles, 1999). This finding has salience in the Indian undergraduate context, where professional identity formation is often deferred to the final years of study or to post-graduate training; participants' accounts suggest that sustained, responsibility-bearing community roles during undergraduate education may accelerate this process earlier than conventional curricular pathways typically allow.

The fourth theme reveals the journey from assumption to empathy. Participants described learning to communicate more adaptively, becoming less judgmental, and practising empathy in real interactions with diverse others. These experiences reflect the broader civic and interpersonal aims associated with service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The findings also resonate with UNESCO's conception of education as "learning to live together," as participants described developing patience, relational understanding, and cooperative capacities through their sustained engagement (UNESCO, 1996). For ADBU and similarly situated institutions operating amid the linguistic and socio-economic diversity of North-East India, this suggests that the social value of service-learning lies not only in generic civic outcomes the primary indicators of success, there is a risk that the broader developmental aims of community engagement—including reflection, civic responsibility, and holistic growth—may receive less attention than the procedural requirements used to evidence participation.

Taken together, the five themes suggest that holistic development through service-learning is best understood not as a set of discrete

but in cultivating the cross-cultural communicative competence that NEP 2020 envisions as part of holistic education (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The fifth theme reveals a progression from compliance to genuine commitment. Participants valued service-learning but were critical of systems organised heavily around hours, grades, and procedural signatures. Their accounts suggest that when service-learning becomes primarily procedural, students are more likely to approach it as a requirement to be fulfilled rather than as an opportunity for meaningful engagement. This resonates with concerns in service-learning scholarship regarding the challenge of balancing institutional accountability with the preservation of authentic, reflective learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Furco, 1996). At the same time, Sharon's account suggests that students can still experience growth by learning to navigate structural pressures. The central issue, therefore, is not whether institutional structures exist, but whether they are designed to support student ownership and reflective engagement or to encourage performative completion.

This finding carries important implications for how Indian institutions operationalise UGC's (2022) recommendation for structured community engagement. Participants consistently described engagement in terms of fulfilling required hours, securing signatures, and meeting assessment expectations, indicating that institutional accountability mechanisms may shape how students understand and participate in service-learning. Where compliance-oriented measures become

outcomes but as an interpretative process in which applied challenge, moral disorientation, relational feedback, and institutional negotiation interact. The consistency with which participants distinguished between procedural completion and genuinely meaningful engagement across academic, moral, and structural domains alike indicates that this distinction is not incidental to their

experience but central to how they evaluate the developmental value of service-learning itself.

CONCLUSION

Holistic growth through service-learning emerged not as a discrete or predictable outcome but as a layered process shaped by applied engagement, ethical dilemma, relational learning, identity formation, and negotiation with institutional structures. Within Indian higher education, service-learning holds meaningful potential for supporting holistic educational aims as articulated in national policy frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2020; UGC, 2022); however, the depth of development depends on preserving the internal motivation that participants described while designing structures that genuinely encourage reflection and student ownership.

The findings suggest that institutions should not assume service-learning automatically produces holistic development; its developmental value appears to depend substantially on programme design and support. First, structured reflection, defined as facilitated sessions for interpreting ethical complexities and real-world constraints is critical for transforming raw field exposure into genuine developmental learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Second, institutions may need to reconsider overly mechanical assessment systems, such as strict hour-based compliance requirements, which participants associated with reduced sincerity and performative participation (Furco, 1996). Third, facilitation and supervision should actively support students in navigating moral ambiguity and real-world constraints, since these were central to their lived experience. In the Indian higher education context, where holistic education is a stated policy priority, these design choices matter considerably for aligning institutional aims with students' actual lived experience of service-learning (Ministry of Education, 2020; UGC, 2022). Future studies could include participants across multiple institutions, examine change over time through longitudinal designs, and incorporate the perspectives of faculty members and community partners to

enrich understanding of the relational and structural dimensions of holistic development through service-learning.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, in relation to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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