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Original Article

Reframing Service-Learning (SL) as a Pedagogy of Care (PoC): Toward a Humane Framework for Religious and Theological Education

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Abstract

This study contends that Service-Learning (SL) must be systematically grounded in the Pedagogy of Care (PoC) to foster humane and transformative education in the 21st century. While SL is recognized for cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and sustainability, it risks becoming transactional, lacking care, and privileging outputs over relationships while neglecting socio-emotional needs. Using a conceptual-theoretic approach, this paper synthesizes care ethics and SL scholarship to propose the CARES (Connect-Analyze-Respond-Extend-Self Evaluate) Framework, inspired by See-Discern-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate, as a structured pathway for embedding attentiveness, relationality, and responsibility into SL design, mentoring, and reflection. Through CARES, learners see community realities with empathy, discern needs through dialogue, act responsibly in solidarity, celebrate shared growth, and evaluate outcomes with accountability. In the fragile and anxious conditions of the BANI landscape, this integration positions care as the ethical foundation of humane 21st-century learning, transforming SL into a vital pedagogy for resilience, empathy, and global citizenship.

Keywords: Empathy, Global Citizenship, Humane Education, pedagogy of care, Service-Learning

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Introduction

Education in the 21st century is increasingly shaped by global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and rapid digital transitions (Cheng, 2024; UNICEF, 2025; Forkosh-Baruch et al., 2024). Earlier frameworks, such as Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA), attempted to capture these challenges, but recent scholarship argues that the Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible (BANI) paradigm better reflects the emotional fragility and structural instability of contemporary life (Menaria, 2024; Schlegelmilch, 2023). Within this context, learners face heightened anxiety, disconnection, and vulnerability, underscoring the need for pedagogies that prioritize not only cognitive rigor but also emotional security, empathy, and relational depth (Halil et al., 2025).

Traditional educational reforms have emphasized adaptability, employability, and digital integration (Cascio, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2024). While these remain important, they often neglect socio-emotional dimensions of learning, leaving students without the relational support necessary for resilience and holistic growth (Ramli et al., 2025; Aldrup et al., 2022). The Pedagogy of Care (PoC), articulated by Noddings (1984) and expanded by Tronto (1993), offers a corrective by foregrounding attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility in educational practice. Care is not merely interpersonal but systemic, requiring institutions to embed compassion and ethical responsibility into structures of teaching and learning.

Service-Learning (SL), defined as the integration of academic study with community engagement (Bringle et al., 1999; Felten et al., 2011), has been widely recognized as a transformative pedagogy that cultivates civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness. However, scholarship cautions that SL does not automatically embody care. Without intentional integration of care principles, SL risks becoming transactional, privileging outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015).

This study, therefore, advances the argument that the PoC must serve as the guiding foundation for SL. Unlike prior scholarship that highlights civic engagement and sustainability, this paper foregrounds care ethics as the missing dimension that transforms SL into a humane pedagogy. By embedding care into the design, mentoring, and reflective processes of SL, education can move beyond market-driven goals to cultivate empathy, solidarity, and global citizenship. In the conditions of the BANI landscape, integrating care into SL offers a pathway toward resilience and humane 21st-century learning.

Research Problem

SL has long been recognized for cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness through reciprocal partnerships and critical reflection, distinguishing it from mere volunteerism and aligning it with transformative pedagogy (Bringle et al., 1999; Felten et al., 2011).

However, scholarship cautions that without the deliberate integration of care, SL risks becoming transactional, prioritizing outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015). Care ethics, as articulated by Noddings (1984) and expanded by Tronto (1993), foreground attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility not only at the interpersonal level but also within institutional structures, reframing SL as a humane and accountable

practice. Evidence from the Philippine context reinforces this gap: while studies highlight gains in faith formation, social responsibility, and sustainability, they also reveal constraints in relationship-building, affective formation, and pastoral support. The central problem, therefore, is that SL's transformative potential remains inconsistent because care principles, though theoretically aligned, are not systematically embedded in its design, mentoring, and reflective processes.

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual-theoretic analysis guided by the dialectical method to examine how the Pedagogy of Care (PoC) can be embedded in Service-Learning (SL) as a foundation for humane 21st-century education. Rather than relying on empirical program data, the approach synthesizes philosophical foundations and contemporary challenges to generate a new conceptual framework. The procedure unfolds in three stages:

First, the seminal works of Nel Noddings (1984) and Joan Tronto (1993) provide the foundational theory of care ethics. Noddings foregrounded attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” while Tronto expanded care into systemic and institutional dimensions, identifying phases of care that situate it as both interpersonal and civic responsibility.

Second, modern scholarship on SL acknowledges its transformative potential in cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and sustainability. However, critics caution that without deliberate integration of care, SL risks becoming transactional, privileging outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015). This tension exposes the gap between SL's promise and its inconsistent practice.

Finally, from the interplay of these perspectives emerges a new conceptual understanding: SL reimaged through the PoC. By embedding care principles, attentiveness, relationality, and responsibility into SL's design, mentoring, and reflection, the pedagogy is transformed into a humane, responsive, and globally conscious practice. This synthesis positions SL not merely as civic engagement but as a pathway for resilience, empathy, and solidarity in the fragile and anxious conditions of the BANI educational landscape.

Through this dialectical process, the study advances a conceptual framework that integrates care ethics into SL, ensuring that education responds to both cognitive and emotional needs while fostering humane 21st-century learning.

Foundations of the Pedagogy of Care

A brief background for Service-Learning

SL is a relatively recent development in American higher education, but its roots are connected to older traditions of civic formation, public purpose, volunteerism, social activism, and experiential education. The term *service-learning* was first coined in 1967 in relation to an internship program sponsored by the Southern Regional Education Board, where college students received academic credit and/or federally funded financial remuneration for community-based work (Sigmon, 1979). During this early stage, SL was still limited to a small number of participants and was often associated with volunteerism, civic exposure, and practical community involvement. Care was already present in these engagements, especially in the

interpersonal encounter between students and communities, but it was not yet systematically theorized as a pedagogical principle.

The conceptual foundations of SL may be traced to several traditions in American higher education. Jacoby (1996) situated SL within higher education's long-standing commitment to public purpose, while Morton and Saltmarsh (1997) linked its emergence to the civic and social traditions represented by figures such as Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, and John Dewey. These antecedents show that SL did not simply appear as a curricular innovation; rather, it grew from a broader educational aspiration to connect knowledge with action, academic learning with public responsibility, and institutions with communities. Liu (1999) similarly described SL as part of an ongoing movement to bring theory and practice, schools and communities, and thought and action closer together. From the perspective of the PoC, this historical grounding is important because it shows that SL has always carried an implicit concern for human needs, social responsibility, and relational engagement, even before care was explicitly named as its ethical foundation.

By the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, SL became more prominent and more clearly distinguished from ordinary community service because of its deliberate integration of service with academic study. This distinction is significant: community service may focus mainly on helping or volunteering, but SL requires structured learning, reflection, reciprocity, and curricular connection. In this period, higher education institutions increasingly embraced civic responsibility as part of their public mission. Ehrlich (1996) emphasized that SL in higher education should cultivate civic responsibility by linking academic learning with meaningful community engagement. Jacoby (1996) likewise framed SL as a pedagogy that combines academic study, community service, and reflection. In this sense, SL became more than an extracurricular activity; it became a legitimate academic practice that could form students intellectually, morally, and socially.

This institutional growth was also connected to the wider movement for civic renewal in higher education. Hollander and Hartley (2000) argued that colleges and universities had to reclaim their civic mission by building stronger networks and institutional commitments for democratic engagement. SL became one of the central vehicles for this renewal because it allowed students to encounter social realities directly while reflecting critically on their roles as citizens. In this stage, care became more visible through the language of civic responsibility, community partnership, and democratic participation. However, care still often remained implicit. It was assumed that because students were serving communities, care would naturally emerge. This assumption later became problematic because service activities could still become transactional if they prioritized completion, outputs, or institutional requirements over genuine relationship-building and community voice.

By the 2000s, SL scholarship began to critique models that treated service as a one-way act of helping. Mitchell (2008) argued that traditional SL could become transactional when it emphasized student learning outcomes without sufficiently addressing power, privilege, and structural inequality. She proposed critical service-learning as an alternative model grounded in social justice, authentic relationships, and the redistribution of power. Sabo et al. (2015) similarly warned that SL may reproduce inequities if community engagement remains superficial or charity-based. These critiques are important because they reveal that SL does not automatically produce care, justice, or transformation. Without intentional design, mentoring, and reflection, SL may unintentionally reinforce the very inequalities it seeks to address.

Viewed through the lens of care ethics, the historical development of SL reveals a movement from incidental care toward intentional care. In its early

volunteer-oriented forms, SL encouraged empathy and civic exposure, but it did not always provide mechanisms for reciprocity, accountability, or sustained relationships. In its institutionalized form, SL gained academic legitimacy through reflection and curricular integration, but it still risked becoming compliance-driven when care was not explicitly embedded. In its critical form, SL moves closer to the PoC because it recognizes that meaningful service requires attentiveness to community realities, responsibility for ethical action, responsiveness to partner voices, and relational accountability.

Therefore, the history of SL supports the need for a care-oriented framework such as CARES. If SL is to become a humane and transformative pedagogy, care cannot remain an assumed byproduct of service. It must become the organizing principle of the whole learning process. The CARES Framework responds to this need by embedding care into each stage of SL: connecting with communities through attentive listening, analyzing needs through critical reflection, responding through responsible action, extending relationships beyond project completion, and self-evaluating with accountability. In this way, SL is reframed not merely as academic engagement or civic participation but as a PoC that forms learners to act with empathy, justice, and solidarity.

On the Ethics of Care in Education: Noddings (1984) and Tronto (1993)

The PoC is rooted in Nel Noddings' influential work *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Noddings emphasized that education must be grounded in attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence between teacher and learner. For her, care was not a peripheral concern but a moral obligation that affirms the dignity of students.

Noddings (1929–2022), an American philosopher of education and professor at Stanford University, reshaped moral and educational theory by centering ethics on relationships rather than abstract principles. She argued that genuine teaching requires attentiveness and responsiveness, with teachers actively listening, observing, and engaging with learners rather than remaining detached. Her ideas generated both acclaim and critique. Tronto (1993) broadened the framework by situating care within systemic and institutional contexts, describing it as the collective effort to sustain and repair the world for better living. Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2007) cautioned that framing care as emotional labor risks reinforcing gendered expectations. Stone (2017), however, praised Noddings as a reformer who shifted educational discourse toward empathy and relationality. Hoagland (1990) offered a strong critique, arguing that Noddings' model lacked reciprocity and risked perpetuating oppressive structures. She highlighted the reliance on mothering as the paradigm of care, which naturalized gender roles and placed disproportionate responsibility on women. Hoagland also noted that the framework lacked mechanisms for evaluating or transforming the values embedded in caring relationships, leaving it vulnerable to sustaining hierarchies rather than promoting liberation.

Noddings' ethics of care emerged in the early 1980s amid dissatisfaction with dominant rationalist and justice-oriented moral theories such as Kantian deontology and Rawlsian liberalism. These traditions emphasized abstract principles over lived relationships, while Noddings positioned care as an alternative grounded in human interdependence. Her perspective was shaped by feminist critiques of abstract ethics, her own experiences as a mother and educator, and broader debates on educational reform. Scholars have described her work as timely, emerging during a period when discussions of education and welfare were shifting toward relational and community-based approaches (Stone, 2017). Ultimately, *caring* advanced a paradigm shift in

moral education by grounding ethics in relationships rather than detached reasoning. Ann Diller (1996) described this as a “new paradigm” in the ethics of care, highlighting its innovation in prioritizing empathy and relational presence in teaching. While critics warned of its potential reinforcement of traditional gender roles or neglect of systemic injustice, Noddings’ enduring contribution lies in redefining pedagogy as relational practice, encouraging educators to foster environments where moral growth is sustained through care, dialogue, and responsiveness rather than standardized outcomes (Diller, 1996; Lynch et al. 2007).

Joan Tronto (1993) broadened the scope of care ethics by embedding it within systemic and institutional contexts. She outlined four interconnected phases [caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving], which illustrate that care is not only interpersonal but also civic, forming a foundation for democratic participation and social justice. Together, Noddings and Tronto established care ethics as a philosophical framework for reimagining education as relational, ethical, and socially responsive.

Tronto, a leading American political theorist and feminist scholar, reframed care as a political and democratic practice rather than a private or gendered morality. Her scholarship emphasizes care as a universal human activity essential for sustaining life and justice, positioning her as one of the most influential voices in feminist political theory (Parra Jounou & Tronto, 2024). In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), she responded to late 20th-century feminist debates and the rise of neoliberal individualism by insisting that care must be understood politically. She highlighted how marginalized groups [women, working-class communities, and people of color] were disproportionately burdened with care work, which remained undervalued socially and economically. Against the backdrop of neoliberal policies and the erosion of collective responsibility, Tronto argued that care must be defended as a democratic value.

Applied to education, Tronto’s framework underscores the relational and reciprocal nature of teaching and learning. Her four phases of care encourage educators to recognize students’ needs, assume responsibility for their learning, teach as a form of caregiving, and remain responsive to feedback. By framing care as a political practice, she calls for democratizing education, embedding care into its processes to promote student-centered learning, inclusive classrooms, and holistic approaches that prioritize attentiveness, responsibility, and reciprocity over technocratic or purely outcome-based models. In this sense, care becomes a practice that sustains and nurtures learners while also advancing equity and justice.

Positioning the PoC within SL highlights both continuity and expansion. Noddings’ foundational claim that care is the moral bedrock of education resonates strongly with SL, which naturally embodies reciprocal relationships of attentiveness and responsiveness between students and communities. Her insistence that teachers must be attentive, responsive, and never indifferent aligns with SL pedagogy, in which educators guide students to listen to and respond to community needs rather than impose predetermined, abstract solutions.

The departure point lies in SL’s extension of care beyond interpersonal classroom relationships into systemic and institutional dimensions. While Noddings’ paradigm was rooted in mothering and personal encounters, SL requires addressing structural inequalities, building community partnerships, and engaging with social justice concerns. Scholars such as Diller (1996) and Lynch et al. (2007) have critiqued Noddings for insufficiently engaging with these broader contexts. SL responds to these critiques by framing care not only as an ethical stance but also as a civic responsibility. In this way, the PoC in SL transforms Noddings’ interpersonal ethic

into a praxis that integrates community engagement, equity, and institutional accountability, expanding care from the personal to the societal level.

On Extending Care Ethics in Educational Contexts

Subsequent scholarship has applied and critiqued Noddings and Tronto's frameworks in diverse educational contexts. Lynch et al. (2007) warned against reducing care to emotional labor, which risks reinforcing gendered expectations. Lynch et al. (2007) provide a crucial expansion and critique of both Noddings' frameworks by situating care within broader structures of inequality. Their central argument is that while Noddings (1984) emphasized interpersonal caring relationships [particularly the dyad of the one-caring and the cared-for], this focus risks reducing care to emotional labor, which historically has been feminized and undervalued. They caution that if care is framed only as a private, affective practice, it reinforces gendered expectations that women should bear the burden of caregiving, thereby perpetuating injustice rather than challenging it. In relation to Noddings, Lynch et al. (2007, pp. 5–7) argue that her reliance on *mothering* as a paradigm, though philosophically rich, inadvertently naturalizes women's caregiving roles and neglects the systemic redistribution of care responsibilities.

This critique aligns with Tronto's (1993, pp. 102-103) insistence that care must be understood as a political and social practice rather than merely an interpersonal ethic. Tronto's framework of care as a democratic responsibility resonates with Lynch et al.'s call for affective equality, which demands that love, care, and solidarity be recognized and distributed fairly across society. Thus, while Noddings provides the philosophical foundation for care in education, Lynch et al. extend the discourse by highlighting the institutional and structural dimensions of care, warning against its reduction to individualized emotional labor. Their articulation corroborates Tronto's systemic perspective and critiques Noddings' interpersonal emphasis, making their work a pivotal bridge between relational ethics and social justice in education.

Antrop-González et al. (2006, p. 413) advanced the concept of critical care by extending traditional care ethics [focused on interpersonal attentiveness] toward broader commitments to justice, inclusivity, and accountability. Their research, rooted in urban schools serving marginalized communities, highlighted that care cannot be reduced to emotional support alone. Instead, it must be enacted as a deliberate practice of equity and advocacy, particularly in contexts where students face systemic challenges such as poverty, racial discrimination, and limited access to resources. In educational practice, critical care calls teachers to move beyond simply listening and responding to individual student needs. It requires recognizing the structural conditions that shape those needs and actively dismantling barriers to learning. This involves cultivating culturally responsive classrooms that are inclusive of diverse identities and accountable to students' lived realities. In this way, critical care reframes teaching as both relational and political, combining empathy with a commitment to social justice so that care becomes transformative rather than passive. The articulation of critical care by Antrop-González et al. (2006) is especially relevant to the PoC in SL. While Noddings emphasized relational presence and Tronto situated care within civic responsibility, Antrop-González et al. (2006) underscore the necessity of embedding care within struggles for equity and inclusion. SL, by design, engages students with communities that often experience systemic disadvantage. Critical care provides the framework for ensuring that these engagements are not merely empathetic gestures but practices of accountability, where educators and learners commit to justice-oriented action, inclusivity, and responsiveness to community voices.

This perspective also resonates with trauma-informed pedagogy (Brunzell et al., 2016), which draws on care ethics to create safe and supportive environments for learners experiencing fragility and anxiety. Brunzell et al. (2016) emphasize that trauma-informed pedagogy must integrate care ethics with positive psychology to create safe and supportive learning environments for students who have experienced adversity. They argue that education should not only repair the deficits associated with trauma, such as disrupted attachment and difficulties in emotional regulation but also build strengths like hope, resilience, and connectedness (pp. 65–66). This dual-continua approach ensures that learners are supported holistically, addressing both vulnerability and potential. Their framework resonates with the PoC in SL because both prioritize attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence as central to educational practice. Noddings (1984) underscores the importance of teachers being attentive and responsive to the needs of the cared-for, while Tronto (1993) expands care into systemic and civic dimensions. Brunzell et al. (2016, p. 70) complement these perspectives by highlighting the need for classrooms to be safe spaces where fragility and anxiety are acknowledged and addressed, thereby enabling learners to thrive. In SL, this translates into designing projects that are sensitive to trauma while fostering resilience, empowerment, and community engagement, making care both interpersonal and civic in scope.

By embedding critical care into SL, this study positions care ethics as a living praxis that unites attentiveness with structural transformation. In doing so, it underscores how education can nurture individual growth while simultaneously advancing social justice. The PoC thus emerges not merely as a theoretical construct but as a guiding framework for cultivating resilient learners and equitable communities.

Defining and Contextualizing Service-Learning

Service-Learning and its Transformative Potential

Service-Learning (SL) is widely recognized as a transformative pedagogy that integrates academic study with community engagement (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024, pp. 4–6; Salam et al., 2019, pp. 574–576). Bringle and Hatcher (1999, pp. 179–185) defined SL as a credit-bearing educational experience deliberately structured through reciprocal partnerships and critical reflection. Their framework emphasized that communities must be co-educators rather than passive recipients, while reflection served as the bridge between experience and theory, enabling students to connect service activities with disciplinary knowledge and broader social issues. In the late 1990s, this model legitimized service-learning within higher education, moving it beyond informal volunteerism toward a pedagogy embedded in the curriculum and aligned with universities' civic responsibilities.

Felten et al. (2011, pp. 75–84) expanded this vision by highlighting SL's role in cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness. They argued that reflection is central, transforming service from charity into a high-impact pedagogy that integrates personal growth with civic and academic learning. Through structured reflection, students confront cultural differences with humility, sharpen their ethical awareness, and learn to see themselves as responsible citizens engaged in democratic life.

Mitchell (2008), however, cautioned that traditional SL risks becoming transactional, focusing on outputs rather than relationships and thereby neglecting socio-emotional needs. She argued that such approaches reduce service to a checklist of activities, leaving little room for authentic engagement. To counter this, Mitchell proposed a critical service-learning model that foregrounds social justice, power

redistribution, and authentic relationships (pp. 50–55). In this model, reflection interrogates privilege and inequality, centering relational depth and socio-emotional needs as essential to transformative pedagogy.

Sabo et al. (2015, pp. 137–139) corroborated Mitchell's (2008) critique of traditional service-learning by showing how transactional approaches fail to address deeper socio-emotional and justice-oriented dimensions of engagement. Their study framed SL as a vehicle for building health equity and eliminating health disparities, but they cautioned that when implemented superficially, SL risks reproducing inequities rather than dismantling them. Much as Mitchell argued that traditional SL reduces service to outputs and neglects relational depth, Sabo et al. emphasized that genuine transformation requires authentic partnerships with communities in which power is shared and socio-emotional needs are acknowledged. They argued that health equity cannot be advanced through one-sided, charity-based models; instead, service-learning must cultivate mutual trust, cultural humility, and reflection to interrogate systemic inequalities. In this way, their work reinforced Mitchell's call for critical SL, insisting that SL must move beyond transactionalism to become a justice-oriented pedagogy that empowers both students and communities.

Therefore, these perspectives illustrate the evolution of service-learning discourse: from Bringle and Hatcher's legitimization of SL as a credit-bearing academic practice to Felten and Clayton's emphasis on civic, cultural, and ethical transformation and finally to Mitchell's critique of transactional tendencies and call for critical, justice-oriented engagement. This synthesis underscores the global recognition of service-learning as a transformative pedagogy while also revealing tensions between traditional and critical models. Such insights provide a hinge for examining how these global frameworks resonate within and are adapted to the Philippine context, where SL must navigate local cultural realities, socio-economic disparities, and institutional missions rooted in community engagement.

Service-Learning in the Philippine Context

In the Philippine context, SL was introduced through a combination of institutional community engagement traditions, Catholic and civic formation, and later, national policy mechanisms that encouraged student participation in community development. One of the earliest documented examples was Ateneo de Manila University's *Theory and Practice of Social Development* or Economics 177, introduced by its Economics Department in 1975, which integrated classroom learning with community-based development work (Sescon & Tũaño, 2012; Abenir et al., 2024). This indicates that Philippine SL did not emerge merely as volunteer work but as a course-based pedagogy connecting academic theory with social realities. Its wider adoption was later strengthened by higher education's commitment to extension and civic formation, especially after the passage of Republic Act No. 9163 or the National Service Training Program (NSTP) Act of 2001, which required tertiary students to undergo civic, literacy, or military service formation as part of nation-building (Republic Act No. 9163, 2001). Although NSTP is not identical to SL, it helped normalize structured student engagement with communities, creating a policy environment where SL could develop more intentionally within universities. In recent years, Philippine institutions such as Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, Silliman University, and the University of Santo Tomas have further institutionalized SL through curriculum-based community engagement, online service-learning, sustainability-oriented projects, and reflection-driven formation programs (Anorico, 2019; Camarines et al., 2024; De La Salle University, 2013).

Camarines et al. (2024, pp. 12–15) examined *Online Service-Learning* (OS-L) during the pandemic, showing that while it nurtured faith, civic responsibility, and social awareness, the virtual format constrained deep relationship-building and emotional accompaniment. Their best practices included structured online reflection, values integration, and creative digital tools to sustain communication, underscoring SL's resilience in adapting to crises. Similarly, Eballo (2025, pp. 47–55) demonstrated that SL can advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when strategically integrated into the curriculum, enabling students to connect academic learning with global priorities such as poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability.

Abenir et al. (2023/2024, pp. 3110–3115) further explored how institutions adapted SL to digital platforms through their CARE-full online SL framework. They argued that while online modalities sustained SL during the pandemic, they also introduced risks of transactional interactions. To counter this, they proposed practices centered on trust-building, empathy, and community partner empowerment, ensuring that even in virtual spaces, communities remain co-educators and relationships are authentic. Basco (2023, pp. 4–7) investigated SL at Republic Central Colleges, affirming its role in values formation and civic responsibility but noting inconsistencies in sustaining long-term partnerships. He argued that continuity and reciprocity are essential for SL to generate lasting community impact. Finally, Cantel and Rha (2023, pp. 5–8) presented a case study on integrating SL into information literacy education, showing how SL bridges academic knowledge with community practice. However, they identified challenges in aligning institutional priorities with community needs, echoing global debates on reciprocity and underscoring the need for collaborative project design.

Therefore, these local studies illustrate that SL in the Philippine context is transformative yet unevenly implemented. Online adaptations (Camarines et al., 2024; Abenir et al., 2023/2024) highlight resilience but also relational risks, while curriculum-based initiatives (Eballo, 2025; Cantel & Rha, 2023) demonstrate alignment with global goals yet expose gaps in affective and reciprocal dimensions. Basco (2023) underscores the importance of sustainability and institutional support to ensure long-term impact. Collectively, these findings point to a common thread: Philippine SL must deliberately embed care principles, reciprocity, and socio-emotional accompaniment to preserve its transformative character. This recognition provides a natural transition to the next discussion, which seeks to address these gaps by grounding SL in practices that prioritize authentic relationships, holistic student formation, and community empowerment.

Introducing a Care-Oriented Framework for Service-Learning

Within the local educational landscape, service-learning has been implemented with evident strengths and challenges. This dual character resonates with the pastoral cycle of *See-Judge-Act*, first articulated by Joseph Cardijn in the early 20th century through his work with the Young Christian Workers. As Zotti (1990) notes, Cardijn began applying the method of *Observe-Judge-Act* in 1912 with small groups of young workers in Laecken, Belgium, enabling them to critically examine their realities, discern them in light of the Gospel, and take action for change (pp. 387–388). Cardijn later formalized this approach in *Reflections on the Enquiry* (1956) and was later endorsed by Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961) as part of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Over time, this cycle evolved into a widely used pastoral framework in education and social action, emphasizing experiential

observation, critical discernment, and transformative commitment. One Catholic university in the Philippines has indigenized this cycle into a reflection framework of *Masid-Danas*, *Suri-Nilay*, and *Taya-Kilos*, or simply known as the Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF), which grounds SL in conscious immersion, structured reflection, and committed action (De La Salle University, 2011; Eballo, 2025). Eballo (2025) explains that the curricular integration and implementation of SL in Christian Living and Values Education uses the LRF as its guiding structure, composed of *Masid-Danas* or *See-Experience*, *Suri-Nilay* or (Analysis-Reflection), and *Taya-Kilos* or (Commitment-Action) (p. 50). In practice, *Masid-Danas* introduces students to the realities of partner communities through conscious experiencing, exposure, needs assessment, and encounter with community concerns. This phase asks students to attend to what is happening, who is affected, and what realities, problems, and hopes are voiced by the community (Eballo, 2025, p. 50). *Suri-Nilay* then deepens the experience through critical analysis and theological reflection, asking why the situation is happening, how different factors are connected, who the key actors are, and how Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, Lasallian principles, and institutional values help interpret the experience (Eballo, 2025, pp. 51–52). Finally, *Taya-Kilos* moves students toward committed action, where projects are implemented in response to the needs discerned with partner communities. This phase is anchored in concrete forms of response such as direct service, education, awareness-raising, advocacy, mobilization, and faith formation (Eballo, 2025, p. 52). Eballo further shows that this process is embedded across the Senior High School Christian Living and Values Education curriculum, where CLVE 4 is aligned with *Masid-Danas*, CLVE 5 with *Suri-Nilay*, and CLVE 6 with *Taya-Kilos* (Eballo, 2025, pp. 52–53). The file also notes that the integration of SL in the Christian Living and Values Education subject gradually developed during the pandemic through orientations, training sessions, syllabus recalibrations, and the eventual introduction of community partners.

This structure demonstrates that SL is not treated as a one-time outreach activity but as a curricular process that gradually moves learners from exposure, to reflection, to action. However, it also reveals a limitation that is important for the present study. While the LRF provides a strong formation-oriented pathway for SL, its operational emphasis tends to culminate in project implementation. Eballo (2025) describes *Taya-Kilos* as the phase that asks, “How do we respond?” and lists possible responses such as direct service, education, awareness-raising, advocacy, mobilization, and faith formation (p. 52). This shows that action is strongly foregrounded in the SL process. Evaluation is present in the broader discussion of SL outcomes, but it is not given the same explicit pedagogical weight as the three major phases of seeing, reflecting, and acting. Likewise, celebration or communal recognition of shared growth is not deliberately articulated as a distinct operational phase within the process. This gap is significant because, from the perspective of the PoC, SL should not end with the completion of a project. It must also include intentional spaces for celebrating reciprocal growth, honoring community partnership, and evaluating the ethical, relational, and affective impact of the engagement. This is where the CARES Framework extends the LRF by making Extend and Self-Evaluate explicit components of care-oriented SL, ensuring that students do not only implement projects but also sustain relationships, recognize shared transformation, and assess whether the engagement was truly attentive, responsive, and accountable.

Buencibello et al. (2024; 2025) proposed embedding care into religious education through the pastoral cycle of *See–Judge–Act–Celebrate–Evaluate*, which

they describe as a holistic learning process that integrates faith, reason, and action. In their paper, the framework begins with *See*, in which learners critically observe ecological realities and injustices, such as environmental degradation and the misuse of biblical texts. The *Judge/Discern* stage then evaluates these realities in light of Scripture and Church teaching, particularly *Laudato Si'*, reframing stewardship as responsibility rather than domination. The *Act* stage translates insights into concrete initiatives, such as integrating ecological values into religious education and community action. *Celebrate* emphasizes communal rituals and recognition of small victories, reinforcing hope and gratitude, while *Evaluate* ensures accountability and continuous improvement. This cycle becomes a strong model for SL because it grounds students in real-world contexts, fosters critical reflection, and moves them toward transformative action that is both sustainable and justice-oriented. It also embodies the PoC by aligning attentiveness (*See*), responsibility (*Judge*), competence (*Act*), responsiveness (*Celebrate*), and continuity (*Evaluate*) with the elements of care. In doing so, the framework humanizes SL, ensuring that ecological and social justice are not abstract ideals but lived practices that cultivate empathy, solidarity, and enduring habits of responsibility toward both the Earth and marginalized communities (Buencibello et al. 2024; 2025, pp. 82-83; ECCE & CBCP, 2007, par. 353).

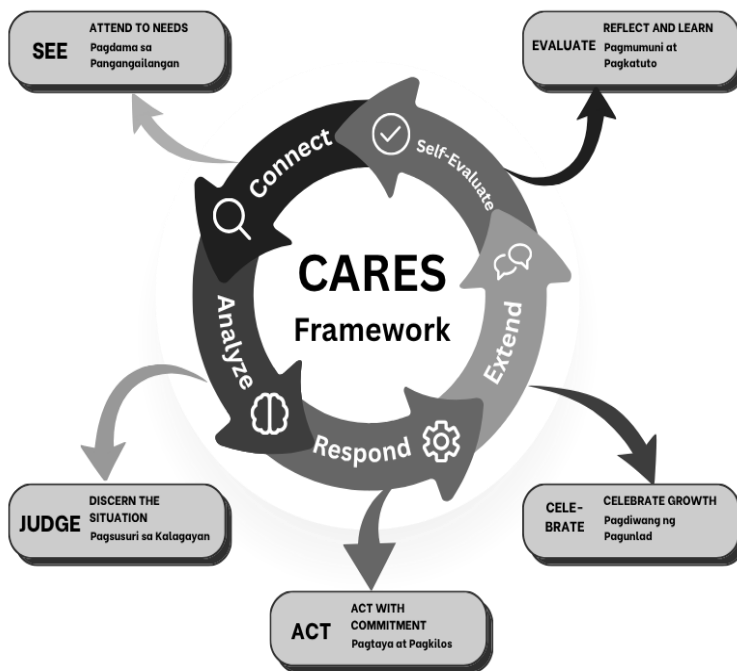


Figure 1: CARES Framework

This framework of Connect–Analyze–Respond–Extend–Self-Evaluate is inspired by See-Discern/Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate by the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCE), & Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)

Applied to SL, this framework operationalizes care principles at every stage: attentiveness in seeing realities of ecological and social crises; ethical discernment in

judging these realities through Scripture and Church teaching; responsibility in acting through concrete initiatives such as ecological catechesis or community solidarity projects; and hope in celebrating outcomes that nurture resilience and compassion. By integrating this cycle, SL becomes not only academic engagement but also a humane pedagogy that cultivates empathy, accountability, and solidarity in the fragile BANI landscape.

The researchers developed the CARES Framework, aligned with the pastoral cycle of *See–Judge–Act–Celebrate–Evaluate*, which can be powerfully articulated through its synergy with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 Quality Education, SDG 13 Climate Action, and SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (United Nations, n.d). These goals deepen the framework’s relevance for researchers and practitioners by situating care ethics within global educational and ecological commitments (Buencibello et al. 2024; 2025).

Table 1: Tabular Presentation of CARES Framework

CARES Framework	Term Application	Concrete Example
Connect Phase (See) <i>Pagdama sa Pangangailangan</i> [Sensing / Recognizing Community Needs]	Term 1 Needs Assessment	Students conduct surveys and interviews with partner communities (e.g., <i>barangay</i> leaders, public school teachers) to identify pressing needs such as literacy gaps or lack of environmental awareness.
Analyze Phase (Discern) <i>Pagsusuri at Pag-unawa</i> [Analysis and Understanding]	Term 2 Project Proposal & Implementation	Learners critically reflect on findings, prepare proposals addressing systemic issues (e.g., waste management, lack of reading materials), and present them to faculty and community leaders for validation.
Respond Phase (Act) <i>Pagkilos na may Pakikipag-ugnayan</i> [Action through Collaboration / Engagement]		Students implement initiatives such as mangrove reforestation, climate education workshops, or literacy tutorials, ensuring actions are responsive to community-identified needs.
Extend Phase (Celebrate) <i>Pagpapatuloy ng Ugnayan</i> [Sustaining Relationships / Partnerships]	Term 3 Culminating Activity (end of Term 3) or SL Expo & Post-Implementation Reflection	A Service-Learning Expo (SL Expo) is organized where students and community partners showcase outputs (e.g., literacy gains, climate action projects), share testimonies, and celebrate achievements, reinforcing reciprocity and long-term partnership.
Self-Evaluate Phase (Evaluate) <i>Pagsusuri at Pagbabago</i> [Reflection, Assessment, and Transformation]		Learners and faculty conduct structured reflection sessions, documenting lessons learned, assessing impact on empathy and civic responsibility, and identifying areas for improvement in future SL cycles.

* *In a trimester school year, this framework can be operationalized by spreading it into each term.*

The *CARES Framework* concretely advances the SDGs by aligning its stages with specific educational, ecological, and civic practices. In the *Connect Phase*, students begin by listening to community partners, for instance, by conducting needs assessments in local schools, which help ensure inclusive and equitable learning environments that directly contribute to SDG 4, Quality Education. In the *Analyze Phase*, learners critically reflect on systemic issues such as unequal access to resources or corruption in governance, thereby strengthening accountability and civic responsibility in line with SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The *Respond Phase* emphasizes responsible action rooted in solidarity and ecological awareness, exemplified by service-learning initiatives such as mangrove reforestation, climate education workshops, or waste segregation drives, which align with SDG 13, Climate Action. Through the *Extend Phase*, students sustain authentic relationships with partner communities, such as continuing literacy tutorials or health awareness campaigns beyond the project period, reinforcing trust, reciprocity, and long-term impact that support both SDG 4 and SDG 16. It is also a phase where students and members of the partner community can celebrate the fruitfulness of their partnership and collaboration through the sharing of their experiences and feelings, culminating in the SL process throughout the school year. Finally, the *Self-Evaluate Phase* embeds accountability and transformation, as learners assess their growth in empathy, resilience, and civic responsibility, ensuring that SL remains aligned with care ethics while operationalizing the SDGs in concrete, community-responsive ways.

Integrating SL in General Education Subjects or Institutionally Mandated Courses

In Senior High School Religious Education

Service-Learning may be intentionally integrated into Senior High School Religious Education subjects, such as Christian Living, Christian Formation, Christian Life Education, or Values Education. Since these courses are commonly offered across strands, they provide a strategic space for SL because they already address academic learning, spiritual formation, moral discernment, character development, and social responsibility. Catholic education is oriented toward the integral formation of the human person and the common good, preparing learners to participate responsibly in social life (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 1965, para. 1). Likewise, Catholic schools are understood as educational communities where learning connects research, reflection, life experience, and Christian spiritual heritage (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, para. 1). This holistic orientation makes Religious Education a fitting home for SL because both seek to connect knowledge, reflection, action, and community engagement.

Although many Catholic schools already offer Christian Living or similar formation subjects, SL is not always deliberately embedded as a structured pedagogical component. In some cases, community engagement remains limited to outreach activities, donation drives, or one-time volunteer work rather than a sustained learning process connected to course outcomes, reflection, and community partnership. This paper therefore recommends integrating SL into Religious Education courses because these subjects naturally invite learners to translate faith into action, recognize human dignity, respond to social realities, and participate in community transformation. Jia's study on Christian values education and holistic child development supports this claim by showing how Christian values education contributes to the formation of learners across holistic development domains, including faith, reconciliation, stewardship, hope, perseverance, obedience, and service (Jia, 2021, pp. 86–100).

In practice, SL may be integrated by linking course themes to community-based engagements. Lessons on Catholic Social Teaching, human dignity, solidarity, preferential option for the poor, stewardship, care for creation, and mission may be connected to projects with partner communities. Students may begin with social analysis and community listening, proceed to theological and moral reflection, implement a response with the community, and conclude with guided reflection on personal growth, faith response, and community impact. This prevents Religious Education from becoming purely conceptual and allows learners to encounter real social issues through faith-informed and responsible action.

This recommendation is supported by existing Philippine Lasallian practice. Eballo (2025) shows that SL can be embedded in Christian Living and Values Education through the Lasallian Reflection Framework, particularly through *Masid-Danas*, *Suri-Nilay*, and *Taya-Kilos* (pp. 47–61). Through this process, learners move from experiencing community realities, to reflecting on them, and finally to acting through concrete responses. However, this paper further recommends that SL should not end with project implementation alone. It should include deliberate spaces for relational continuity, celebration of shared growth, and careful evaluation of ethical, affective, spiritual, and community outcomes. The proposed care-oriented framework strengthens Religious Education by ensuring that SL is not reduced to compliance or output production but becomes a humane pedagogy of empathy, accountability, solidarity, and care.

In Higher Education Theology Courses

SL may also be visibly embedded in higher education theology courses by treating community engagement as a course-based theological learning experience, not merely as an optional outreach activity. Since theology courses are often required across programs in Catholic higher education, they offer a strong platform for integrating faith, reason, moral discernment, social responsibility, and concrete action. This aligns with the mission of a Catholic university, which seeks not only to pursue knowledge but also to promote human dignity through research, teaching, and service to local, national, and international communities (John Paul II, 1990, para. 12). Theology also helps other disciplines reflect on meaning, ethical implications, and the relationship between faith and life (John Paul II, 1990, para. 19). SL can therefore make Theology more formative by allowing students to encounter social realities, interpret them through Scripture and Church teaching, and respond through service with partner communities.

In practical terms, SL may be embedded in Theology courses through a structured process of community exposure, theological reflection, project implementation, and post-engagement evaluation. For instance, a Theology course on Catholic Social Teaching may engage students with partner communities on issues related to poverty, education, ecological care, peacebuilding, migration, or human dignity. Students may begin with listening and immersion, followed by theological analysis using themes such as solidarity, preferential option for the poor, stewardship of creation, justice, and the common good. Their response may take the form of tutorials, advocacy campaigns, ecological initiatives, parish-based formation, community education, or support for marginalized groups. After implementation, students should evaluate not only the project output but also how the experience shaped their faith, empathy, ethical responsibility, and understanding of social issues.

This recommendation is aligned with the renewal of ecclesiastical and theological studies. *Veritatis Gaudium* emphasizes that theological formation must listen to the cry of the poor and the earth and give concrete expression to the social

dimension of evangelization (Francis, 2017, para. 4a). It also calls for dialogue as an essential requirement for understanding truth and its practical implications (Francis, 2017, para. 4b), as well as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches in responding to contemporary issues (Francis, 2017, para. 4c). These principles support SL in Theology because SL brings theological reflection into dialogue with communities, cultures, and lived social realities.

To make SL visible at the institutional level, theology departments should include it in course syllabi, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, rubrics, and community partnership plans. A common SL template may also be developed to identify the partner community, theological theme, expected output, reflection guide, ethical safeguards, and evaluation tool. This ensures that SL is not dependent only on individual instructors but becomes part of the institution's theological formation program.

Finally, Theology-based SL should be guided by the PoC. Its purpose is not simply to require students to "serve," but to form persons who can listen, discern, accompany, respond, and evaluate responsibly. Without care, SL may become another compliance requirement or one-time charity activity. With care, it becomes a concrete expression of theological education: faith seeking understanding, and understanding becoming compassionate action.

Conclusion

This study argued that SL becomes more humane and transformative when it is intentionally grounded in the PoC. While SL has historically developed from volunteerism and civic exposure into a recognized academic pedagogy, its transformative promise remains incomplete when care is treated only as an assumed outcome of service. The discussion showed that SL may cultivate civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness, but it may also become transactional when it prioritizes outputs, compliance, or project completion over authentic relationships, reciprocity, and accountability.

By bringing care ethics into conversation with SL, this paper reframed care not as a sentimental addition to community engagement but as its ethical foundation. Noddings' emphasis on attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence, together with Tronto's broader view of care as a civic and institutional responsibility, helps clarify what SL must become in practice: a pedagogy that listens before acting, discerns before implementing, responds responsibly, sustains relationships, and evaluates its impact with honesty. In this sense, care deepens SL by ensuring that students and communities are not reduced to performers and recipients of projects but are treated as co-learners, co-formators, and partners in transformation.

The Philippine and Lasallian context further reveals both the strength and limitation of existing SL practice. The Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF), through Masid-Danas, Suri-Nilay, and Taya-Kilos, already provides a meaningful pathway from experience, to reflection, to action. However, the discussion also surfaced an important gap: SL practice often culminates in implementation, while the celebration of shared growth and the evaluation of ethical, relational, affective, spiritual, and community outcomes are not always deliberately foregrounded as distinct phases. This is significant because a care-oriented SL process should not end when the project is completed. It must also ask whether relationships were sustained, whether community voices were honored, whether students grew in empathy and

accountability, and whether the engagement truly responded to the needs and dignity of the partner community.

The CARES Framework responds to this gap by extending SL into a more explicit cycle of care: Connect, Analyze, Respond, Extend, and Self-Evaluate. Through this framework, SL begins with attentive listening, moves into critical and theological reflection, proceeds to responsible action, sustains community relationships beyond implementation, and closes with honest evaluation of learning, impact, and transformation. In doing so, CARES strengthens existing SL models by making celebration and evaluation visible parts of the learning process rather than incidental or peripheral activities.

This paper therefore recommends that SL be more deliberately integrated into Senior High School Religious Education and higher education Theology courses, especially in Catholic institutions where formation is already oriented toward academic, spiritual, moral, social, and personal development. These courses provide a natural home for SL because they invite learners to connect faith with life, doctrine with action, and moral reflection with concrete responsibility for others. When guided by the PoC, SL in these courses can move beyond outreach or compliance and become a structured formation process that cultivates empathy, solidarity, accountability, and hope.

Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies in its insistence that the true measure of SL is not only the completion of projects but the quality of relationships, reflections, and transformations it makes possible. In the fragile and anxious conditions of contemporary education, SL must become more than an academic requirement or civic activity. It must become a humane PoC, one that forms learners to see more attentively, judge more responsibly, act more compassionately, celebrate shared growth, and evaluate their commitments with humility and accountability.

Declaration on the Use of AI

In preparing this article, artificial intelligence tools were employed to support the research and writing process. Google Gemini was utilized to assist in analyzing the review of related literature, particularly in identifying thematic connections across sources. Microsoft Copilot was used to visualize the CARES framework diagram, providing a clear, structured representation. However, the final layout and design were arranged and refined personally by researchers using Canva. Grammarly was also used to refine the manuscript's grammar, clarity, and readability. These tools served as aids to enhance efficiency and precision, while the authors retained full responsibility for interpreting the findings, integrating insights, and making the study's overall scholarly contribution.

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