

## **Community Service as a Contextual Learning Platform for Students: A Theoretical Study on Service Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to theoretically analyze the role of community service as a contextual learning platform for students through a service learning approach. Using a literature review method with a qualitative and descriptive analysis approach, this research focuses on enriching references regarding community service as an integral part of higher education processes. Data were obtained from scholarly articles on Google Scholar and various credible websites during the period 1984–2025. Out of a total of 50 articles found, after a rigorous selection process based on relevance and academic quality, 26 articles were used as the main sources of analysis. The findings indicate that service learning-based community service has a strong theoretical foundation in Experiential Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Character Education Theory. Community service has been proven capable of integrating practical experience with academic reflection, developing students' social, moral, and professional competencies, and providing positive socio-economic impacts for the community. These findings confirm that community service is a strategic instrument for shaping students as empowered, reflective, and ethical agents of social change.

**Keywords:** Community Service, Service Learning, Contextual Learning, Higher Education, Student Empowerment

## **Pengabdian Masyarakat sebagai Wahana Pembelajaran Kontekstual bagi Mahasiswa: Kajian Teoretis tentang *Service Learning***

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara teoretis peran pengabdian masyarakat sebagai wahana pembelajaran kontekstual bagi mahasiswa melalui pendekatan service learning. Menggunakan metode tinjauan pustaka dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan analisis deskriptif, penelitian ini berfokus untuk menambah referensi terkait pengabdian masyarakat sebagai bagian integral dari proses pendidikan tinggi. Data diperoleh dari artikel ilmiah di Google Scholar dan berbagai website kredibel pada periode 1984–2025. Dari total 50 artikel yang ditemukan, setelah proses seleksi ketat berdasarkan relevansi dan kualitas akademik, digunakan 26 artikel sebagai sumber analisis utama. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pengabdian masyarakat berbasis service learning memiliki dasar teoretis kuat dari Experiential Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, Social Capital Theory, dan Character Education Theory. Pengabdian masyarakat terbukti mampu mengintegrasikan pengalaman praktis dengan refleksi akademik, mengembangkan kompetensi sosial, moral, dan profesional mahasiswa, serta memberikan dampak sosial-ekonomi positif bagi komunitas. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pengabdian masyarakat merupakan instrumen strategis untuk membentuk mahasiswa sebagai agen perubahan sosial yang berdaya, reflektif, dan beretika.

**Kata kunci:** Pengabdian Masyarakat, *Service Learning*, Pembelajaran Kontekstual, Pendidikan Tinggi, Pemberdayaan Mahasiswa

## INTRODUCTION

Community service is one of the main pillars of the tridharma of higher education, functioning as a bridge between academic knowledge and real societal needs. In the context of modern higher education, community service is regarded as a learning platform that allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in contextual situations. Through these activities, students gain direct experience in addressing social, economic, and environmental issues within communities. This experience fosters character development, social empathy, and problem-solving skills that cannot be fully acquired in the classroom. The paradigm shift in higher education from mere knowledge transfer to the development of social and humanistic competencies positions community service as a social laboratory that combines academic and empirical aspects (Pratiwi et al., 2024).

In practice, community service involving students has increasingly evolved toward a service learning approach. This approach combines social service activities with structured academic reflection to strengthen students' understanding of course material while enhancing their social awareness. According to Bringle & Hatcher (2000), service learning is a pedagogical method that integrates community service with academic instruction and critical reflection to enrich learning experiences and foster students' civic responsibility. This model positions students not as passive observers but as active agents of change engaged in addressing societal problems through scientific and innovative approaches. Service learning plays a dual role: supporting academic objectives while cultivating humanitarian values.

In the Indonesian context, the implementation of service learning has gained serious attention in line with the increasing demand for graduates who are adaptive to social challenges and sensitive to their surroundings. Programs such as Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) represent a concrete form of community service incorporating service learning, where students are placed in communities to identify problems and seek solutions based on scientific knowledge (Pramuntadi et al., 2025). However, in practice, many community service activities remain ceremonial and have not fully integrated academic reflection or in-depth learning evaluation. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive theoretical approach to understand how community service can be optimally utilized as a contextual learning platform for students.

Furthermore, the service learning approach aligns with constructivist educational theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through individuals' interactions with their environment (Prakash Chand, 2023). Through community service, students learn from the community, which serves as both the subject and the source of learning. The two-way interaction between students and the community creates a dynamic mutual learning process, where theory is tested in social reality, and field experience enriches academic understanding. Community service functions as a reflective practice space that enables students to develop critical, collaborative, and adaptive thinking skills.

From the perspective of Experiential Learning Theory proposed by Kolb (1984), effective learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of community service,

students directly experience real-life situations, then reflect on those experiences, connect them with the theories they have learned, and finally develop solutions or innovations to be applied back in the field. This cycle positions community service as an authentic learning platform oriented toward the development of professional competencies. Service learning provides a more meaningful learning experience compared to traditional approaches that focus on one-way knowledge transfer.

Furthermore, service learning has significant implications for the formation of students' character. Through active involvement in community service, students learn about social responsibility, empathy, and professional ethics. According to Astin et al. (2000), students' engagement in community service activities positively impacts moral development, social commitment, and leadership skills. This indicates that community service is not merely a means to develop academic skills but also a platform for fostering humanitarian awareness and critical citizenship. In this context, higher education plays a strategic role in nurturing socially responsible young generations oriented toward collective well-being.

Beyond individual benefits for students, service learning also delivers broad social impacts for the community (Afzal & Hussain, 2020; Asenjo et al., 2021; Krift et al., 2024). These activities encourage collaboration between universities and local communities in identifying and addressing real-world issues such as poverty, education, health, and the environment. Such collaboration strengthens the position of higher education institutions as socially responsible agents of change with a focus on sustainable development. Meanwhile, communities benefit from enhanced capacity, skills, and awareness of local potential that can be independently developed. Service learning-based community service creates a symbiotic relationship between academia and society, where both mutually learn, grow, and become empowered.

Nevertheless, the implementation of service learning in higher education still faces several challenges, such as limitations in integrative curriculum design, lack of reflection-based evaluation mechanisms, and minimal institutional support for sustainable program development. In addition, not all faculty members fully understand the strategic role of community service as a medium for contextual learning, so these activities are often positioned as supplementary rather than as an integral part of the academic curriculum. A deeper theoretical examination is needed to reaffirm the position of community service within higher education as an effective platform for contextual learning. Therefore, this study aims to theoretically examine how community service can function as a contextual learning platform for students through a service learning approach. This study is expected to contribute conceptually to the development of an integrative, humanistic higher education model that is oriented toward community empowerment.

### **Community Service**

Community service is one of the main pillars of the tridharma of higher education, emphasizing the active involvement of the academic community in addressing real-world problems within social environments (Amalia, 2024; Chudzaifah et al., 2021). Through

these activities, universities act as catalysts for social change by transferring knowledge, technology, and skills to communities in an applied manner. Community service activities serve as a means for character development among students, such as fostering empathy, social responsibility, and care for the surrounding environment. In the modern context, community service has evolved into a collaborative practice that connects academic theory with community needs in a sustainable way, thereby establishing a reciprocal relationship between universities and communities as development partners.

### **Service Learning**

Service learning is an educational approach that integrates community service activities with academic learning through direct experience and critical reflection. This concept is rooted in Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which emphasizes the importance of real-world experience as the primary source of learning. Through service learning, students understand the social impact of applying their knowledge in real-life contexts. This approach develops cognitive, affective, and psychomotor competencies in a balanced manner, producing graduates who are sensitive to social issues and possess moral responsibility toward society. Service learning serves as an effective strategy to bridge the gap between theory and practice in higher education.

### **Contextual Learning**

Contextual learning (contextual teaching and learning) is an approach that emphasizes the connection between academic material and real-life situations in students' surroundings. This theory is based on the constructivist perspective, which states that knowledge is constructed through direct experience and social interaction (Prakash Chand, 2023). In the context of community service, contextual learning enables students to learn through real actions related to community life, such as developing economic empowerment programs, environmental education initiatives, or public health projects. This approach strengthens students' conceptual understanding while training their critical thinking, problem-solving, and cross-disciplinary collaboration skills. Contextual learning makes education more relevant, meaningful, and applicable to the needs of society.

### **Higher Education**

Higher education serves as a strategic institution for producing knowledgeable, ethical, and globally competitive human resources. Through the tridharma of higher education—teaching, research, and community service—universities function as agents of social change driving sustainable development. Within the framework of service learning, higher education plays a crucial role in designing experiential learning programs that connect academic theory with social practice (Kawai, 2021; Resch & Schritteser, 2023). Adaptive universities can produce graduates with high social sensitivity and professional ethics. The transformation of higher education toward participatory and contextual learning models is key to creating an academic ecosystem relevant to contemporary challenges.

## **Student Empowerment**

Student empowerment is the process of enhancing individuals' capacities to develop potential, social responsibility, and independence through active participation in academic and social activities (Pulungan et al., 2024). In the context of community service and service learning, student empowerment is achieved by providing opportunities for students to take the lead in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs that benefit the community. This approach encourages students to think critically, innovate, and practice leadership and social empathy values. As a result, students build their identity as agents of change capable of contributing to socio-economic development. Student empowerment through community service ultimately produces a generation that is creative, ethical, and morally responsible in advancing the nation.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a literature review method with a qualitative approach, focusing on conceptual analysis and synthesis of findings from various scholarly sources related to community service as a contextual learning platform for students through the service learning approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to examine in depth the meanings, concepts, and theoretical relationships among variables within the context of higher education and community empowerment. The primary objective of this study is to enrich references regarding community service, particularly from an academic perspective that views such activities not merely as institutional obligations, but as an effective, reflective, and contextual learning medium for students.

The data collection process involved searching scholarly sources from Google Scholar and various credible websites, including official university portals, research institutions, and reputable international journals, during the period 1984–2025. The search focused on articles discussing themes such as community service, service learning, contextual learning, and higher education. From the initial search, 50 relevant scholarly articles were identified. A rigorous selection was then conducted based on academic eligibility, topic relevance, methodological quality, and originality of findings. After this selection process, only 26 articles met the criteria and were used as the main sources for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative descriptive analysis, in which each article was systematically reviewed to identify patterns of findings, theoretical approaches, and conceptual contributions to the understanding of community service. The analysis process consisted of three main stages: data reduction (filtering key information from the articles), data presentation (organizing findings into main themes such as the concept of service learning, student engagement, and social impact), and drawing conclusions (synthesizing meanings and theoretical implications from various sources). The results of the analysis were then interpreted narratively to reinforce theoretical understanding and to reaffirm the position of community service as an integral part of contextual learning processes in higher education.

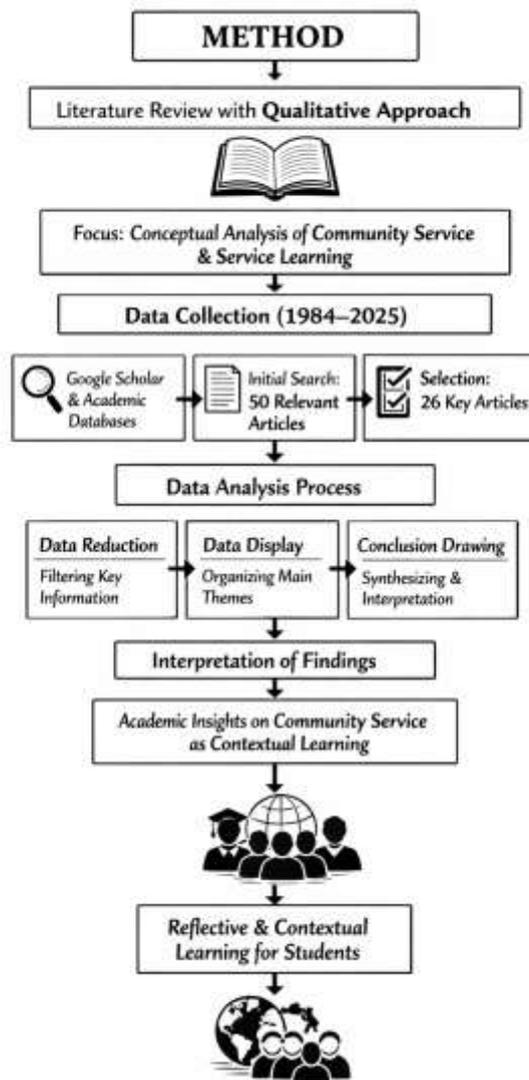


Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The concept of community service as a contextual learning platform for students has a strong theoretical foundation in Experiential Learning Theory proposed by Kolb (1984), which views learning as a dynamic process that integrates concrete experience, deep reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Through this approach, students become the main actors in a practice-oriented learning process. In the context of higher education, community service functions as a social laboratory that allows students to apply academic theory in real-life situations full of social and economic dynamics and challenges. For example, economics students involved in rural MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) empowerment programs can practice concepts such as financial planning, cost analysis, and marketing strategies while helping business partners improve efficiency and revenue. This process transforms previously conceptual theories into concrete and meaningful knowledge because they are internalized through direct experiences that require creative and collaborative problem-solving. Thus, community

service serves as an integrative learning medium that unites cognitive (knowledge), affective (empathy and social values), and psychomotor (actions and skills) dimensions, producing socially competent graduates.

Another theory reinforcing the urgency of community service within higher education is Constructivist Learning Theory, which assumes that knowledge is not passively transferred from educators to learners but is actively constructed through interactions between individuals and their environment (Prakash Chand, 2023). In the context of community service, students act as constructive agents who interpret, modify, and enrich their knowledge through social and collaborative engagement with local communities. For instance, when students collaborate with farmers' groups to develop organic farming innovations, they not only apply agribusiness theory but also learn from local knowledge accumulated over many years. This process merges scientific knowledge with local wisdom, creating a productive dialogical learning form. Research by N. Hidayat (2019) shows that the constructivist approach in the *Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN)* program at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta enhances students' critical, collaborative, and creative thinking skills, as they are confronted with situations requiring multidimensional analysis. This confirms that community service functions as an epistemological platform for students to construct new knowledge relevant to the social and cultural contexts in which they interact.

Furthermore, Service Learning Theory, developed by Bringle & Hatcher (2000), explicitly links community service activities with academic learning objectives through planned social engagement and critical reflection. This theory emphasizes that field experiences will only produce meaningful learning if followed by a systematic reflection process connecting empirical experiences with theoretical frameworks studied in the classroom. In this context, students do not merely "serve" the community but also learn through service itself (learning through serving). A critical study by Setyowati & Permata (2018) published in the *Journal of Gadjah Mada University* demonstrates that students participating in service learning-based community service programs experience significant improvements in reflective capacity, social empathy, and the ability to translate theory into practical action. For example, psychology students mentoring children in marginalized communities gain a deeper understanding of emotional development and social behavior concepts compared to learning solely through literature. This process also cultivates students' social sensitivity and ethical awareness in understanding the complexity of humanitarian issues. Integrating service learning into higher education curricula thus becomes a strategic approach to shaping students with adaptive social leadership, reflection, and a focus on social sustainability.

From the perspective of Social Capital Theory introduced by Putnam (1994), community service serves as a strategic instrument for building and strengthening social networks, reciprocal trust, and collaborative norms that support the creation of social capital among students, educational institutions, and communities. Putnam emphasizes that the success of social development largely depends on the quality of relationships and trust among social actors involved. In the context of higher education, students'

participation in community service activities such as Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) or Community Development Projects provides a platform for intensive interaction with communities, understanding socio-cultural dynamics, and developing interpersonal skills that cannot be acquired solely through theoretical classroom learning. A case study at Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) Surakarta on the thematic KKN program “Sustainable Tourism Village” clearly illustrates how collaborative interaction among students, village governments, and local tourism actors fosters mutual trust and a shared sense of ownership over development outcomes (Rinanto et al., 2023). Such activities strengthen community perceptions of the university as an institution committed to regional development. This synergy demonstrates how social capital becomes the foundation for successful contextual learning, as healthy social networks and collective trust enable more effective and sustainable knowledge and value transfer.

From an empirical perspective, various studies provide strong evidence that community service significantly enhances students’ competencies while empowering target communities. Research conducted by Adi (2025) and Ki Aprianto (2025) at Universitas Airlangga found that the “MSME Empowerment KKN” program successfully improved students’ abilities in digital adaptation, entrepreneurial literacy, and technology-based problem-solving. Students who assisted MSME actors in digital transformation, such as conducting online marketing training via e-commerce platforms and social media, were able to apply management and digital communication theories previously learned on campus. Reciprocal impacts were also observed within the community, where MSME actors experienced increased sales and wider market access. This interaction creates a symbiotic relationship between academia and society, known as mutual learning—a process in which students and communities learn from each other to find innovative solutions to local challenges. These findings underscore that community service provides a shared learning space that enriches students’ professional competencies while strengthening the socio-economic resilience of communities in a sustainable manner. Community service contributions thus have a dual effect: building individual capacity while reinforcing community resilience.

Beyond contributing to cognitive and technical skills, community service plays a fundamental role in shaping students’ character to be ethical, empathetic, and oriented toward human values. According to Character Education Theory proposed by Lickona (1992), true education should develop three main dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These dimensions can only grow optimally when individuals are confronted with real experiences that demand ethical decision-making and social responsibility. In the context of community service, students learn to balance personal interests with public interests, understand complex social realities, and cultivate empathy for vulnerable groups. A case study at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) through Service Learning for Community Empowerment demonstrated that students experienced increased moral awareness and social commitment after assisting rural communities in poverty alleviation and local economic empowerment programs (O. T. Hidayat, 2024). Through reflection on these experiences, students develop authentic

concern for social justice and humanitarian values. Community service functions as an integral character-building medium, bridging the academic world with real-life experiences while reinforcing moral values, responsibility, and ethical leadership essential for addressing current global challenges.

In the context of higher education in Indonesia, integrating community service as a form of contextual learning is highly relevant to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on “Quality Education” and Goal 8 on “Decent Work and Economic Growth.” This concept emphasizes that higher education serves as a driving force for sustainable socio-economic development. Through programs such as “Kampus Mengajar,” “Thematic KKN for Innovative Village Empowerment,” and the “Kedaireka Matching Fund,” students are encouraged to apply their knowledge in real contexts relevant to social challenges within communities (Dwi Cahya et al., 2022; Kedaireka, 2024; UM, 2025). For example, in the 2023 Kampus Mengajar program at Universitas Padjajaran, students were deployed to schools in remote areas to help improve basic literacy, develop creative teaching methods, and implement digital technology in school environments (Maulana, 2023). These experiences directly honed their pedagogical, communication, leadership, and managerial skills. More broadly, such activities strengthen the bridge between academia and the workforce, producing graduates who are adaptive to social and economic changes. Community service within the service learning framework thus serves a dual function: as an educational platform that strengthens student competencies and as a sustainable development instrument supporting the global SDG agenda through collaboration among universities, government, industry, and local communities.

Based on a synthesis of various theoretical studies and empirical findings, it can be concluded that service learning-based community service represents a holistic and contextual learning approach aligned with 21st-century education paradigms emphasizing the integration of knowledge, skills, and human values. Through the application of Experiential Learning, Constructivist Learning, Service Learning, and Character Education theories, students develop essential social, emotional, and professional competencies to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Real-world field experiences, combined with critical reflection and interdisciplinary collaboration, shape individuals who are critically thinking, empathetic, adaptive, and socially aware. Therefore, higher education institutions in Indonesia need to strengthen service learning-based curriculum design through a systematic interdisciplinary approach, supported by research mechanisms, impact assessment, and sustainable partnerships with communities and industry sectors. This approach will ensure that community service becomes the heart of a transformative learning process—preparing students to become agents of change who are ethical, innovative, and capable of making tangible contributions to sustainable development and social justice at both local and global levels.

**Table 1.** The concept of community service as a contextual learning platform for students

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Description / Evidence</b>
<b>Experiential Learning Foundation</b>	Community service as a contextual learning platform is grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), integrating concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students apply theory in real-life social and economic contexts, turning abstract knowledge into practical skills. Example: economics students helping rural MSMEs practice financial planning, cost analysis, and marketing strategies.
<b>Constructivist Learning</b>	Constructivist Learning Theory (Prakash Chand, 2023) emphasizes knowledge construction through interaction. Students act as constructive agents, combining scientific knowledge with local wisdom. Example: collaborating with farmers to develop organic farming innovations, enhancing critical, collaborative, and creative thinking (N. Hidayat, 2019).
<b>Service Learning Theory</b>	Bringle & Hatcher (2000) link community service to academic objectives through critical reflection and social engagement. Students learn through serving ("learning through serving"), improving reflective capacity, social empathy, and translating theory into practice. Example: psychology students mentoring children in marginalized communities (Setyowati & Permata, 2018).
<b>Social Capital Development</b>	Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1994) shows community service strengthens social networks, trust, and collaborative norms, enabling knowledge transfer and sustainable learning. Case study: KKN "Sustainable Tourism Village" at UNS Surakarta fosters mutual trust and ownership between students, local government, and tourism actors (Rinanto et al., 2023).
<b>Empirical Evidence on Competence</b>	Programs like "MSME Empowerment KKN" at Universitas Airlangga enhance student competencies in digital adaptation, entrepreneurial literacy, and technology-based problem-solving, while increasing community sales and market access (Adi, 2025; Ki Aprianto, 2025). This demonstrates mutual learning between students and communities.
<b>Character Development</b>	Community service cultivates ethical, empathetic, and human-centered character, based on Lickona's Character Education Theory (1992). Example: UMS students in Service Learning for Community Empowerment improve moral awareness and social commitment through poverty alleviation and local economic empowerment programs (O. T. Hidayat, 2024).
<b>Alignment with SDGs</b>	Community service supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Programs like "Kampus Mengajar," thematic KKNs, and Kedaireka Matching Fund enable students to apply knowledge in real-world contexts and enhance pedagogical, leadership, and managerial skills (Dwi Cahya et al., 2022; Kedaireka, 2024; UM, 2025; Maulana, 2023).
<b>Holistic Learning Approach</b>	Service learning-based community service integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions, fostering critical thinking, empathy, adaptability, and social awareness. It prepares students to be ethical, innovative agents of change capable of contributing to sustainable development and social justice.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the theoretical review and findings from previous studies, it can be concluded that community service serves as an effective contextual learning platform for students, enabling the integration of academic theory with real-world practice. Through the service learning approach, grounded in Experiential Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Character Education Theory, students develop social

empathy, moral responsibility, and professional skills. Community service activities facilitate reflective processes that enhance academic understanding while fostering humanistic character development. Beyond benefiting students, these activities contribute to the socio-economic development of communities and strengthen the synergy between academia and local communities. Therefore, community service represents a strategic educational instrument for producing graduates who are adaptive, solution-oriented, and ethically grounded.

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education curriculum development in Indonesia. First, universities need to formally integrate the concept of service learning into their instructional design to ensure that community service activities are not sporadic or merely administrative but form an integral part of the learning process. Second, lecturers should act as facilitators, helping students reflect on field experiences within theoretical contexts, thereby ensuring the academic value of community service activities. Third, from a social perspective, implementing service learning-based community service can strengthen collaboration between campuses and communities in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of education, economic empowerment, and poverty alleviation. These implications confirm that contextual learning through community service has significant potential to cultivate a generation of intellectuals who are socially responsible, productive, and oriented toward positive social change.

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, as a literature review with a qualitative approach, the analysis relies entirely on the researcher's interpretation of the available literature and does not directly reflect empirical conditions. Second, the data sources were limited to scholarly articles from Google Scholar and credible websites from 1984–2025, which, while representative of recent developments, may not fully encompass the variation of community service contexts and models across Indonesia. Third, not all reviewed articles provided in-depth empirical data on reflective mechanisms in service learning, so conclusions were drawn conceptually and theoretically. These limitations highlight the need for more field-based, applied research in the future.

Based on these limitations and findings, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen implementation and future research. First, universities are encouraged to develop measurable service learning-based community service models with success indicators encompassing academic, social, and character dimensions of students. Second, empirical research should directly observe the contextual learning process through community service across various disciplines to validate and enrich existing conceptual findings. Third, government and educational institutions are expected to enhance funding policies and university–community partnerships to support the sustainability of community service programs. Finally, academic researchers are advised to expand studies on critical reflection and social transformation as the core of service learning, ensuring that community service becomes a truly transformative educational instrument, rather than merely a formal activity within the tridharma of higher education.

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