

THE MANY FACES OF ENGAGEMENT, LEARNING GOALS, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN SERVICE LEARNING

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Many universities are embracing a broader definition of scholarship, one that entails not only the discovery and integration of knowledge, but also the application and dissemination of knowledge. This article defines service learning, lists potential learning goals for service learning, and outlines principles of good practice.

As we enter a new century, there are many societal issues influencing the culture of education. Uncertainty in employment, shifts in values, and more pressured lifestyles are affecting the way in which students approach their educational goals. Competing resources and societal problems are forcing the academic community to refocus its mission, draw upon and apply the findings of pedagogical research, and maximize available resources. Educators are embracing a broader vision of scholarship, one that entails not only the discovery and integration of knowledge but also the application and dissemination of knowledge. The new scholarship of engagement encompasses application and dissemination through outreach, community service, and service learning.

As educators and mentors, we assume the responsibility of sharing our knowledge and ideas. Students are looking to us to help them build the skills and talents necessary to be better citizens, gain employment, and advance careers. Additionally, we are developing minds by challenging our students through critical thinking and thought provocation. To new professionals in the field of education, this may seem like a daunting task. Indeed even a seasoned veteran of the traditional classroom might find fulfilling all of these responsibilities difficult. However, newly recognized pedagogy –service learning – seems to facilitate not only learning but also application and engagement of what has been learned in a setting that promotes citizenship.

Working Definitions

Many educators in the field of family and consumer sciences may rightfully assume that they already have service-learning components in place, and indeed many do. As a profession with many practical applications, we have often engaged our students in outreach programs. At the very least we have had some mechanism for students to gain on the job experience. We may have used the terms internship, practicum, or field study. In other situations, we may have had opportunities where we encouraged our students to engage in volunteer activities. All of these terms have different definitions. Therefore, before discussing service learning in depth, it is necessary to define “service learning” and similar terms.

Internships, field studies, and practicums usually involve the students performing work off-campus in the hopes of gaining in-depth practical knowledge that will enhance the students’ understanding of the “body of knowledge” in their chosen discipline. Often this activity will lead to permanent employment.

A volunteer project or community service, on the other hand, usually has a minimal academic component. The purpose of this type of project is to get the students involved in the

community or an organization. Community service is giving one's time through an organized effort to serve the needs of the community. This can range from serving food to the homeless to tutoring children to working on a voter registration drive. In some situations, the courts may mandate community service, but most of the time it is a voluntary act of persons interested in improving their communities.

Service learning differs from an internship or volunteer activity in that there is course content integrated into the service. In essence, the student is learning while serving. The goal of this type of activity is to have the student master course content while applying this to the need of the community or non-profit agency. Students learn the course content as they apply this material in a real-world setting. Additionally, students also develop team building, programming, and communication skills. All of this occurs in a context in which students are exposed to citizenship and to giving back to their communities.

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) defined service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participated in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Learning Goals for Service Learning

By its very nature, service learning is transformational learning – the intersection of the individual and society or the social environment (O'Sullivan, & Tennant, 1993). Mezirow (1994) referred to service learning as a transformation of perspective. This transformation occurs at various levels and by a variety of means. In a service-learning course students might be confronted or faced with disorienting dilemmas. Students will likely have their stereotypes challenged and their personal values questioned and they will be forced to “walk in another's shoes” as they become more aware of real life social problems.

Based on a national survey of service-learning students, Eyler and Giles (1999) reported that students participating in service learning develop

- A reduction of negative stereotypes and an increase in tolerance for diversity;
- Greater self-knowledge;
- Greater spiritual growth;
- Increased ability to work with others;
- Increased leadership skills;
- Increased feelings of being connected to a community;
- Increased connection to the college experience through closer ties to students and faculty;
- Increased reported learning and motivation to learn;
- Deeper understanding of subject matter;
- Deeper understanding of the complexity of social issues; and
- Increased ability to apply material learned in class to real problems.

Another reason to create a service-learning goal is to help students connect what they read and hear in the classroom with what they experience and observe in the community. Service learning should promote civic responsibility and address community needs, all the while instilling a life-long commitment to service.

Principals of Good Practice

Honnet and Poulson (1989) studied several service-learning programs in an attempt to determine principles of good practice. They concluded that an effective and sustained program

- Engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good;
- Provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience;
- Articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved;
- Allows those with needs to define their needs;
- Clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved;
- Matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances;
- Expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment;
- Includes training, supervision, monitoring support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals;
- Insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interest of all involved; and
- Is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations.

Conclusions

With appropriate rigor, a flexible instructional plan, appropriate community partnering, and specific learning goals set for the students, service learning is recognized as an effective and desirable pedagogy. Service learning is consistent with the teachings of Boyer (1996). He urged the academy to become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, thus reaffirming its historic commitment to the scholarship of engagement. Boyer spoke of creating a special climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate creatively with each other, while at the same time enriching the quality of life for all. Boyer was a strong advocate of the value of scholars and practitioners actively interacting with each other. This, is the essence of service learning.

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