An Introduction to Service Learning Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: Many higher education institutions and discipline-specific associations have embraced service-learning as a way to join campuses (and specifically, academic departments across the curriculum) with their communities to positively respond to community challenges and opportunities for collaboration. Hundreds of definitions of service-learning exist internationally, many of which are informed by definitions used by national organizations such as Campus Compact, the Corporation for National Service or the National Society for Experiential Education. Service-learning can be defined as both an educational philosophy and a pedagogical technique for combining community service with academic objectives. Academic Service-Learning is a teaching methodology which utilizes a community involvement component as a means for students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary course objectives and to gain a deeper understanding of civic life and participation through structured reflection. This paper is a brief introduction to service learning.

Keywords:
Campus Compact; Service Learning; Structured Reflection; Pedagogical Techniques

1. Introduction

Academic service-learning provides a way to unite the tripartite mission of any university: (1) teaching, (2) research, and (3) public service. Many university faculty members across the world have reported that students doing community work as part of their coursework become more engaged and active learners because they see how their studies apply to actual community issues while they are positively contributing to an organization (Galura & Howard, 1993). For faculty, service-learning can mean engaging your students with existing community organizations or in a community-based research project with you and the community (Zlotkowski, 1998, 2000). For the community, service-learning can translate into identifying what they want done that could not otherwise be done without assistance from outside help or it can extend their reach in the community farther than otherwise possible with existing staff (Kendall, 1990). By giving thoughtful attention to how students can work in community organizations, learn from that experience, and develop respectful communication with community organizations, the full potential of service-learning pedagogy can be achieved (Salmani Nodoushan & Daftarifard, 2011).

Service-learning is a pedagogy grounded in the belief that students learn by doing. As a teaching strategy, it builds on experiential learning theory. It is shaped by education reform principles that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. It is inspired by the belief that the academy has a fundamental responsibility to prepare students for lives of active citizenship (Salmani Nodoushan, 2015a,b,c,d,e; 2016a; Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999). Under a variety of labels, including “community-based learning” and “theory-practice

learning," service-learning has gained ground rapidly in educational institutions at all levels. Its practitioners cite numerous benefits: Faculty members gain new insight about their teaching goals and methods as they examine the ways in which students learn. Students participating in the "lived text" of a community through community service or through a community-based research project come to approach learning with newly awakened enthusiasm and insight. Also because the pedagogy addresses divergent learning styles, students often achieve greater mastery of the subject matter (Salmani Nodoushan & Pashapour, 2016; Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999).

No less important, service-learning connects the university with the community in relationships that are reciprocal and mutually rewarding. As universities are increasingly asked to justify themselves and their costs to a variety of constituencies, the partnerships forged by campuses and community organizations to address issues together take on added significance (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Service-learning is a demanding pedagogy for both teachers and learners. Faculty members use it not because it is easy, but because they value the transformation it brings to their teaching. Implementing it for the first time requires the instructor to be flexible with the syllabus to allow for the unexpected (Rhodes, 1997). Appropriately enough, when integrating service-learning, faculty might find it most useful to follow the learning cycle: conceptualize, experiment, reflect, and revise (Rhodes & Howard, 1998).

2. Myths about academic service learning

To clarify the conceptualization for academic service-learning, as well as to distinguish it from other community-based service and learning models, let's begin with four common misunderstandings about this pedagogy.

- *The myth of terminology:* This myth holds that academic service-learning is the same as student community service and co-curricular service-learning. Academic service-learning is not the same as student community service or co-curricular service-learning. While sharing the word "service," these models of student involvement in the community are distinguished by their learning agenda. Student community service, illustrated by a student organization adopting a local elementary school, rarely involves a learning agenda. In contrast, both of the two forms of service-learning (i.e., academic and co-curricular service learning) make intentional efforts to engage students in planned and purposeful learning related to the service experiences. Co-curricular service-learning, illustrated by many alternative spring break programs, is concerned with raising students' consciousness and familiarity with issues related to various communities. Academic service-learning, illustrated by student community service integrated into an academic course, utilizes the service experience as a course "text" for both academic learning and civic learning (Jacoby, et al. 1996).
- *The myth of conceptualization:* It is simply a myth to assume that academic service-learning is just a new name for internships. Many internship programs, especially those involving community service, are now referring to themselves as service-learning programs, as if the two pedagogical models were the same. While internships and academic service-learning involve students in the community to accentuate or supplement students' academic learning, generally speaking, internships are not about civic learning. They develop and socialize students for a profession and tend to be silent on student civic development. They also emphasize student benefits more than community benefits, while service-learning is equally attentive to both (Heffernan, 2001).

- *The myth of synonymy:* It is simply another myth to assume that experience, such as in the community, is synonymous with learning. Experience and learning are not the same. While experience is a necessary condition of learning, it is not sufficient (Coles, 1993; Ehrlich, 2000; Salmani Nodoushan, 2002, 2016b). Learning requires more than experience, and so one cannot assume that student involvement in the community automatically yields learning. Harvesting academic and/or civic learning from a community service experience requires purposeful and intentional efforts. This harvesting process is often referred to as "reflection" in the service-learning literature (Ehrlich, 2000; Jackson, 1994; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan & Ashrafzadeh, 2010).
- *The myth of marginality:* It is also a myth to assume that academic service-learning is the addition of community service to a traditional course. Grafting a community service requirement (or option) onto an otherwise unchanged academic course does not constitute academic service-learning (Salmani Nodoushan, 2003, 2006a,b; 2008a,b). While such models abound, this interpretation marginalizes the learning in, from, and with the community, and precludes transforming students' community experiences into learning. To realize service-learning's full potential as a pedagogical tool, the community experience must be considered in the context of, and integrated with, the other planned learning strategies and resources in the course (Al Shalabi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2009; Ehrlich, 2000; Howard, 2001; Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b,c; 2008c; 2009a,b).

3. Basic tenets of service learning

Jeffrey Howard (2001) believes that in order to fully understand and authentically integrate service-learning into coursework, faculty must adhere to each of the following ten principles of service-learning equally.

Principle 1: Academic Credit is for Learning, Not for Service

This first principle speaks to those who puzzle over how to assess students' service in the community, or what weight to assign community involvement in final grades. In traditional courses, academic credit and grades are assigned based on students' demonstration of academic learning as measured by the instructor (Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Karami & Salmani Nodoushan, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan, 1992, 2006c; 2012a). It is no different in service-learning courses. While in traditional courses we assess students' learning from traditional course resources (e.g., textbooks, class discussions, library research, etc., *a la* Salmani Nodoushan, 2008d,e) in service-learning courses we evaluate students' learning from traditional resources, from the community service, and from the blending of the two. Therefore, academic credit is not awarded for doing service or for the quality of the service, but rather for the student's demonstration of academic and civic learning (Salmani Nodoushan, 2010a,b).

Principle 2: Do Not Compromise Academic Rigor

Since there is a widespread perception in academic circles that community service is a "soft" learning resource, there may be a temptation to compromise the academic rigor in a service-learning course. Labeling community service as a "soft" learning stimulus reflects a gross misperception. The perceived "soft" service component actually raises the learning challenge in a course. Service-learning students must not only master academic material as in traditional courses, but also learn how to learn from unstructured community experiences and merge that learning with the learning from other course resources (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Principle 3: Establish Learning Objectives

It is a service-learning maxim that one cannot develop a quality service-learning course without first setting very explicit learning objectives. This principle is foundational to service-learning. While establishing learning objectives for students is a standard to which all courses are accountable, in fact, it is especially necessary and advantageous to establish learning objectives in service-learning courses. The addition of the community as a learning context multiplies the learning possibilities. To sort out those of greatest priority, as well as to leverage the bounty of learning opportunities offered by community service experiences, deliberate planning of course academic and civic learning objectives is required (Eyler, Giles & Schmiede, 1996).

Principle 4: Establish Criteria for the Selection of Service Placements

Requiring students to serve in any community-based organization as part of a service-learning course is tantamount to requiring students to read any book as part of a traditional course. Faculty who are deliberate about establishing criteria for selecting community service placements will find that students are able to extract more relevant learning from their respective service experiences, and are more likely to meet course learning objectives. We recommend four criteria for selecting service placements:

1. Circumscribe the range of acceptable service placements around the content of the course (e.g., for a course on homelessness, homeless shelters and soup kitchens are learning-appropriate placements, but service in a hospice is not).
2. Limit specific service activities and contexts to those with the potential to meet course-relevant academic and civic learning objectives (e.g., filing papers in a warehouse, while of service to a school district, will offer little to stimulate either academic or civic learning in a course on elementary school education.
3. Correlate the required duration of service with its role in the realization of academic and civic learning objectives (e.g., one two-hour shift at a hospital will do little to contribute to academic or civic learning in a course on institutional health care).
4. Assign community projects that meet real needs in the community as determined by the community.

Principle 5: Provide Educationally Sound Learning Strategies to Harvest Community Learning and Realize Course Learning Objectives

Requiring service-learning students to merely record their service activities and hours as their journal assignment is tantamount to requiring student in an engineering course to log their activities and hours in the lab. Learning in any course is realized by an appropriate mix and level of learning strategies and assignments that correspond with the learning objectives for the course. Given that in service-learning courses we want to utilize students' service experiences in part to achieve academic and civic course learning objectives, learning strategies must be employed that support learning from service experiences and enable its use toward meeting course learning objectives. Learning interventions that promote critical reflection, analysis, and application of service experiences enable learning. To make certain that service does not underachieve in its role as an instrument of learning, careful thought must be given to learning activities that encourage the integration of experiential and academic learning (Salmani Nodoushan, 2012b). These activities include classroom discussions, presentations, and journal and paper assignments that support analysis of service experience in the context of the course academic and civic learning objectives. Of course,

clarity about course learning objectives is a prerequisite for identifying educationally-sound learning strategies (Bringle, Games & Malloy, 1999; Salmani Nodoushan, , 2009c,d,e).

Principle 6: Prepare Students for Learning from the Community

Most students lack experience with both extracting and making meaning from experience and in merging it with other academic and civic course learning strategies. Therefore, even an exemplary reflection journal assignment will yield, without sufficient support, uneven responses. Faculty can provide: 1) learning supports such as opportunities to acquire skills for gleaning the learning from the service context (e.g., participant-observer skills), and/or 2) examples of how to successfully complete assignments (e.g., making past exemplary student papers and reflection journals available to current students to peruse) (Barber & Battistoni, 1993; Salmani Nodoushan, 2010c).

Principle 7: Minimize the Distinction Between the Students' Community Learning Role and Classroom Learning Role

Classrooms and communities are very different learning contexts. Each requires students to assume a different learner role. Generally, classrooms provide a high level of teacher direction, with students expected to assume mostly a passive learner role. In contrast, service communities usually provide a low level of teaching direction, with students expected to assume mostly an active learner role. Alternating between the passive learner role in the classroom and the active learner role in the community may challenge and even impede student learning. The solution is to shape the learning environments so that students assume similar learner roles in both contexts (Salmani Nodoushan, 2012a).

While one solution is to intervene so that the service community provides a high level of teaching direction, we recommend, for several reasons, re-norming the traditional classroom toward one that values students as active learners. First, active learning is consistent with active civic participation that service-learning seeks to foster. Second, students bring information from the community to the classroom that can be utilized on behalf of others' learning. Finally, we know from recent research in the field of cognitive science that students develop deeper understanding of course material if they have an opportunity to actively construct knowledge.

Principle 8: Rethink the Faculty Instructional Role

If faculty encourage students' active learning in the classroom, what would be a concomitant and consistent change in one's teaching role? Commensurate with the preceding principle's recommendation for an active student learning posture, this principle advocates that service-learning teachers, too, rethink their roles. An instructor role that would be most compatible with an active student role shifts away from a singular reliance on transmission of knowledge and toward mixed pedagogical methods that include learning facilitation and guidance.

To re-shape one's classroom role to capitalize on the learning bounty in service-learning, faculty will find Howard's (1998) model of "Transforming the Classroom" helpful. This four-stage model begins with the traditional classroom in which students are passive, teachers are directive, an all conform to the learned rules of the classroom. In the second stage, the instructor begins to re-socialize herself toward a more facilitative role; but the students, socialized for many years to be passive learners, are slow to change to a more active mode. In the third stage, with the perseverance of the instructor, the students begin to develop and acquire the skills and propensities to be active in the classroom. Frequently, during this phase, faculty will become concerned that learning is not as rich and rigorous as when they are using the more popular lecture format, and may regress to a more directive posture (See also Salmani Nodoushan, 2011a). Over time homeostasis is established, and the instructor and the

students achieve an environment in which mixed pedagogical methods lead to students who are active learners, instructors fluent in multiple teaching methods, and strong academic and civic learning outcomes (Salmani Nodoushan, 2011b).

Principle 9: Be Prepared for Variation in, and Some Loss of Control with, Student Learning Outcomes

For faculty who value homogeneity in student learning outcomes, as well as control of the learning environment, service-learning may not be a good fit. In college courses, learning strategies largely determine student outcomes, and this is true in service-learning courses, too. However, in traditional courses, the learning strategies (i.e., lectures, labs, and reading) are constant for all enrolled students and under the watchful eye of the faculty member. In service-learning courses, given variability in service experiences and their influential role in student learning, one can anticipate greater heterogeneity in student learning outcomes and compromises to faculty control. Even when service-learning students are exposed to the same presentations and the same readings, instructors can expect that classroom discussions will be less predictable and the content of student papers/projects less homogeneous than in courses without a service assignment (Salmani Nodoushan, 2006a; 2013; 2014a). As an instructor, are you prepared for greater heterogeneity in student learning outcomes and some degree of loss of control over student learning stimuli?

Principle 10: Maximize the Community Responsibility Orientation of the Course

This principle is for those who think that civic learning can only spring from the community service component of a course. One of the necessary conditions of a service-learning course is purposeful civic learning. Designing classroom norms and learning strategies that not only enhance academic learning but also encourage civic learning are essential to purposeful civic learning. While most traditional courses are organized for private learning that advances the individual student, service-learning instructors should consider employing learning strategies that will complement and reinforce the civic lessons from the community experience. For example, efforts to convert from individual to group assignments and from instructor-only to instructor and student review of student assignments, re-norms the teaching-learning process to be consistent with the civic orientation of service-learning (Salmani Nodoushan, 2012a; 2014b).

4. Service learning FAQs

There are various frequently asked questions (FAQs) about service learning that need to be answered here:

Does service-learning work in introductory and lower-level courses?

Students at any level can have successful and rich service-learning experiences. The key is to carefully select service-learning placements where students are given levels of responsibility that are appropriate to their skill levels. Service-learning coordinators can help you identify community opportunities that should work well for your students.

Does service-learning work in large courses?

Our office has supported service-learning courses with enrollments as low as 10 students and as high as 250. With large courses, the key to success is making sure that all the teaching assistants understand the service-learning component and are prepared to facilitate students' reflection on their community work in discussion sections. Of course the logistics are more complicated in larger courses, so it's also important to stay in close contact with the service-

learning coordinator assigned to your course so they can help keep tabs on students getting their placements and logging their hours throughout the semester.

Do students have time to do service-learning?

We all know that many students are juggling classes, part- or full-time work, family obligations, and other activities, and it can be difficult to fit in a service-learning requirement. But we have found that most students are able to fit in the 2-3 hours per week typically required of service-learning students and, in fact, some students who didn't think they would have time for the community work decide to continue to make volunteering part of their routine after their course ends. Our staff members also work hard to offer students service-learning opportunities with different scheduling options and convenient locations. If a student seems to have extraordinarily challenging circumstances and service-learning is a requirement for your course, your service-learning liaison can help you think about alternative assignments for exceptional cases. When incorporating service-learning into a course, you'll want to make sure you adjust the workload of readings and other assignments in recognition of the time students will be working in the community. Your service-learning course liaison from our office is always happy to review your syllabus and offer suggestions.

Should I require service-learning or have it be an option in my course?

Our office support courses with service-learning requirements and with service-learning options (where students can choose to do service-learning or a different assignment, such as a research paper). Either way can work well, and it's up to you to decide which you prefer. There are, of course, pros and cons to each. When service-learning is required, all the students will have a shared basis for class discussions about their community work, but you may also be sending some students into the community who don't really want to be there. You can avoid this pitfall by making service-learning optional, but then it can be harder to facilitate reflection if not everyone has a community experience to draw on. Our staff can help you think this decision through and can share sample syllabi of both models. If you do require service-learning in your course, this should be include in the course description students see when they register so they'll be aware of this expectation.

How should I grade students on their service-learning?

Because we think of students' work with community organizations as a "lived text" for a course, you can compare the time students spend at their organizations to required readings. Just as students' grades are based not on whether they've done the readings, but rather on how well they demonstrate what they learned from the readings on assignments like exams and papers, your service-learning class should include assignments that require students to articulate what they've learned from their community work and how it connects with other course texts, lectures, and discussions. These assignments are examples of reflection, and reflection is a key aspect of service-learning that sets it apart from other types of volunteer work. To learn more about reflection and see examples of how you might ask your students to do reflection in a service-learning class, see the Reflection section of this Guide.

Most service-learning instructors do require a minimum number of hours of community work for the semester, but you can think of this component of the students' experience as being similar to other parts of their grade that are based on attendance and participation. The required number of hours is intended to give students enough time in the community organization to fulfill the course learning objectives, and also to make sure that the organization is getting enough benefit from students' service to balance the time and effort their supervisors are investing in them. We do recommend that students doing service-

learning be asked to commit 2-3 hours per week to their organization, for a total of 25-30 hours over the course of a semester, to achieve this balance.

How do I make sure service-learning is well integrated into my class?

Reflection assignments are the most effective way to integrate service-learning into your course because they help students make connections between their community work and the course content. Also, when we ask students at the end of each semester how service-learning could have been better integrated into their class, a common response is that more time could have been spent in class discussing students' experiences in the community, so we strongly encourage you to keep this in mind as you plan your course. Whether service-learning is required for all your students or an option that only some students pursue, think about the ways they could learn from each other through these discussions. Just remember the importance of making sure that service-learning doesn't appear to be an "add-on" to the course – it should be clearly woven into your curriculum.

What if something happens to a student, or if their actions cause damages to someone else?

Every service-learning student who requests a referral to an organization needs to complete a Participant Agreement, in which they acknowledge "that there are risks involved in doing community work and that the University does not assume any responsibility for injuries or loss to my personal property while I am participating in a community organization." We work to minimize these risks by visiting community partner organizations to gain a better sense of where and how they operate, and our partner organizations also sign an agreement limiting the University's liability and providing proof of their own liability insurance coverage. However, the University of Minnesota's own liability insurance does provide coverage for all academic credit-bearing student activities, including service-learning. If a student reports an incident to you, please let your course liaison to our office know as soon as possible. Should there be any question of liability, the U's Risk Management staff will work with the organization and the student to resolve the issue.

What are some of the challenges encountered by students doing service-learning?

During the semester, students will likely share with you the challenges they're experiencing with their service-learning. These could include delays in hearing back from their organization and getting started with their work, difficulty getting in their required hours, dissatisfaction with the work they're being asked to do, or a lack of clarity about their role in the organization. If students approach you with concerns about their organization, you should work to address the situation as quickly as possible, either by communicating directly with the student's supervisor at the organization or by letting your service-learning coordinator know about the situation so she can follow up. The service-learning coordinators try to encourage students to contact them with any concerns, but because students see you more frequently you will likely be the first to know when these situations arise. Because a semester goes by so quickly it's imperative that any issues be resolved promptly – and, of course, this will also help students maintain a positive attitude about their service-learning assignment and the course in general.

5. Conclusion

In summary, service learning is very useful for students. It can provide academic, personal, and professional development benefits; it:

- Increases understanding of the topics covered in the class;
- Develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills;

- Encourages exploration and clarification of values and beliefs about the world, and provides opportunities to act on them;
- Fosters a greater understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and communities;
- Develops understanding of social issues facing communities and encourages exploration of root causes and social, political, and economic structures;
- Improves the ability to handle ambiguity and the flexibility to adapt to changing situations;
- Provides valuable work experience (and can even lead to an internship or a job);
- Develops and/or enhances important skills, especially in communication, collaboration, and leadership;
- Encourages reflection on how to integrate skills, interests, and values in a career path;
- Provides connections to a network of professionals and community members to draw on in future endeavors; and
- Instills an appreciation of and the skills needed for lifelong learning and civic participation.

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