

Service Learning: Concept, Theory and Practice

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Abstract: Service learning activities should be organized around and designed to meet actual community needs, and integrated into the student's curriculum. Teachers should provide time for students to reflect on and write about their service experience, offer opportunities to apply newly learned academic skills and knowledge, and strive to enhance both academic learning and a sense of carrying for others. Service learning activities, but instead should be an integral part of their learning. Service learning activities may involve direct service (tutoring, serving meals at homeless shelter, raising money), indirect service (collecting food for shelter, raising money), or advocacy (designing and distributing posters about a food drive, writing newspaper articles). Service learning could also be a form of problem – based learning. Service learning has potential to transform teaching and learning in the academy and to call a generation of students to develop social responsibility and an ethic of service. Through participation in service learning, students may develop truncated understandings of the nature of social problems and of strategies for fundamental social change. Service learning goes beyond what is learned in the classroom. It is a hands-on experience. Students gain new skills by working directly with the community. Service learning enhances students' valuable academic skills, including communication, team building, and critical thinking; builds their self-esteem; and develops their sense of responsibility for decision making. This paper enlightens the concept, origin, types, criteria, benefits and research issues connected with service learning.

Keywords: service learning, concept, origin, types, criteria, benefits and research issues

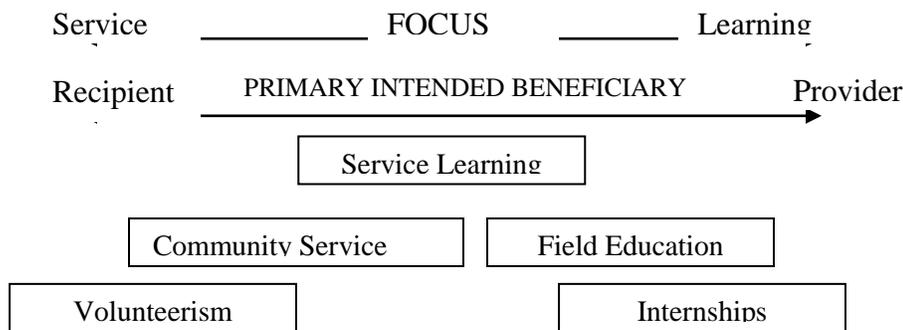
I. Introduction

Service learning is a teaching strategy that invites students to identify, research, and address real community challenges, using knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. Service learning combines academic learning with personal and social development for secondary and college students (Woolfolk Hoy, Demerath, & Pape, 2002). A more formal definition of service learning is "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (National Service Learning Clearing House, n.d.). About half of American high schools have some form of service learning (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007).

The difference between service learning and community service is: community service participants volunteer for the primary purpose of meeting the needs of others and bettering the community as a whole while increasing their academic achievement. Service learning students also take part in structured time to investigate community needs, thoughtful planning of the service project, and guided reflection regarding the relationship between their service experience and their more traditional in-class learning. Overall, the most important feature of effective service learning programs is that students engage equally with learning and service and reflect on their intersections. Service learning is an effective teaching method for all students, including gifted and talented students, special education students, students with disabilities: at-risk youth, youth in inclusive classrooms, and students in alternative education.

II. What is Service Learning?

- It is a method of encouraging student learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in, and meets the needs of, a community.
- It involves an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, along with the community.
- It helps foster civic responsibility.
- It is integrated into, and enhances, the academic curriculum or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled.
- It provides structured time for students or participants to reflect on the service experience.



Volunteerism

Activities where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient.

Community Service

Activities that primarily focus on the service being provided as well as the benefits the service activities have on recipients (e.g. providing food to the homeless during the holidays). The students receive some benefits by learning more about how their service makes a difference in the lives of the service recipients.

Field Education

The engagement of students in co-curricular service opportunities that are related, but not fully integrated with their formal academic studies. Students perform the service as part of a program that is designed primarily to enhance students' understanding of a field of study, while also providing substantial emphasis on the service being provided.

Internships

Service activities primarily for the purpose of providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study.

Service Learning

A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.

Service learning programs are found in all subjects and grade levels, a wide range of community-based organizations, and in Indian Tribes and U. S. Territories. Each year, Learn and Serve America programs engage more than a million students – from kindergarten to higher education – in service learning activities that support education, the environment, public safety, and other human needs. The degree to which these programs are implemented varies from a school-wide program at the k-12 level to a large consortium of community colleges like the American Association of Community Colleges Horizons Service Learning program.

III. What are the roots of service learning?

The practice of service learning dates back much further than the term itself, beginning with educational movements and social change in the late 1880s. The intellectual foundations of service learning in the United States trace back to the early 1900s with the work of John Dewey, William James, and others who promoted models of "learning by doing," and linked service to personal and social development. The term "service learning" was coined by two educators in 1967 to describe the combination of conscious educational growth with the accomplishment of certain tasks that meet genuine human needs.

IV. What is the difference between service learning and community service?

Community service participants volunteer for the primary or sole purpose of meeting the needs of others and bettering the community as a whole. Young people engaged in high quality service learning meet the needs of their communities while increasing their academic achievement. Service learning students also take part in structured time to investigate community needs, thoughtful planning of the service project, and guided reflection regarding the relationship between their service experience and their more traditional in-class learning. Overall, the most important feature of effective service learning programs is that students engage equally with learning and service and reflect on their intersections.

V. What are the types of Service Learning ?

"Pure" Service Learning

These are courses that send students out into the community to serve. These courses have as their intellectual core the idea of service to communities by students, volunteers, or engaged citizens. They are not typically lodged in any one discipline.

Discipline-Based Service Learning

In this model, students are expected to have a presence in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis throughout the semester using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding.

Problem-Based Service Learning (PBSL)

According to this model, students (or teams of students) relate to the community much as "consultants" working for a "client." Students work with community members to understand a particular community problem or need. This model presumes that the students will have some knowledge they can draw upon to make recommendations to the community or develop a solution to the problem: architecture students might design a park; business students might develop a website; or botany students might identify non-native plants and suggest eradication methods.

Capstone Courses

These courses are generally designed for majors and minors in a given discipline and are offered almost exclusively to students in their final year. Capstone courses ask students to draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their coursework and combine it with relevant service work in the community. The goal of capstone courses is usually either to explore a new topic or to synthesize students' understanding of their discipline. These courses offer an excellent way to help students make the transition from the world of theory to the world of practice by helping them establish professional contacts and gather personal experience.

Service Internships

Like traditional internships, these experiences are more intense than typical service learning courses, with students working as many as 10 to 20 hours a week in a community setting. As in traditional internships, students are generally charged with producing a body of work that is of value to the community or site. However, unlike traditional internships, service internships have regular and on-going reflective opportunities that help students analyze their new experiences using discipline-based theories. These reflective opportunities can be done with small groups of peers, with one-on-one meetings with faculty advisors, or even electronically with a faculty member

providing feedback. Service internships are further distinguished from traditional internships by their focus on reciprocity: the idea that the community and the student benefit equally from the experience.

Undergraduate Community-Based Action Research

A relatively new approach that is gaining popularity, community-based action research is similar to an independent study option for the rare student who is highly experienced in community work. Community-based action research can also be effective with small classes or groups of students. In this model, students work closely with faculty members to learn research methodology while serving as advocates for communities.

VI. What are the Criteria for Service Learning ?

Academic Connection: Service is related to curriculum and fully integrated into course goals, student learning outcomes. Participation is required.

- The service learning component of the course is directly linked to the academic goals of the course; each informs and transforms the other.
- Goals of the service learning component are clearly articulated in terms of the broader course goals.

Community Voice and Quality Service: The service project/placement engages and fulfills community identified needs as well as meeting course objectives. This includes determining a timeframe, required skill-set for students, training requirements etc.

- The service component responds to the needs of the community as defined by the community.
- Goals are developed in the context of community needs, but with a focus on the *assets/capacities* of all partners (students, community partners, faculty members, etc.).
- Students are prepared for entrance into the community through an introduction to the agency/issue and appropriate training.

Reciprocity/Collaboration: Reciprocity suggest that every individual, organization, and entity involved in the service learning functions as a both teacher and a learner.

- Partners in the process develop a shared vision and joint strategies.
- Partners learn from and teach each other on an on-going basis.

Reflection: A mechanism that encourages students to link their service experience to course content and to process their personal experience/perceptions. *The hyphen in service learning represents the reflection that bridges service to learning and learning to service.*

- Formal and informal reflection is conducted before, during and after the service.
- Social, psychological, political and ethical considerations are made while reflecting on the service experience.

Assessment: A method/tool embedded in the course for understanding effectiveness of service learning for all participants: faculty, students, and community partners.

- Evaluation seeks to measure the progress towards and outcomes of both the learning and service goals of the course.
- Assignment that demonstrates that student capacity to link academic knowledge to practice.

VII. What are the Benefits of Service Learning ?

Service learning also provides developmental opportunities that promote a successful transition from childhood to adulthood, builds resilience and promotes positive youth development. Service learning accomplishes this by promoting growth in the following areas:

- **Personal growth** applies to the development of characteristics related to self-improvement and self-actualization, including independence and autonomy and openness to new experiences.
- **Social growth** includes the social skills necessary for relating to others in society, such as communication and leadership skills and the ability to work cooperatively with others. Participation in service learning is beneficial in strengthening these elements of social development.
- **Intellectual growth** encompasses the cognitive skills necessary to enhance academic learning and acquire higher-level thinking skills. This includes learning to apply knowledge and developing problem-solving skills. With high-quality service learning, students can gain deeper knowledge and understanding of the curriculum.
- **Citizenship development** refers to the responsibilities of participation in a multicultural society and of citizenship in a democracy. As educators, we are obligated to prepare our students for these responsibilities, and service learning offers varied possibilities.
- **Preparation for the world of work** includes development of those skills that are needed in the workforce of the 21st century as well as knowledge of a range of possible career directions. Service learning can foster these characteristics from the earliest grades.

VIII. Examples of Service Learning

- **Elementary school students in Florida** studied the consequences of natural disasters. The class designed a kit for families to use to collect their important papers in case of evacuation, which students distributed to community members.
- **Middle school students in Pennsylvania** learned about the health consequences of poor nutrition and lack of exercise, and then brought their learning to life by conducting health fairs, creating a healthy cookbook, and opening a fruit and vegetable stand for the school and community.
- **Girl Scouts in West Virginia** investigated the biological complexity and diversity of wetlands. Learning of the need to eliminate invasive species, the scouts decided to monitor streams and then presented their findings to their Town Council.
- **University students in Michigan** looked for ways to support struggling local non-profit organizations during difficult economic times. Graduate communication students honed their skills while providing a wide variety of public relations services with community partners, including developing press kits and managing event coordination.

IX. What are the Impacts of Service Learning?

A 2002 national study of Learn and Serve America programs suggests that effective service learning programs improve academic grades, increase attendance in school, and develop personal and social responsibility. Whether the goal is academic improvement, personal development, or both, service learning can help students learn critical thinking, communication, teamwork, civic responsibility, mathematical reasoning, problem solving, public speaking, vocational skills, computer skills, scientific method, research skills, and analysis.

X. Research Issues

There is a great need for case studies showing creative and innovative ways to do effective service in service learning. Examples of service learning can be used as models for planning and evaluation. Studies of ineffective programs can help identify critical factors for success. Research should specifically examine the impact of service learning on local communities and on persons served. Case studies can be used effectively for assessment (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996).

Studies of service learning have produced mixed results. Some studies have found modest gains on measures of social responsibility, tolerance for others, empathy, attitude toward adults, and self-esteem (Solomon *et. al.*, 2001). A case study at an urban parochial high school describes a successful service learning experience program that was required for juniors and was part of a yearlong course on social justice (Youniss & Yates, 1997). In the class, students examined the moral implications of current social issues such as homelessness, poverty, exploitation of immigrant labourers, and urban violence. Students also were required to serve four times (20 hrs.) at an inner-city soup kitchen. The researcher concluded that students emerged from the course with “a deeper awareness of social injustice, a greater sense of commitment to confront these injustices, and heightened confidence in their abilities overall” (Youniss & Yates, 1999, p. 64).

There is also a need for research on short term service and volunteerism particularly as it affects agencies and communities. Work needs to be done to identify the critical factors which determine the outcomes of service learning. Additional research on the impact of service learning could contribute greatly to improving quality and impact. A check list for planning the service component of service learning would be helpful.

XI. Conclusion

Participation in service learning can promote political and moral development among adolescents. Through service learning projects, adolescents experience their own competence and agency by working with others in need. Students see themselves as political and moral agents, rather than as merely good citizens (Youniss & Yates, 1997). In addition, service learning can help adolescents to think in new ways about their relationships with people who are unlike them, and thus can lead them to become more tolerant of differences (Tierney, 1993).

Service learning experiences foster an “ethic of care” that can result in a growing commitment to confront difficult social problems. In this sense, students’ involvement in social learning can motivate and empower adolescents to critically reflect on their role in society (Woolfolk Hoy, Demerath, & Pape, 2002). A number of schools now have participation in service learning as a requirement for graduation.

Service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives, with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the young provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills and knowledge content.

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