Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Recommendations Based on Evaluations of a Course

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Abstract

This study describes a service-learning course in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Purdue University developed in 1998 with the overarching goal of creating a culture of civic engagement by providing students with an opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to meet community needs, to learn from social service providers and agency clients, to read and discuss articles about civic engagement, and to reflect on their experiences through journaling. This paper describes the theoretical model of service-learning on which the course is based, as well as its structural features, then presents research on its impact on both students and social service agencies. Attention is focused on student responses to service-learning, student internship experiences, and both the intended and unintended outcomes of the course. On the basis of student and agency evaluations, recommendations are offered for improvements that might be incorporated into service-learning courses at other institutions.

Within the realm of higher education, service-learning courses—that is, courses that require students to put their education to work in service to their communities—have increased substantially in number over the last decade *(Rhoads 1998)*. Eyler and Giles *(1999)* refer to 147 definitions of service-learning. Some definitions emphasize "service," with the learning being secondary; some emphasize "learning," with the service being secondary; some look at the goals of "service" and "learning" as independent from one another; and some view the two goals as having equal weight and being intertwined.

Service-learning courses developed at least in part due to criticisms by noted educator Ernest Boyer and others who took colleges and universities to task for their lack of civic involvement, and to research indicating that one of the strongest predictors of student success is the degree to which they are connected to their

campus and community *(Astin 1992; Boyer 1990, 1987)*. Service-learning can be distinguished from both internships and field education in that the latter two focus primarily on providing students with hands-on, practical, career-related experiences *(Furco 1996)*.

Much of the appeal of the service-learning concept lies in its objective of addressing the increasing gap in service that the lack of adequate government funding has created, a gap that is likely to grow *(Council for Aid to Education 1997)*. Campus Compact, a coalition of college and university presidents, reports 575 campuses boasting approximately 10,800 faculty members who teach 11,800 service-learning courses *(Campus Compact 1998)*.

According to its proponents, "Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" *(Honnet and Poulsen 1989, 1)*. It builds social capital and moves students toward a lifelong involvement with their communities *(Putnam 1995; Boyer 1990)*. According to its detractors, service-learning waters down the curriculum, lessening the time that students could more profitably spend in laboratories and/or libraries *(Gray, Ondautje, and Zakaras 1999)*. Of equal concern is the potential harm that can be done by well-intentioned undergraduates attempting to give service in communities with which they are unfamiliar and for which they feel emotionally unprepared. Their presence can reinforce stereotypes that the clients with whom they work have about college students. Similarly, the negative stereotypes students bring with them into the classroom can be reinforced by their interactions with those clients *(Jones 2002)*.

Theoretical underpinnings of service-learning: Service-learning is rooted in the philosophy of John Dewey, who describes learning as occurring through action and reflection, rather than through reading and recounting. "Students learn best not by reading the Great Books in a closed room but by opening the doors and windows of experience" *(Erlich 1996; Furco 1996)*. It has been described as "a form of community service designed to promote student learning and development"*(Gray, Ondautje, and Zakaras 1999)*. Practitioners of service-learning are action oriented and focus on process and course development rather than empirical research. Theory is necessary for developing a research agenda *(Moore 1993)*.

One model that has played a significant role in experiential learning was developed by David Kolb *(1984)*. Kolb expanded the philosophy of Dewey. Using an inquiry approach, Kolb conceptualized a four-stage experiential model: concrete experiences,

Figure 1
Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning

Reflective Observation

Concrete
Experiences

Abstract
Conceptualization

Active Experimentation
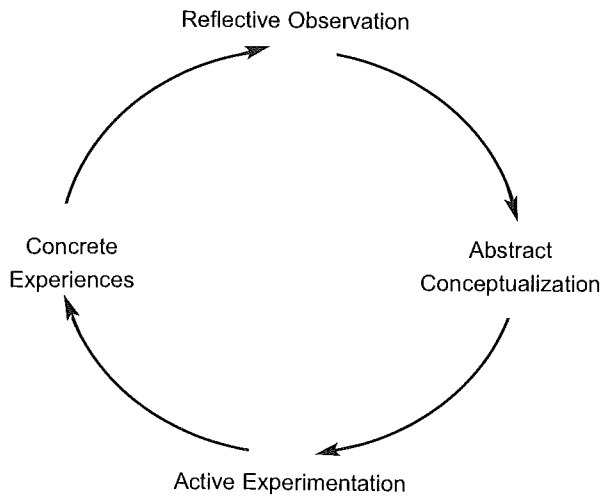
reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb's model included the role of reflection in connecting concrete experiences to abstract conceptualization.

In 1990, David Moore approached service-learning as "critical pedagogy . . . in which students and teachers conduct an unfettered investigation of social institutions, power relations, and value commitments" *(Kolb 1990)*. Moore stated that experiential learning gives students the opportunity to experience "shifting systems of meaning." Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's view of service-learning included empowerment for the community as well as treating the community members with dignity and respect *(Freire 1994)*.

Outcomes of service-learning: Service-learning is expected to improve learning and serve communities. Two longitudinal studies of the effects of service-learning on college students show positive results. A study of 3,450 students enrolled in 42 higher educational institutions found that college students who participated in volunteer activities developed a commitment to serve their communities, intended to participate in the future, and developed greater leadership and interpersonal skills. In addition, their increased contact with the faculty members involved with service-learning

appeared to heighten their interest in postgraduate education *(Sax, Astin, and Astin 1996)*. A similar study of more than 12,000 college students found that the effects of volunteerism continued up to nine years after graduation *(Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999)*.

Studies focusing on service-learning courses for undergraduates indicate small but significant positive effects on student values and attitudes toward community and social justice *(Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997)*. However, large differences were observed between participants and nonparticipants before service-learning experiences.

Qualitative research on the outcomes of service-learning has also been conducted. Rhoads *(1998)* based a study on participant observation and personal interviews. The results indicated that service-learning participation increased students' understanding of citizenship, social problems, and social good. Service-learning students developed a better understanding of self and increased appreciation of multiculturalism and diversity.

Ostrow *(1998)* studied the effects of service-learning on students' attitude toward the homeless. After working with this population, students showed increased empathy toward the homeless and greater understanding of the factors that result in homelessness.

Less research has addressed the effects of service-learning on community and the service agencies included in service-learning activities. Studies focusing on building community/education partnerships have been conducted *(Kupiec 1993; Tice 1994)*, but the information has not been empirically validated.

Service-Learning course designs: Service-learning courses are generally designed in one of two ways. In the first model, students are organized into teams and dispatched to social service agencies to solve identified problems. Often the organizations have applied to the course supervisor for the student help. The Engineering Projects In Community Service (EPICS) program at Purdue University is an example of this model. EPICS is designed to create a partnership between teams of undergraduate students and community social services agencies to solve identified engineering-based problems those organizations are experiencing. The projects can continue for several semesters. An example of an EPICS project is the Homelessness Prevention Network Project, a secure, distributed database system to help a number of agencies coordinate services and track clients without violating their privacy rights *(EPICS 2003)*.

The second service-learning course model is individual-based; students negotiate their responsibilities with the individual agencies to which they are assigned. The course described below in an example of this model.

In this paper, the authors adapt the theories (discussed above) into a working model that bridges the gap between theory and practice, describe the structural features of their service-learning course, and present both the students' and social service agencies' responses to the service-learning, student internship

"[S]ervice-learning participation increased students' understanding of citizenship, social problems, and social good."

experiences, and both the intended and unintended outcomes of the course. On the basis of student and agency evaluations, recommendations are offered for improvements that might be incorporated into service-learning courses at other institutions.

Development of the service-learning course: In fall 1998, the Department of Organizational Leadership at Purdue University decided to offer students an alternative to the traditional business and industry internship experience. The resulting service-learning course was designed to provide students with an opportunity to put their education to work to address genuine community needs. The overarching goal of a service-learning course is to create an educated citizenry who will become involved in their communities, meeting the needs of the who inhabit those communities long after they have graduated *(Kraft and Krug 1994)*.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the course was developed on the premise that service-learning lies at the intersection of education, civic engagement, and reflection. These components differ somewhat from those set forth by McCarthy, Tucker, and Dean *(2002, 68)*—theory application, skill acquisition, and civic engagement— in that they rest heavily on reflection.

The stated objectives of the course are to provide a service-learning environment where students can apply what they have learned in the classroom; to enable students to interact with and learn from experienced social service personnel; to mentor and help those in need in the community; and to allow students to reflect upon their experiences. Students participate in 3 to 12 hours

Figure 2
Service-Learning Model

Education

Civic
Engagement

Service-Learning

Reflection
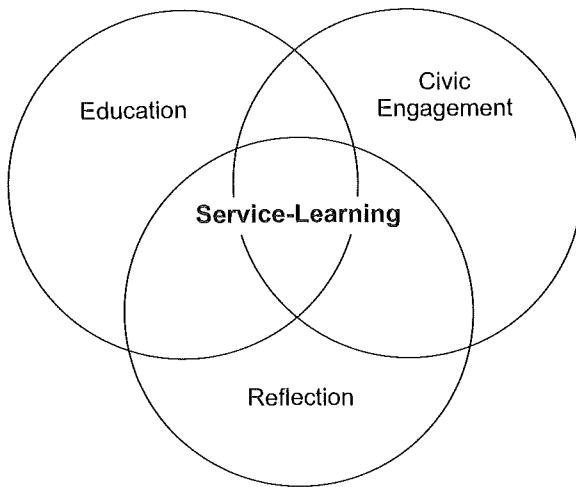
of specialized training offered by the agencies where they find placement, and spend approximately 3 to 6 hours per week working at the agency.

Students meet as a group during their regularly scheduled class times. They discuss their internships; read articles and books on service-learning; and engage in vigorous discussion about such issues as mandatory service-learning courses, whether service-learning waters down the curriculum, and whether universities are failing the communities in which they are housed by not addressing more community needs. As part of the course requirements, groups of two or three students select an article on service-learning, present it to the class, and lead a discussion on the issues raised by the article.

The onus is upon the individual student to secure a service-learning internship. Representatives of social service agencies make presentations to the class during the first three weeks of the semester, but the individual placement and negotiation of responsibilities are arranged by the student intern and the agency supervisor. Each internship must meet the course goals specified above, and must put the student in regular contact with agency clients. In other words, students cannot meet the goals of the course by performing only administrative tasks; the majority of their internship must be spent in direct client service.

One of the key objectives of a service-learning course utilizing this model is for the students to reflect on their internship experiences, which they do in a thirty-page journal. Students are expected to reflect on the assigned readings, to share their thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and observations about their internships, and to demonstrate their ability to think critically about the course content as a whole. The journal is submitted to the instructor three times during the semester. Students' grades are determined by the quality of the work they do for the agencies to which they are assigned, the group presentation they give, the journal they write, and the extent to which they participate in class discussions.

In order for a service-learning course to be successful, a partnership must be developed between the course instructor and each agency in which students are placed. To strengthen that partnership, the student's agency supervisor is allowed to evaluate the service-learning experience in general and the student's performance in particular. The students, in turn, evaluate their internship experiences. These evaluations can alert the course instructor to potential problems that may have arisen and not been addressed by the student.

> *"Students are expected to reflect on the assigned readings, to share their thoughts, . . . and to demonstrate their ability to think critically about the course content as a whole."*

Because each student and agency supervisor negotiate the internship responsibilities on an individual basis, taking into account the student's interests, skills, and abilities, the agency's needs, and the goals of the course, the internship experiences vary greatly. Table 1 shows some of the internships in which students have been placed, and some of the services they have provided to the agencies to which they were assigned.

Since its inception in 1998, the Department of Organizational Leadership and Supervision's Service Learning course has enrolled 153 junior and senior students. The course was evaluated using the instrument developed by the Purdue Division of Instructional Services. Student evaluations of the course are noted in Table 2.

Student reactions to the course have been consistently positive, ranging from agree to strongly agree with positive statements

Table 1
Examples of Service-Learning Assignments

Agency	Agency Mission	Student Project
Indiana Legal Services	Providing free legal representation and advice for low-income people	Do intake on new clients, reconfigure computer networking
Family Services, Inc.	Helping families help themselves	Do intake on new cases; accompany case worker on home visits
Lafayette Transitional Housing	Working toward long-term solutions for homeless individuals and families	Do intake on new residents; provide job search help and tutoring
YWCA Domestic Violence Intervention & Prevention Program	Providing services to women and children who are victims of domestic abuse	Respond to crisis phone line; tutor and mentor residents and children
Community & Family Resource Center	Guiding children and families to solve problems that arise in their families	Work with juvenile offenders in Teen Court, a peer-run alternative to the justice system
Mental Health Association	Providing shelter and support in a nonjudgmental, non-threatening environment for the chronically mentally ill and homeless	Provide support and friendship to a socially isolated adult; assist with job searches
Lafayette Adult Resource Academy	Teaching academic and life skills to enable learners to make productive changes in their personal lives, in society, and in public policy	Tutor adults and teens in reading and math; work with nonnative English speakers on language skills

about the course and subject matter (see Table 2). When asked if course assignments are interesting and stimulating, aggregate student responses ranged from 4.2/5.0 to 4.8/5.0 on a Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. In fall 2001, that item was changed to ask whether the practical application of the subject matter is apparent. Responses to that question ranged from 4.7/5.0 to 5.0/5.0. Asked if the course was among the best ever taken, aggregate responses ranged from 4.2/5.0 to 4.6/5.0.

Table 2
Student evaluations of service learning course on a 5-point scale, 1998-2003

	Fall 1998	Spring 1999	Fall 1999	Spring 2000	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Fall 2003
Number of students enrolled	15	15	14	15	14	16	15	15	15	15	14
*Course assignments are interesting and stimulating	4.5	4.8	4.2	4.5	4.4	4.3	N/A	NA	N/A	N/A	N/A
The practical application of the subject matter is apparent	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4.7	4.9	4.8	5.0	4.9
**Overall this is among the best courses have taken	4.2	4.6	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.4	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overall, I would rate this course as excellent	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4.8	5.0	4.8	4.9	4.9

1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree
*   This question was replaced by the question directly below it in Fall 2001
** This question was replaced by the question directly below it in Fall 2000

When this item was changed by the university in fall 2001 to ask how students would rate the course overall, aggregate responses ranged from 4.8/5.0 to 5.0/5.0.

Impact of service-learning internships on students and agency supervisors: Many students enter the service-learning internship experience with some degree of skepticism and a bit of trepidation. Some have enrolled in the course solely because it fit into their schedules. For many if not most, it is unlike any undergraduate course they have taken, and they feel overwhelmed and uncertain.

> My fear is that I won't be able to get through to some people and they will end up disliking me for one reason or another. Since I am only volunteering for 3 hours a week, I am worried that I won't be able to build a relationship with the clientele. That will make it hard to gain trust and without trust I stand no chance with them.

> It is kind of scary that after being here for four years this was the first time I had ever heard of [the agency] or any of the various organizations. It seems like as a college student, I live in a shell rarely going into the community or helping out.

"Working directly with agency clients opened some students' eyes. They saw firsthand how many of the clients' problems can seem insurmountable."

For others, putting their education to work to serve those in need is an extension of the way they were raised.

> I grew up in a wonderful family environment filled with lots of love, support, and encouragement to where, sometimes I feel guilty. I knew that this opportunity to volunteer at [this agency] would help me give back to those families who are not as fortunate as mine.

> I know that not everyone was as fortunate as I was to have two great parents that really cared about what I did, how school was going and just in general how I was doing. If I hadn't already done some volunteer work, I

would really think that there is no way that there are so many people out there needing help.

Working directly with agency clients opened some students' eyes. They saw firsthand how many of the clients' problems can seem insurmountable.

I really saw how some people get on a downward spiral of bad decisions and how it leads to even worse decisions. I believe [the teen] feels that he is already messed up, so why should he try to do good from now on? I would like to emphasize to him the importance of him being a better person and how that will be better for him, and his goals. I would love to express that to his parents as well, but that is not my job.

When the kid tried to show his mother the picture that he colored for her she simply replied "that's nice" and continued complaining about the problems in her life. I found it slightly heartbreaking watching the disappointment set into the young boy's eyes.

Throughout the years that the course has been taught, nearly all of the students have described how much they gained from their internship, and how they were changed in many ways by the experiences they had.

The situation that unfolded today gave me new experience and a sense of pride. I left [the agency] with a strong feeling of success. Now I see why people choose to work somewhere without being paid. The feeling of being helpful is far more rewarding than making a few bucks. I hope that I am faced with more challenges like this throughout the semester.

Before this class, I used to judge people on their outside appearance. I am not saying that I have completely changed, but I feel I'm on the right path. I now wait to judge people until I have had the chance to talk with them.

Giving my time and energy to [the agency] is one of my proudest accomplishments. This is not because of any recognition or award, but rather because of my feelings of accomplishment. I have taken my time and put it to use for something that is good. I am not thinking of

> myself and somehow end up feeling that I am the true beneficiary. The small amount of time that I gave does not clearly represent the experiences I was involved in. My experiences are going to be with me a lifetime and will serve as a guide to how I shape my life.

Many students responded to critics of service-learning who, as noted above, contend that their time would be better spent in the library or laboratory.

> Every thing I do now is done in a library. All of my time I put into education is done there. I believe that students should have diversity in their education. I do not see how five percent of my college career being spent to help others and use my skills is making me any less educated and a waste of time. If anything it is time well spent and I have become more diverse because I have been able to learn about my community, which should be important to everyone.

Consistent with the goal of the course, the overwhelming majority of students express their desire to continue to give service after they graduate.

> In my career, I see the need for us young professionals to step up [to] the plate and give back to the community. Sometimes a more expensive commodity than actual money . . . What I want to do is develop programs in the community where I will work.

> I think I would like to volunteer at another program in whatever community I end up in. I think it is a great feeling to be able to know that I made a difference in someone's life. I also think that volunteering is a great way to give back to the community that gives us so much. When I am a parent, I would like to do some sort of volunteer work with my family to show my children that [it] is good to serve and that it needs to be done.

> "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?" Hillel, First Century Philosopher. I guess that quotation that I learned way back on the first day of class is the most important thing I learned this semester. It is my civic responsibility to help out in the community wherever I can.

Perhaps because the course supervisor monitors the service-learning experience, the evaluations of students by their supervisors have been consistently positive. Even when problems had arisen in the beginning, they were resolved, and the student went on to have a successful experience,

> The volunteers you sent are an enormous asset to [this program]. The youth get a chance to see respectable college students contributing to their community. They are always welcome here!

> Once the initial problems were straightened out, [the student] was a truly wonderful asset!! She truly went above and beyond. If she retakes this class, I would love to have her back!

> [The student] is very mature, non-judgmental and professional. He was always willing to assist staff with various tasks. We will be sorry to see him leave. He has wonderful interpersonal skills. Our [clients] responded to him in a very positive manner.

> I do want to thank you for providing us with some feedback on how the students feel about our program. We have shared those comments with the director and I know at least one change will be made based on what they said.

Unintended Consequences

As noted by Jones *(2002)*, both students and community agencies can be unprepared for the service-learning experience. For example, since the service-learning internship is not a job and there is no pay attached, students may fail to take their responsibilities to the agency seriously, failing to appear for assigned orientation sessions and/or weekly shifts. Similarly, agency supervisors, who have many other responsibilities, can fail to meet their responsibility to student interns and assign them to clerical tasks in lieu of working directly with clients and staff. Although clerical help is often extremely important to the agency, extensive administrative responsibilities prevent students from meeting course goals. The ensuing challenge for service-learning course instructors can be one of carefully balancing the need to help the students meet their agency responsibilities and the need to maintain a positive relationship with the service providers so that future students will be welcome.

Recommendations

Below are some suggestions for helping to ensure that both students and social service agency providers to have a rewarding internship experience.

1. Meet with the social service providers in your community with whom you are considering placing students. Provide them with a copy of your syllabus, and ascertain whether or not they will be able to supervise a service-learning intern adequately, and whether or not the students will be able to meet the course goals at that agency.

2. Prior to students' selecting their internships, allow class time for representatives from community agencies to come to class and speak to them about their agencies: the mission, the clientele, what students can expect to do on a typical day, skills they will need, and their responsibilities to the agency.

3. Students need an opportunity to come together and share their internship experiences. Literature on service-learning can facilitate meaningful class discussion by helping students to contextualize their internship experiences. It is helpful to prepare a course packet of readings about service-learning, including articles that present both sides of the service-learning debate in higher education so that students can engage with the issues.

4. The opportunity to reflect on their experience is one of the hallmarks of the service-learning model used in developing this course. When students write about their thoughts and feelings, those writings can be extremely intense. It is important that the instructor take sufficient time to respond reassuringly in writing, particularly if students are disturbed by some of the situations they encounter, or if some of their experiences trigger memories from their past.

5. The supervisors are aware that students are evaluating their internship experiences. The instructor should contact each agency supervisor to provide some feedback about what went well and what could be improved. Not only will the students have a more meaningful experience, but the agencies will also receive the help they need.

6. Inevitably, some students will encounter difficulties in their internships, either with their supervisors or with their responsibilities. Unless the problems are extremely

serious and warrant your immediate attention, encourage students to try to solve the problem themselves; this is an opportunity for growth. That failing, you can intervene.

7. Be more of a coach and less of a traditional instructor. For many service-learning students, this is the first time they have grappled with community issues. Your support and encouragement are critical in moving students from a one-time course experience to a lifetime of community involvement.

Conclusion

As described above, students who have taken service-learning courses report that they plan to continue engagement with their communities. This was the overarching goal of the course discussed in this paper. Empirical, longitudinal studies are needed to determine how long-lasting the effects of service-learning courses are.

In their new book, *Millennials Go to College (2003)*, Howe and Strauss predict that campus life will undergo yet another transformation as a new generation of students enters college. They describe today's students as eager to become engaged in community activities. If they are correct, the time has never been better for colleges and universities to create more opportunities for students to put their knowledge and skills to work in service to their communities.

It was Margaret Mead *(1972)* who said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." It would appear that colleges and universities have an opportunity to promote a culture of civic engagement that can help ensure that the "small group of thoughtful, committed citizens" who change the world, is, in fact, the Millennials.

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