

Community Service Learning in the Curriculum

by Jeffrey Howard

MUCH OF THE ATTENTION AND SUPPORT for college student involvement in community service has focused on students' contributions to the community and on the development of students' lifelong civic responsibility. These are essential outcomes of a community service program. But there is more.

Community service learning, or service-learning as it is more commonly called, is a first cousin of community service. It, too, engages students in service to the community and contributes to the development of students' civic ethic. Where it differs is in its deliberateness about student learning. Though learning necessarily occurs in the act of serving in the community, with community service learning there is an intentional effort made to utilize the community service experience as a learning resource.

A number of possible avenues enable students to intentionally learn from their community service experiences. One option is for students to self-direct their learning, for example by keeping a reflective journal or by reading germane materials. A second option is for the campus community service program to provide a learning structure, such as a reflection guidebook or periodic seminars, for students placed in the community. Any of these intentional learning interventions would transform the community service to community service learning.

A third option is to have the community service integrated into an academic course. In this model, the community service experiences of the students are not just a sidebar but an integral component of the course. When used in this way, community service learning may be conceptualized as a pedagogical model that

connects meaningful community service experiences with academic course learning.

WHY INTEGRATE SERVICE INTO ACADEMIC COURSES?

There are some educationally sound reasons for integrating community service experiences into academic courses:

- faculty are well equipped to design effective assignments that enable students to capture the learning from their community service experiences
- students are more likely to intentionally learn because they are more accustomed to, and accountable for, learning in academic courses than in co-curricular activities
- community service experiences enhance academic learning
- community service experiences are important sources of knowledge and scholarship
- faculty can play a role in reducing the chances that students' stereotypes and preconceived notions about underserved populations are perpetuated

In addition, integrating service into the curriculum strengthens the prospect for the institutionalization of community service learning because:

- faculty are more likely to perceive community service as educationally valuable if the service occurs within, rather than outside of, the curriculum

- curricular efforts are a higher funding priority than co-curricular efforts

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING PEDAGOGY

The field of community service learning has a number of outstanding sets of principles of good practice, most notably the Johnson Foundation/Wingspread “Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning.” However, these sets of principles have mostly focused on non-curricular community service learning programs. And though these prior principles have application to community service learning courses, they are insufficient for developing and implementing what is for many faculty a new kind of course. Therefore we offer the following set of principles of community service learning pedagogy, subscription to which will enable students’ community learning to be fully integrated with, and utilized on behalf of, course learning.

The 10 principles below are derived from a host of sources, most notably the models depicted in this book, my 16 years of involvement with curriculum-based service-learning, and the candid responses of 10 University of Michigan academic leaders as part of the evaluation of our Kellogg Foundation grant.

None of these 10 principles are antithetical to, or inconsistent with, previously disseminated principles of good practice, and none of these will compromise the service that students provide in the community. On the contrary, these principles not only complement previously generated lists, but a number of them enhance the student’s capacity to be of service in the community.

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

Credit in academic courses is assigned to students for the demonstration of academic learning. It should be no different in community service learning courses. Academic credit is for academic learning, and community service is not academic in nature. Therefore, the credit must not be for the performance of service. However, when community service is integrated into an academic course, the course credit is assigned for both the customary academic learning as well as for the utilization of the community learning in the service of the course learning. Similarly, the student’s grade is for the

quality of learning and not for the quality (or quantity) of service.

Principle 2: Do Not Compromise Academic Rigor

Academic standards in a course are based on the challenge that readings, presentations, and assignments present to students. These standards ought to be sustained when adding a community service learning component. Though experience-based learning is frequently perceived to be less rigorous than academic learning, especially in scholarly circles, we advise against compromising the level of instructor expectation for student learning. The additional workload imposed by a community service assignment may be compensated by an additional credit, but not by lowering academic learning expectations. Adding a service component, in fact, may enhance the rigor of a course because, in addition to having to master the academic material, students must also learn how to learn from community experience and merge that learning with academic learning, and these are challenging intellectual activities that are commensurate with rigorous academic standards.

Principle 3: Set Learning Goals for Students

Establishing learning goals for students is a standard to which all courses ought to be accountable. Not only should it be no different with community service learning courses, but in fact it is especially necessary and advantageous to do so with these kinds of courses. With the addition of the community as a learning context, there occurs a multiplication of learning paradigms (e.g., inductive learning, synthesis of theory and practice) and learning topics (e.g., the community, the population). To sort out those of greatest priority in the service of the course goals, as well as to best take advantage of the rich bounty of learning opportunity offered by the community, requires deliberate planning of the course learning goals.

Principle 4: Establish Criteria for the Selection of Community Service Placements

To optimally utilize community service on behalf of course learning requires more than merely directing students to find a service placement. Faculty who are deliberate about establishing criteria for selecting community service placements will find that the learning that students extract from their respective service experiences will be of better use on behalf of course learning than if placement criteria are not established.

We offer three criteria as essential in all community service learning courses. First, the range of service placements ought to be circumscribed by the content of the course; homeless shelters and soup kitchens are learning appropriate placements for a course on homelessness, but placements in schools are not. Second, the duration of the service must be sufficient to enable the fulfillment of learning goals; a one-time two-hour shift at a hospital will do little for the learning in a course on institutional health care. And, third, the specific service activities and service contexts must have the potential to stimulate course-relevant learning; filing records in a warehouse may be of service to a school district, but it would offer little to stimulate learning in a course on elementary school education.

We also offer three guidelines regarding the setting of placement criteria. First, responsibility for ensuring that placement criteria are established that will enable the best student learning rests with the faculty. Second, the learning goals established for the course will be helpful in informing the placement criteria. And third, faculty who utilize the volunteer services office on campus or in the community to assist with identifying criteria-satisfying community agencies will reduce their start-up labor costs.

Principle 5: Provide Educationally Sound Mechanisms to Harvest the Community Learning

Learning in any course is realized by the proper mix and level of learning formats and assignments. To maximize students' service experiences on behalf of course learning in a community service learning course requires more than sound service placements. Course assignments and learning formats must be carefully developed to facilitate the students' learning from their community service experiences as well as to enable its use on behalf of course learning. Assigning students to serve at a community agency, even a faculty approved one, without any mechanisms in place to harvest the learning therefrom is insufficient to contribute to course learning. Experience as a learning format, in and of itself, does not consummate learning, nor does mere written description of one's service activities.

Learning interventions that instigate critical reflection on and analysis of service experiences are necessary to enable community learning to be harvested and to serve as an academic learning enhancer. Therefore, discussions, presentations, and journal and paper assignments that provoke analysis of service experiences in

the context of the course learning and that encourage the blending of the experiential and academic learnings are necessary to help ensure that the service does not underachieve in its role as an instrument of learning. Here, too, the learning goals set for the course will be helpful in informing the course learning formats and assignments.

Principle 6: Provide Supports for Students to Learn How to Harvest the Community Learning

Harvesting the learning from the community and utilizing it on behalf of course learning are learning paradigms for which most students are under-prepared. Faculty can help students realize the potential of community learning by assisting students with the acquisition of skills necessary for gleaned learning from the community and/or by providing examples of how to successfully do so. An example of the former would be to provide instruction on participant-observation skills; an example of the latter would be to make accessible a file containing past outstanding student papers and journals to current students in the course.

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

Classrooms and communities are very different learning contexts, each requiring students to assume a different learner role. Generally, classrooms provide a high level of learning direction, with students expected to assume a largely learning-follower role. In contrast, communities provide a low level of learning direction, with students expected to assume a largely learning-leader role. Though there is compatibility between the level of learning direction and the expected student role within each of these learning contexts, there is incompatibility across them.

For students to have to alternate between the learning-follower role in the classroom and the learning-leader role in the community not only places yet another learning challenge on students but is inconsistent with good pedagogical principles. Just as we do not mix required lectures (high learning-follower role) with a student-determined reading list (high learning-leader role) in a traditional course, so, too, we must not impose conflicting learner role expectations on students in community service learning courses.

Therefore, if students are expected to assume a learning-follower role in the classroom, then a mechanism is

needed that will provide learning direction for the students in the community (e.g., community agency staff serving in an adjunct instructor role); otherwise, students will enter the community wearing the inappropriate learning-follower hat. Correspondingly, if the students are expected to assume a learning-leader role in the community, then room must be made in the classroom for students to assume a learning-leader role; otherwise, students will enter the classroom wearing the inappropriate learning-leader hat. The more we can make consistent the student's learning role in the classroom with her/his learning role in the community, the better the chances that the learning potential within each context will be realized.

Principle 8: Rethink the Faculty Instructional Role

Regardless of whether they assume learning-leader or learning-follower roles in the community, community service learning students are acquiring course-relevant information and knowledge from their service experiences. At the same time, as we previously acknowledged, students also are being challenged by the many new and unfamiliar ways of learning inherent in community service learning. Because students carry this new information and these learning challenges back to the classroom, it behooves service-learning faculty to reconsider their interpretation of the classroom instructional role. A shift in instructor role that would be most compatible with these new learning phenomena would move away from information dissemination and move toward learning facilitation and guidance. Exclusive or even primary use of the traditional instructional model interferes with the promise of learning fulfillment available in community service learning courses.

Principle 9: Be Prepared for Uncertainty and Variation in Student Learning Outcomes

In college courses, the learning stimuli and class assignments largely determine student outcomes. This is true in community service learning courses too. However, in traditional courses, the learning stimuli (i.e., lectures and readings) are constant for all enrolled students; this leads to predictability and homogeneity in student learning outcomes. In community service learning courses, the variability in community service placements necessarily leads to less certainty and homogeneity in student learning outcomes. Even when community service learning students are exposed to the same presentations and the same readings, instructors can expect that the content of class discussions will be less predictable and the content of student papers will be

less homogeneous than in courses without a community assignment.

Principle 10: Maximize the Community Responsibility Orientation of the Course

If one of the objectives of a community service learning course is to cultivate students' sense of community and social responsibility, then designing course learning formats and assignments that encourage a communal rather than an individual learning orientation will contribute to this objective. If learning in a course is privatized and tacitly understood as for the advancement of the individual, then we are implicitly encouraging a private responsibility mindset; an example would be to assign papers that students write individually and that are read only by the instructor. On the other hand, if the learning is shared amongst the learners for the benefit of corporate learning, then we are implicitly encouraging a group responsibility mentality; an example would be to share those same student papers with the other students in the class. This conveys to the students that they are resources for one another, and this message contributes to the building of commitment to community and civic duty.

By subscribing to this set of 10 pedagogical principles, faculty will find that students' learning from their service will be optimally utilized on behalf of academic learning, corporate learning, developing a commitment to civic responsibility, and providing learning-informed service in the community.

FINAL NOTE

...community service learning is a comprehensive educational experience. In addition to contributing to the community, furthering students' social responsibility, and their general learning about the community, it is a teaching-learning model with myriad other learning benefits. It enhances academic learning. It offers students new learning paradigms as well as a chance to try on new learner and instructor roles. It renews investment in learning. It offers an opportunity to reconsider prior values, ethics, and attitudes. It offers an experience that counterbalances the curriculum's predisposition for theory. It provides experience with ambiguity and with variance in data significance, both of which in turn foster critical thinking. It encourages student self-direction and learning about self. It brings books to life and life to books. And, it provides opportunities for developing real world skills and real world knowledge.