

Service Learning

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Abstract

Service Learning is an academic model providing students and faculty hands-on experiences and an opportunity to develop in-depth knowledge and skills through projects aimed at identifying and meeting real community needs. President Barack Obama has made Service Learning a major priority of his administration's education reform initiatives for all student levels including higher education. Students are challenged and empowered to identify community needs, plan projects to address them, and implement their projects benefitting both the community and the service providers (students, faculty, and institution). Service Learning combines service with a learning experience and can be implemented in a variety of subject areas if the projects align with and serve desired learning outcomes. The challenges and achievements of Service Learning and its implementation are discussed, along with suggestions for further research.

Introduction

Service Learning provides students the opportunity to combine, utilize, and apply skills and concepts developed in the classroom along with acquired personal and professional knowledge in real-world projects. This method is considered a form of experiential learning and is often described by professionals and students as a “hands-on,” practical form of learning (Watkins & Braun, 2009).

While Service Learning is a form of experiential learning, it is much more than a mere hands-on or practical approach; it substantially enriches the learning process by providing faculty and students the opportunity to serve communities, especially at-risk social and economic constituencies or those who lack sufficient personal, business, management, or leadership resources needed to achieve their desired outcomes and aspirations. Generally the local communities serve as primary service targets and subjects; however, global communities are also increasingly being served when resources afford the opportunity.

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) advanced what has become a commonly accepted definition of Service Learning, asserting it as a “course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience,” where “students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 112). This definition has gained popular acceptance because it effectively conveys the model’s conceptualization by clearly connecting its two primary outcomes, service and learning, in a significant collaboration (Butin, 2010).

Many scholars have bifurcated Service Learning into two different segments, one that accentuates and emphasizes service and the other learning. They have perceived them as exclusive rather than linked in a distinctive and meaningful way. Service was viewed as a means in itself, the primary objective being to serve rather than as a means or method of learning (Butin, 2010). Volunteer activity and community service comprised the service component of the model, while internships, practica, and field-

based education (such as student teaching) served the learning aspect of the model (Butin, 2010). Further segmentation, including the notion of Service Learning as either “academic,” “community-based,” or “field-based,” provided opportunity for additional differentiation.

While such distinctions might be useful, they can also limit and constrain the use of Service Learning programs. Advocates have been articulating broader, more comprehensive and consistent definitions of the construct to provide opportunities for a wider reach. Sigmon (1979) argued for adoption of the “Four Rs”: respect (for all parties to the process and situations involved); reciprocity (mutual cooperation and collaboration); relevance (to the course, learning, and impact to communities); and reflection (research, self-engagement, self-inquiry, and self-development) (Butin, 2010).

The Four Rs make no distinction as to discipline or segment, instead serving as a common architecture applicable to all such approaches to learning. So the only question begged when applying the Four Rs is whether the course, activity, or program supports or empowers them. If the method does not, then it should be revised; and if it cannot, then it should be discarded.

Butin (2010) has identified four distinctive Service Learning classifications or perspectives: (1) Technical Perspective, (2) Cultural Perspective, (3) Political Perspective and (4) Anti-foundational Perspective (Butin, 2010). Butin’s (2010) perspective serves as a platform for common understanding and dialogue and argues that Service Learning is multi-faceted and fosters multi-disciplinary synthesis. The Technical Perspective Butin defines addresses the legitimacy of Service Learning as an innovative education reform initiative, with particular emphasis on implementation and the linkage between the practice and student outcomes, particularly personal, social, and cognitive (Butin, 2010). The Cultural Perspective focuses on how social learning contributes to and affects social networks, social meaning and identity, democratic renewal, and civic engagement (Butin, 2010). The Political Perspective identifies interactions with and potential impact on equity, power, access, consensus, and conflict. The Anti-foundational Perspective examines the relationship between

Service Learning and truth, assumptions, convention, context, and success and failure.

Service Learning has been at the forefront of a national conversation over the past twenty years on how educational institutions can and should foster better community and global citizenship among students (Watkins & Braun, 2009). Policymakers, academics, and community leaders have identified Service Learning as a means for doing just that, by moving students and education from the classroom into communities (Watkins & Braun, 2009). As a result Service Learning continues to gain momentum as more institutions consider its adoption into programs and courses. But after a decade of solid growth, it is far from being institutionalized in higher education (Butin, 2010). The academic community, argues Butin (2010), has not yet adopted Service Learning. Clearly more research and persuasion is needed to establish its efficacy.

Employing Service Learning

Service Learning is usually employed in internships, practica, student leadership organizations, and in courses where interacting or collaborating with external constituencies and groups are both possible and mandated. It is not limited by a disciplinary focus. Service Learning is multi-disciplinary and is easily applied across academic disciplines (Butin, 2010). A 2004 annual membership survey by Campus Compact reflects the following distribution of utilization of Service Learning by academic departments: Education (69 percent), Sociology (54 percent), English (55 percent), Psychology (55 percent), Business (46 percent), Communication (46 percent) and Health (45 percent).

At City University of Seattle, Service Learning is used in the education, business, and psychology departments, primarily in internships and practica where they are designed to provide students with opportunities to apply classroom concepts and skills to real-world problems in local organizations under the supervision of faculty and an organizational mentor or coach. While most internships provide experiential learning opportunities (particularly in business), they do not offer the “service” component

required in Service Learning. They generally do not serve at-risk social and economic constituencies or those who lack sufficient personal, business, management, or leadership resources needed to achieve desired outcomes and aspirations. Notable exceptions are student teaching and select internships and practica supported by the education and psychology departments.

While internships and practica do not necessarily—by design or structure—support Service Learning, an extra-curricular program known as Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) does. Service Learning is the primary pedagogy used in SIFE. At City University of Seattle, SIFE is both an extracurricular student activity/organization and a credit-bearing, experiential course.

SIFE is a non-profit global organization launched by Sam Walton in the late 1970s. SIFE’s mission and purpose is to “Develop tomorrow’s leaders to create a sustainable world through the positive power of business” (sife.org). SIFE teams comprise some 42,000 students at more than 1,500 universities in 40 different countries who interact with more than 100 national and local corporate and organizational sponsors (sife.org). SIFE team members (students) at City University of Seattle can earn up to six graduate or five undergraduate elective credits for their participation in the program. They may also petition to substitute SIFE credits for course equivalency in the marketing, project management, leadership, or sustainability emphasis areas that are part of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program. The SIFE team at CityU has among the highest representation of globally diverse membership of any SIFE team in the United States. The 2009–2010 team was represented by students from nineteen different countries, including the United States.

SIFE members work on projects and serve on teams addressing real local and global community, business, social, economic, and cultural problems or issues. Most of the constituencies served are at-risk social and economic groups or those lacking sufficient personal, business, management, or leadership resources needed to achieve desired outcomes and goals. Such opportunities are not usually possible or available in the majority of traditional academic courses. SIFE members combine knowledge derived from their academic coursework, their personal and career experience,

and their membership in SIFE, enabling them to both serve others and learn. Learning occurs at the conceptual as well as the practical level. SIFE members are able to test classroom models and theories and develop and hone critical organizational and life skills, including:

- Leadership
- Management
- Team Process
- Communication
- Relationship Building
- Presentation
- Project Management
- Multi-Cultural Awareness and Acceptance
- Professional Networking
- Analysis
- Critical Thinking
- Finance
- Marketing and Media Management
- Sustainability
- Self-Reflection
- Self-Awareness
- Resource Development

A recent SIFE project that was conducted by CityU students, the Women's Empowerment Initiative, provides an excellent understanding of how SIFE applies the service learning model. The project involved identifying an at-risk constituency and conducting a needs assessment. The needs assessment that was conducted identified gaps that existed in current public service levels due to local resource constraints. The proposed project to address those needs met SIFE and Service Learning model criteria. SIFE criteria require projects that address community economic, social, or environmental issues and create positive impact for project participants (sife.org). Service learning criteria require a formal academic component and community-based learning. Analysis was then performed to determine

if the SIFE team had sufficient resources to address the service gap and also address the needs. The analysis led to the development of a project proposal identifying specific constituency issues, including employability, academic performance, career direction, parenting assistance, psychological health as a result of lower socio-economic demographics, limited access to educational resources, low self-esteem, family dysfunction, criminality, single-parent family structure, and teen parenting. A curriculum was developed to be delivered through workshops, seminars, and one-to-one teaching. Specific at-risk communities were identified, venues for delivery determined, implementation dates selected, costs assessed, benefits established, and metrics created. Finally, it was determined that a critical success factor for acceptance and implementation of the project proposal was leveraging resources through existing university partnerships.

The next step involved discussions with university partners, including a local National Football League (NFL) franchise to determine if collaboration was possible and if the resources that the project needed could be shared or provided. The discussions proved fruitful and a collaborative partnership was established. SIFE project team members then brought the NFL franchise together with other local community advocacy groups to implement the project. The resources provided by partners included curriculum development assistance, mentoring, coaching, venues for delivery, resources needed for delivery, and promotion of the project.

The Women's Empowerment Initiative provided SIFE team members with the opportunity to apply course concepts and knowledge from marketing, project management, human resources management, communication, leadership, international management, information technology, and operations courses. Course concepts and skills applied included problem solving, needs assessment, multi-cultural team process, multi-cultural communication, development and delivery of PowerPoint presentations, research, teaching, planning, budgeting, resourcing, marketing, networking, conflict resolution, mentoring, coaching, negotiation, and public relations.

Implementation

Implementation of Service Learning projects should also include an analysis of the impact on participants. In the case of the SIFE initiative, all project stakeholders were positively impacted. SIFE project team members developed and honed critical management, leadership, and life skills. Their socially responsible service to subjects who were economically and culturally challenged prompted self-reflection and self-awareness, heightened their awareness of the importance of community and citizenship, and enhanced their confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, they were able to see a clear linkage between the classroom and real-world application while they were experiencing significant personal and professional growth.

The at-risk subject group was also positively impacted. In addition to the content presented in the workshops, seminars, and one-on-one meetings, subjects were able to form mentoring and coaching relationships with team members; build interpersonal skills, including social interactions with presenters and other participants; develop appreciation of citizenship, community, and service by recognizing and understanding the service provided to them by project team members and stakeholders; and build confidence and enhance self-esteem by successfully completing the program. Additionally, many subjects identified team members as “role models,” enabling them to develop a greater sense of possibility for future career and life success.

Project stakeholders including faculty, advisors, partners, and the university were also positively impacted. Faculty were able to connect classroom and academic program competencies and concepts to project activities, including planning, research, project management, content development, presentation, budgeting, team process, and communication. Additionally, faculty forged community relationships, enhancing the brand equity of the institution and creating opportunities for sustainable partnerships. Finally, faculty demonstrated socially responsible service to others, providing an example of citizenship and institutional commitment to stakeholder communities. Advisors, partners, and the university were able to contribute to the advocacy and support

of needy, at-risk communities; exhibit socially responsible service to others; demonstrate individual and organizational citizenship; and increase brand awareness and equity.

Another major benefit of Service Learning is its capacity to have a positive impact on international students. Most international students have not been exposed to Service Learning curriculum or projects in their native countries. It is an entirely new experience for them. Service Learning projects provide them with an opportunity to have a rich multi-cultural experience. It takes them out of the classroom and provides them with a glimpse of American culture generally not available through most academic programs or courses. It involves them in socially responsible community projects, some with at-risk communities (like the Women’s Empowerment Initiative) that enfranchise understanding and assimilation of America’s version of core social-cultural values, such as compassion, empathy, cultural sensitivity, social justice, patriotism, and equity. It also instills appreciation of, and a desire for, community service, volunteering, and charitable giving. As a result of this process, international students who have participated in Service Learning projects return to their native countries inspired and motivated to apply American values and understanding they have developed here in meaningful projects at home.

A recent SIFE project illustrates how students’ values and perspectives can be strengthened and refined through their participation in SIFE. Three SIFE members from Indonesia developed a project aimed at educating elementary school students about the Three Rs of environmental stewardship: reuse, reduce, recycle. They chose this project after researching pollution in their home country. They discovered that Indonesia was considered to be the fourth largest polluter in the world and that there were virtually no education programs to teach the importance of environmental awareness in Indonesian schools, particularly at the elementary level. They believed educating young students was key to developing a sustainable environmental program for their country. They developed a curriculum and piloted it at a local elementary school. After successfully piloting it in the United States, they partnered with a local school district in their hometown in Indonesia and began to teach the program there. They reported back that

the program had been very well received and was changing student behavior. The school where they introduced it is practicing recycling for the very first time and many of the students reported that their families were also recycling.

Broader integration and application of Service Learning into courses and academic programs rests on increasing awareness of the academic legitimacy, practical student learning outcomes, and social benefits of Service Learning. Over the last twenty years a significant body of research and discussion has emerged advocating for the efficacy of Service Learning as an academic pedagogy. The works of Butin (2010), Pringle and Hatcher (1995), Astin (1998, 1999), Cuban and Anderson (2007), Furco (1996, 2002), Bell (1971, 2000, 2007), Boyle-Baise (1999, 2007), Ellison and Eatman (2008), and Colby (2003, 2007), among many others have contributed to a broader understanding of Service Learning, its definition, structure, limits, constraints, and efficacy.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the broader integration of Service Learning is the “engaged university” movement (Ellison & Eatman, 2008) advocating public engagement and civic renewal (Butin, 2010). If public and private education is commissioned to serve the broader goals of democracy, and in particular the cultivation of community, social responsibility, and citizenship, then it is clear that Service Learning should hold a salient position in pedagogy (Ramaley, 2000). When this linkage becomes pervasive, academic institutions, administrators, faculty, and policy-making bodies will more fully adopt the engaged university concept and integrate Service Learning into courses and programs, recognizing its contribution to the student, community, and institution.

Summary and Recommendations

Service Learning can be implemented in numerous projects and assignments and in an array of courses and programs. Education, sociology, English, psychology, business, communication, and health programs at CityU currently use Service Learning in courses with outcomes and competencies, such as team proc-

ess, project management, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, marketing, research, critical thinking, relationship building, self-awareness, self-reflection, leadership, accounting, presentation, teaching, sustainability, resourcing, and public relations. Others will also find Service Learning an excellent method for connecting students to assignments and few methods are better suited to cultivate social responsibility, service to others, community, civic renewal and citizenship than Service Learning.

A recent accounting course project provides an excellent example of Service Learning. MBA students in an accounting course were assigned a class project involving the preparation of tax returns. The assignment required student teams to identify local residents who did not speak English fluently and assist them with tax preparation. Project planning, including identification of the culture targeted and documentation of the process used for locating candidates for the assignment, was required. One team chose local Spanish-speaking residents as their target. Members of the team were either Americans who spoke Spanish fluently or were international students from Spanish-speaking countries. The team decided to videotape its sessions to document the process. They also submitted completed returns to faculty for quality-control inspection, assuring that the returns were completed accurately. The assignment enabled students to apply classroom concepts in a real-world setting and provided them with the opportunity to serve others. Feedback from both the subjects and students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the project; in fact, subjects asked if this process could be sustained and if they could refer others in the future.

This example is one among many that could be chronicled. Integration of Service Learning may be constrained by resources; however, in most cases it seems that awareness, enterprise, innovation, and commitment to student learning are the primary constraints.

Service Learning will enjoy broader integration when administrators, faculty members, policy-makers, and others familiarize themselves with the theoretical constructs of Service Learning, its practical applications, the best practices of current and former practitioners, and its mandate. Additionally, organizations like

SIFE that have developed expertise in its application and practice can be consulted to serve as models for development and implementation.

It appears that the major constraints and limitations for broader integration of Service Learning are awareness of its mandate, constructs, practical applications, and the best practices of current and former practitioners. These are all limitations that can be assuaged. Specific courses and learning outcomes may not be a good fit for Service Learning, although most academic disciplines do report successful employment of the concept and strategies. Faculty time and supervision as well as resources required for successful coaching, mentoring, supervision, monitoring, and project implementation might also constrain acceptance and implementation. Faculty will clearly spend more time managing Service Learning projects than other assignments. Legal and risk assurance/mitigation factors may need addressing.

Opportunities for Future Research

Service Learning is a relatively new practice in higher education and has seldom been employed in adult learning; however, it is a practice or method gaining popularity and credence. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama advocated for Service Learning as a means to promote citizenship and as a strategy for higher levels of student retention and productivity (Schweber, 2009). Since becoming president, the Obama administration has proposed bold initiatives that would make Service Learning an integral component of secondary and higher education and that position it to have a transformative impact on students, schools, and communities. Given this mandate and the growing acceptance of Service Learning as pedagogy, outstanding opportunities exist for integration of this approach and future research into this practice.

Research assessing the sustainability and efficacy of projects should be undertaken to determine the positive impact of Service Learning on students, faculty, community members, and participating institutions. Studies assessing the impact and relationship

between Service Learning and career advancement, continuing education, and community service could serve to further demonstrate the efficacy of this model on student outcomes.

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