

Service-Learning as a Method of Instruction

Stuart Umpleby

The George Washington University

Abstract

Service-learning is a new educational method that is expanding the involvement of universities in their neighboring communities. It also tends to promote the civic and moral development of students. This paper explains what service-learning is and how it is consistent with the history of universities in general and particularly universities in the U.S. with their focus on applied knowledge. The paper describes how service-learning has developed in the U.S. and how it is practiced in a School of Business. The article presents some important lessons learned from conducting service-learning at The George Washington University.

Service-Learning Defined

Service-learning is now being practiced at many levels of education in the United States. Common service-learning activities include the following: Middle school students (11-14 years old) may help to clean up a part of the city and then write essays about keeping the city clean or the importance of caring for the environment. High school students (15-18 years old) sometimes help to deliver meals to elderly or terminally ill people and then write essays on what life is like for people in different stages of life. Undergraduate and graduate students in the School of Business at The George Washington University often do group projects with local organizations. Students in management work in teams of 3 to 5 as consultants to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies or businesses. These projects are the “laboratory” part of a management course. The client is a second instructor. Students have an opportunity to observe an organization while helping the organization to improve its processes. Students write a paper in which they describe the work they did and use as many concepts from the course as they can, thereby connecting the concepts in the textbook with their personal experiences.

Service-learning can be defined as “service performed by students, aimed at attending to a real need of the community, and oriented in an explicit and planned way to enhance the quality of academic learning.” (Tapia, *et al.*, 2006, p. 68) A service experience should be personally

meaningful and beneficial to the community. In addition, there should be clearly identified learning objectives, student involvement in selecting or designing the service activity, a theoretical base, integration of the service experience with the academic curriculum and opportunities for student reflection. (Furco and Billig, 2002, pp. 7-8)

Individuals may cognitively process knowledge in one of four ways: personal experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, or active experimentations. Based on their personalities, individuals may prefer one learning style over another. A major strength of service-learning projects is that they contain both personal experiences and reflective opportunities. Thus students are likely to be responsive to service-learning activities regardless of their learning style. (Lester, *et al.*, 2005, p. 279)

Three reasons can be given for encouraging service-learning: aid the community, more effective learning and moral development. Advocates of service-learning argue that a key value of service lies in its ability to foster heightened moral awareness. Service-learning projects expose students to community needs. Service activities are an opportunity to infuse the message that organizations can “do well by doing good.” Service-learning experiences therefore can be seen as an instructional technique that encourages individuals to be socially responsible and engage in moral actions. (Lester, *et al.*, 2005, p. 279)

Service-learning is not simply a pedagogy. Rather, service-learning is a means to empower students and educational institutions to become more aware of the needs of the communities of which they are a part and to become engaged and civically active in mutually beneficial ways. Community-based service that relates to course and curricular content is becoming increasingly embedded in curricula. Evidence is beginning to show that service-learning has not only begun to transform education, but it also has transformed the lives of many of the students involved. (Casey, *et al.*, 2006, p. xi)

An Historical Commitment to Community Service

Universities have a long history of making important contributions to their surrounding communities. European universities emerged in decentralized medieval society and became more widespread in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due in part to actions by city authorities and regional authorities. Universities were supported because of the

recognition that the growth and dissemination of knowledge was of value to the community. (Florax, 1992, pp. 275-276)

The U.S. has a tradition of people organizing efforts to serve public interests. In his famous nineteenth century study of American society, de Tocqueville noted Americans' habit of forming voluntary associations to advance their own and the community's interests. De Tocqueville suggested that such associations were crucial to the vitality of American society, pointing out that their activities served to shape the participants' recognition of the coincidence of personal and public interest, which he called "the principle of interest rightly understood." (Pritchard, 2002, p. 4)

Universities in the U.S. have been said to engage in the three activities of education, research and service. The role of universities in providing service to society beyond simply educating the next generation has a long history. In 1862, the U.S. government passed the Morrill Act, which established agricultural and engineering extension services at state universities. Under this act, the federal government gave land to the states. The states were to sell the land and use the money to buy stocks that would generate perpetual income to support the universities. The universities were to teach students, conduct research on improved methods, and communicate the results of the research directly to farmers and businessmen through "extension agents." Extension agents were similar to traveling salesmen for new agricultural and engineering methods. Hence, the activity of service was changed and universities took a more active role in providing service to society.

Students and faculty members at U.S. universities have been doing volunteer work with community organizations for many years. For example, Russell Ackoff, his colleagues and students worked not only with business clients but also with community leaders in the neighborhoods near the University of Pennsylvania. (Ackoff, 1974) These consulting activities were discussed in class and were part of the curriculum. However, the rapid growth of service-learning as a teaching method is rather recent. The growth of service-learning in the U.S. can be described as passing through several stages.

1. Students have long worked in groups to complete a large assignment. This method of learning is a step beyond lectures, exams, and term papers.
2. At least by the 1970s some students were doing projects which were not just hypothetical projects or laboratory exercises. Rather, students worked on projects with real clients with real problems.

3. The term “service-learning” was invented and defined as a pedagogical method.
4. Books and articles on service-learning began to appear in the educational literature.
5. Articles on service-learning began to appear in discipline-oriented journals. Hence, publications about service-learning spread beyond schools of education to the journals of other disciplines.

Increased attention to service in the educational curriculum arises at a time when modern industrial economies have become more knowledge intensive. Universities are important social institutions that contribute to economic growth. So, combining education, research and service, rather than keeping them separate is arising in part due to an effort to couple the knowledge creating activities of the university more closely to the community.

“From community colleges to major research universities, relations to surrounding communities are central to the higher educational agenda. The institutions of higher education profiled in this book are using various strategies to revitalize local neighborhoods while concurrently fulfilling some aspect of their educational mission.” (Maurrasse, 2001, p. 181) Service-learning is one example of this heightened commitment to community service.

Another reason for the spread of service-learning is the motivations of faculty members.

I started assigning group projects with real clients in 1978, soon after arriving at GW. Although there certainly is a role for textbook problems, I feel that students learn more from working on real problems than on hypothetical problems.

One indication of the spread of service-learning in the U.S. is the growth in membership of Campus Compact, which was founded in the mid 1980s by the presidents of three universities – Brown University, Georgetown University and Stanford University. Their intent was to persuade the presidents of other universities to encourage faculty, students and staff to engage in service activities. The “compact” is a statement that university presidents are asked to sign. If the president signs then that university becomes a member of Campus Compact (www.compact.org) and becomes publicly committed to engaging in service-learning activities. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of university presidents who have signed the compact since 1985.

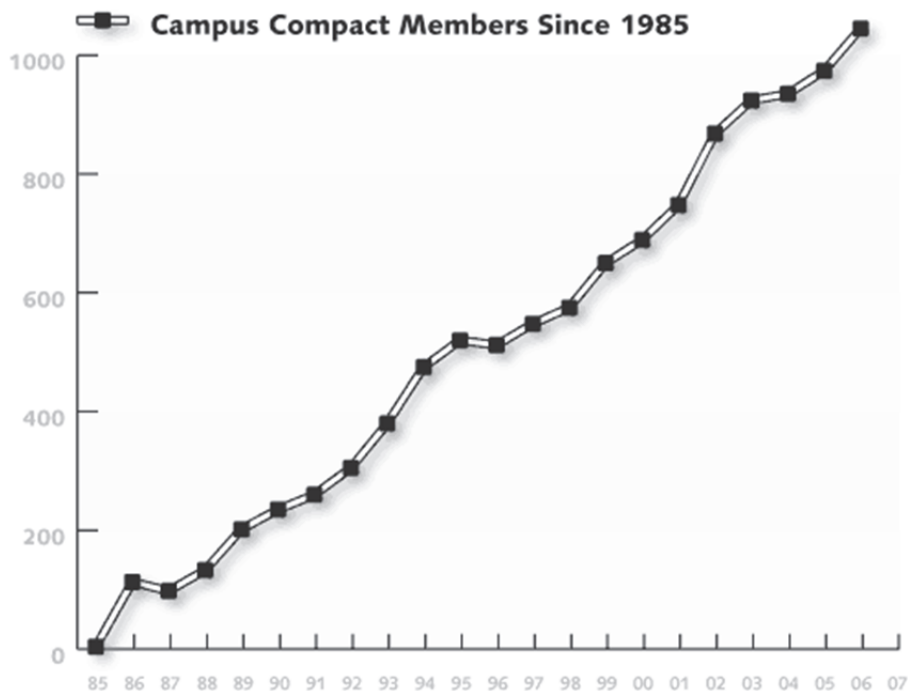


Figure 1: The Growth of Campus Compact

The American Emphasis on Applied Knowledge

Service-learning can be seen as an extension of a long-standing commitment in the U.S. to practical knowledge. Some countries emphasize theoretical knowledge to the neglect of applied knowledge. Richard Feynman, who won a Nobel Prize in physics, described his experience of teaching in Brazil. He was puzzled by the observation that his students could answer some questions quickly and accurately, but other questions, which seemed the same to him, they could not answer at all.

After a lot of investigation, I finally figured out that the students had memorized everything, but they didn't know what anything meant. When they heard "light that is reflected from a medium with an index," they didn't know that it meant a material such as water... Everything was entirely memorized, yet nothing had been translated into meaningful words. (Feynman, 1984, pp. 212-213)

Service-learning provides a way of relating textbook assignments and classroom discussions to personal experiences.

Thomas Ehrlich, former president of Indiana University and former chair of Campus Compact, has described a debate over the nature of a liberal education which occurred in the U.S. in the 1930s. On one side was Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago and his colleague Mortimer Adler. They argued for focusing the undergraduate curriculum on a selection of “Great Books.” They claimed that the study of the works of major Western thinkers would lead to a set of principles covering all aspects of human life.

On the other side philosopher John Dewey argued that this claim was dangerous because the notion of fixed truths requires a seal of authenticity from some human authority, which leads away from democracy and toward fascism. He also argued that purely intellectual study should not be separated from practical study or from the great practical problems confronting society.

Such separation can only weaken the intellect and undercut the resolution of those problems. Study Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, and the others, Dewey urged, but recognized that contemporary learning from their writings requires the application of their insights to contemporary issues... At the time of the debate and for most of the next half-century leaders in higher education generally concurred that Hutchins won the argument. The premise of service-learning is... however, that Dewey was right and Hutchins was wrong. Service-learning is the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service-learning is Dewey’s: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning. (Ehrlich, 1996, pp. xi-xii)

Service-learning is one of several trends in pedagogy that together mark a shift in undergraduate education from an emphasis on teaching to one on learning. Among the other trends are a focus on problems rather than disciplines, an emphasis on collaborative rather than individual learning, and careful articulation of learning outcomes coupled with assessment of learning success. (Ehrlich, 1996, p. xiii)

Robert Coles (1993) makes the case for the impact on moral character that derives from community service in conjunction with guided reflection, a necessary ingredient of service. Service-learning can enhance interpersonal skills that are key in most careers – skills such as careful listening, consensus building, and leadership. Dewey wrote that education should be the primary means of social progress, not just a means to develop the intellect for its own sake. Democracy depends on an involved

citizenry. Lee Shulman suggested in 1991 that service learning may become the “clinical practice of the liberal arts.” (Ehrlich, 1996, p. xv)

The Benefits of Service-Learning

Service-learning is now being studied from several points of view, depending on the interests of researchers. Key topics that are being discussed concern implementation of service-learning in curricula, methods of implementation, establishment of collaboration with the community, and benefits of service-learning for all parties (students, faculty, community and educational institution).

The motivation of faculty members to adopt service-learning as a method of instruction has been studied by Barbara Holland (2003). She found that there are different sources of faculty motivation. Faculty members might be motivated by personal values, values that inspire their commitment to a life of service, the success of their discipline and the quality of their teaching and research. Hence, service-learning and collaboration with the community can be a result of either individual or professional goals.

Measuring the outcomes of service-learning for the various parties has been attempted by many authors. In their studies, they pay most attention to the outcomes for students. The most difficult to measure or identify are the outcomes for educational institutions. The benefits for the community are obvious. Students do work that would increase the expenses of community organizations if the work were done by employees or professionals who were paid for their work. Clearly, both students and client organizations benefit. Some participants benefit more than others but certainly implementation of service-learning as part of a course will have positive impacts on students, faculty, community and educational institutions.

Janet Eyler and her colleagues have summarized the research on service-learning in higher education over the past few years. Among their findings, each of which is annotated with references, are the following:

- Service-learning has a positive effect on student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development.
- Service-learning has a positive effect on interpersonal development, the ability to work well with others, and leadership and communication skills.

- Service-learning has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding. However, a few studies suggest that service-learning may subvert as well as support course goals of reducing stereotyped thinking and facilitating cultural and racial understanding.
- Service-learning has a positive effect on sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills.
- Students and faculty report that service-learning has a positive impact on students' academic learning.
- Students and faculty report that service-learning improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in the "real world."
- Service-learning participation has an impact on such academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development.
- Students engaged in service-learning report stronger faculty relationships than those who are not involved in service-learning.
- Service-learning improves student satisfaction with college.
- Students engaged in service-learning are more likely to graduate.
- Faculty using service-learning report satisfaction with quality of student learning. They report commitment to research. They increasingly integrate service-learning into courses.
- Colleges and universities report that community service positively affects student retention and enhances community relations.
- Communities report satisfaction with student participation and enhanced community relations. (Eyler, *et al.*, 2003, pp. 15-19)

Implementation of Service-Learning

Service-learning in the curriculum can be implemented in several ways. (Enos and Troppe, 1996) Service-learning can be a fourth-credit option (add a fourth credit to a regular three-credit course), a stand-alone module (three credits) or part of a normal course. In terms of its place in the curriculum, service-learning can be incorporated into an introductory course, a required course, or an elective course. Service-learning can be included as course clusters, as capstone projects, *etc.* Each university needs to adjust the implementation of service-learning depending on the field and the abilities of students. Service-learning can be implemented in every field but not in every course.

Establishing partnerships between a university and the community is very important. Partnerships are usually established in three stages: designing partnerships based on values, building collaborative working relationships among partners, and sustaining the partnerships. (Torres and Schaffer, 2000) In many service-learning activities students work as individuals on tasks arranged by leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGO) and university administrators. However, in graduate management classes students often do group projects with organizations where one student is employed.

Service-learning at The George Washington University

Service-learning is widely practiced at The George Washington University. In the past few years, more than 30 faculty members in 17 departments have integrated service-learning into their course offerings. (Benton-Short and Morrison, 2007, pp. 4-5) The Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service is the clearinghouse for service-learning activities at The George Washington University. The Center's staff members work to support service-learning across all academic departments by providing resources, support, and information to faculty, students, administrators and community partners. The staff has established more than 60 campus-community partnerships with local schools, agencies, and community organizations. Faculty engaged in service-learning may access the Center as a resource for identifying a community partner for service-learning projects. (Benton-Short and Morrison, 2007, pp. 8-9)

Benefit to Students

By doing group projects students experience the psychological sequence of working in a team – forming, storming, norming, and performing. (Tuckman, 1965) Students are able to apply what they have learned in the classroom. They gain experience with organizations and the problems they face. They learn not only to solve well-formulated textbook problems but also to identify ill-defined problems in an organizational setting. Students gain confidence in their ability to solve organizational problems.

The Assignment

Service-learning courses contain key elements that set them apart from traditional classes. The main differentiator of a service-learning course is that part of the course occurs outside of the classroom and in the community. Service-learning courses possess a greater amount of complexity in terms of the number of stakeholders involved and the quality, resonance, and nature of knowledge transfer and competence building. Within a service-learning course, a student's learning will go beyond the course subject matter to include capacity building, team work, leadership, communication and citizenship. (Faculty Service-Learning Toolkit, 2007)

Students in the School of Business at GW are doing service-learning projects as part of some courses. The assignment is to improve the functioning of some organization. The students use the knowledge and methods that they have acquired from the textbook and classroom discussions. Before the students start to work on a project, the professor provides specific guidelines and recommendations on how to do the project. These guidelines help students do the project effectively. See the website <http://www.gwu.edu/~rpsol/service-learning>.

Students also receive instructions for working on the project effectively and achieving the project goals. At the end of the semester, when students finish the project, they prepare a final report which is presented both to the client and in class in front of their classmates. Students are given instructions on how to prepare the final report. The client completes an evaluation form and sends it to the instructor. The guidelines help students to develop an appropriate path for doing the projects so they do not lose time. The guidelines also make the projects more comparable.

Types of Projects

From 1992 to 2007 my students worked on 70 projects for different clients – local and state government, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and universities. The projects can be classified according to the type of organization. The distribution of the projects in terms of numbers and percentages is listed in Table 1. (Levkov and Umpleby, 2009)

Table 1: Clients of student projects

Clients	Numbers	Percentage
Businesses	24	34%
Federal government agencies	4	6%
Local government agencies	6	9%
Universities	19	27%
Non – profit organizations	17	24%
Total	70	100%

Students used their skills and knowledge to do different kinds of tasks in their project activities. Short descriptions of a few projects show a wide range of activities:

- An international non-governmental organization needed help finding specific solutions to improving processes in the areas of marketing, strategic management, and human resources.
- Students worked with a U.S. government agency to incorporate improvements into the new budget development process for the fiscal year 2008 budget cycle.
- A department of the city government sought recommendations for the proposed restructuring of the information systems department and suggestions for how the staff could keep their technical skills current.
- Students worked with a U.S. government agency to find the best governance model for managing a web portal.
- Students worked with an office at GW to create a mentor program for incoming, international students pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Choosing a Project

There are several possible ways that students can find a project. Students can be assigned a project by the instructor, they can choose a project from a list of possible projects or they can find a project through their work place or through friends. In my classes, students usually work with an organization where one student is employed. I also suggest possible projects and clients.

Depending in part on the class the students do a wide variety of projects, for example improving office procedures, creating a cross-cultural training program, revising personnel procedures, conducting a

survey of customers or employees, building a website, or guiding a strategic planning process.

Integration of the Internet into Service-Learning

Email has made it much easier for students to work together on a project. Since the internet is now worldwide, students are choosing to do projects with clients in other countries. Usually the client is a friend or relative of a student in the group. Here are a few examples of international projects.

- One member of a group was a Korean student who had a brother who worked in Mexico. The brother's firm made auto parts at a factory in Mexico. The Korean managers were having difficulty communicating with the Mexican workers due to cultural differences. So, in a Cross-cultural Management class a group of students created a training program for the Korean managers and Mexican workers, so they would better understand the cultural differences between Korea and Mexico.
- A group of students in an organizational behavior course worked with Somali television. Somalia was a failed state. For several years it had had no government, because the Somali government officials had moved to Kenya to avoid the chaos in Somalia. But many organizations continued to function, including Somali television. The owner lived in London. My students worked with the owner via email on two projects. First, they found a code of journalistic ethics, which was used in training the journalists in Somalia. Second, they obtained an organization chart from a television station in Washington, DC, and sent it to the owner in London along with recommendations on how to organize the people working at the station in Somalia.
- A student from Ethiopia shared the class notes on quality improvement methods with the Ethiopian government official in charge of quality improvement in Ethiopia. Via email she explained the class notes and provided additional books and articles.

Lessons learned

The work of the students is invariably rated very highly by the clients. What students are able to accomplish in one semester is quite impressive. The most frequent suggestion from clients is that students should work with them more closely.

When projects are conducted by graduate students, usually they decide to work with an organization in which one or more students are working. Several benefits result when the student chooses the client:

- Increased trust between the students and the client
- Better collaboration
- More knowledge of the organization and the processes and problems within the organization
- Less difficulty defining and analyzing the problems and developing solutions
- A greater likelihood that the recommended changes will be implemented, because essential support for implementation continues with the student employee.

We have also learned that projects work better when the person desiring that the project be done is the same person the students work with. In the DC government projects we found that sometimes a superior wanted the project to be done, but the students worked with a person lower in the chain of command. In these cases the immediate client often seemed to feel that the students were there to observe and to report to the higher level manager. This perception sometimes led to non-cooperation, which interfered with completing the project in a timely fashion.

Conclusion

In the United States service-learning has proven to be an effective means both for education and for community development. Service-learning is a new pedagogical method which is spreading rapidly in the U.S. and in other countries. Research shows that it improves the effectiveness of education and has a beneficial effect on students' sense of social responsibility. The work that students do is beneficial to neighboring communities and organizations. Service-learning aids learning, is a way for universities to contribute to their communities, and helps to instill democratic values.

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