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Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



Service Learning in Higher Education:

Giving Life and Depth
to Teaching and Learning

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Booklet Seven

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The Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series is a publication of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University. The Series is intended to stimulate and support both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning by drawing contemplative attention to various aspects of the methods, goals and visions of teaching and creating learning opportunities with students.

Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

Alan Altany, Editor

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Service Learning in Higher Education: Giving Life and Depth to Teaching and Learning

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Director of Service Learning

The mediocre teacher tells.
The good teacher explains.
The superior teacher demonstrates.
The great teacher inspires.

– William Arthur Ward

The landscape of higher education has changed dramatically over the past decade or two. Witness the changes heralded by technological innovations such as the Internet. Look at the changes in student characteristics and the diversity now abounding in many institutions. Take note of the fundamental shift to interdisciplinary, collaborative methods and the creation of learning communities in colleges and universities throughout the United States. Consider also higher education's new emphasis on the old tradition of community and public service.

These and similar changes have significant implications for teaching and learning. Although colleges and universities also have vital outreach and service functions, teaching and learning remain the primary purposes of higher education institutions.

The purpose of this booklet is to discuss a creative approach to teaching and learning that combines classroom instruction with community service. A growing number of higher education institutions across the United States and elsewhere are embracing this teaching/learning approach, which is called service learning.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching, research, and service have long been regarded as the tripartite role of higher education faculty, and teaching was once preeminent. Increasingly, some institutions are requiring that faculty devote more time to research activities. For such institutions, published research is what scholarship is all about. This is clearly reflected in their reward system which pushes faculty towards disciplinary research and away from teaching. It pushes faculty even farther away from service.

Those who do teach find themselves face to face in the classroom with students who lead lives that are vastly different from the lives of college and university students 15 to 20 years ago. Many students now have to deal with the demands of the classroom and campus, the family and home, the job and workplace – all at the same time. Many have to perform a juggling act as they try to create a balance between earning an income and earning a college degree.

Further, course instructors often face student passivity, narrow goals orientation, and lack of purpose among those whom they seek to teach. To be sure, there is a strong tendency for students nowadays to focus strictly on grades, credits, and “getting through.” Undoubtedly, such a narrow focus circumscribes and inhibits their ability to learn and develop academically and intellectually.

Faculty must be sensitive and responsive to the needs of students. However, this does not mean that teaching should be replaced by entertainment or that evaluation standards should be lowered. Rather, it means that the learning styles of students should be taken into account and that the learning process should become more engaging.

Transformative, Learner-Centered Education

Education is the process of developing knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills through methods of teaching and learning. Students attending institutions of higher education should become fully engaged in an exciting, if demanding, process of learning to learn. They should develop the ability to analyze, criticize, synthesize, and utilize information; they should acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies that will make them good employees

and active citizens; and they should graduate as well-rounded persons prepared for life's challenges and opportunities.

According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), "Our society expects colleges and universities to graduate students who can get things done in the world and are prepared for effective and engaged citizenship" (NASPA/ACPA, 2004, p. 5). The associations jointly present a compelling argument for the integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education of the whole student and they argue that learning should be a "transformative," student-centered process.

The idea of transformative learning reinforces the root meaning of liberal education itself – freeing oneself from the constraints of a lack of knowledge and an excess of simplicity. In the transformative educational paradigm, the purpose of educational involvement is the evolution of multidimensional identity, including but not limited to cognitive, affective, behavioral and spiritual development. *Therefore learning, as it has historically been understood, is included in a much larger context that requires consideration of what students know, who they are, what their values and behavior patterns are, and how they see themselves contributing to and participating in the world in which they live.*

(NASPA/ACPA, 2004, p. 10, original emphasis)

The milieu for teaching and learning should be one in which students do not necessarily see their instructors as repositories of wisdom and purveyors of knowledge. It should be one in which students are not passive recipients of such (perceived) wisdom or knowledge. That is why instructors are urged to do less lecturing (Dunn, 1994) and to employ other approaches that are more engaging. Come to think of it, wisdom has been defined as the ability of knowing how to use the knowledge at one's command. Surely, a good way for professors to use their knowledge is to employ a variety of teaching/learning methods geared to the needs of students.

This is what learner-centered teaching is all about. “Learner-centered teachers connect students and resources. They design activities and assignments that engage learners. They facilitate learning in individual and collective contexts. Their vast experience models for novice learners how difficult material can be accessed, explored, and understood” (Weimer, 2002, p. 76).

Learner-centered professors connect their students with resources both inside and outside the classroom. Learning cannot be confined to a classroom. In fact, as McKeachie (1994) reminds us, most learning occurs outside the classroom. No wonder classrooms are increasingly being seen as a supplemental environment for learning. Furthermore, there is growing interest in out-of-classroom learning experiences, including situations in which learning occurs off campus in other social settings (Grauerholz, McKenzie, & Romero, 1999).

Attitudes and Aptitudes

Faculty should remember, too, that learning starts with the attitudes and aptitudes students bring to the classroom and the course. Students’ readiness to participate in the process, together with their capacity for learning, will ultimately determine whether they succeed or fail.

Indeed, whenever I take on the instructor role and prepare to teach a new class, I remind myself of the story of a legendary teacher who was asked at the start of the semester what his course content would be. “I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t seen my students yet.”

As an instructor, I regard my role as that of a facilitator of learning and a motivator of learners. I remind my students that learning is a collaborative, participatory process, and I make it clear to them that they must take some responsibility for their education. I expect them to come to class prepared to participate actively – to ask questions, share ideas, take part in the discussion, and contribute in other ways. I tell them: “You’d better not sell yourselves short by thinking that your mind is a warehouse and that I am here to stuff it full of goods!” At the same time, I make it clear to myself that I must use appropriate instructional methods to excite my students about learning.

Experiential Education

Classroom instruction has always been the *sine qua non* of formal education. Traditionally, higher education institutions have used lecture and discussion as the preferred method of instruction, especially at the undergraduate level. Although the lecture-discussion method remains useful, a growing body of research provides evidence that learning is improved when new approaches to teaching are embraced.

Increasingly, college and university faculty have been replacing “learning by hearing” with “learning by doing.” Rather than restrict research activities, for instance, to the science laboratory, the library, or the Internet, students are now occasionally required to go into the local community to gather data and validate findings.

Learning by doing makes sense because, clearly, teaching is most efficacious when there is more “show” than “tell.” Bear in mind the principle underlying the Chinese proverb, “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.”

Faculty members in many colleges and universities have found experiential education to be the answer to student apathy and disengagement. Through experiential education, students become active learners as they gain relevant experience in various settings. In addition, they experiment with knowledge, apply their skills, and make discoveries. Instead of merely imbibing information about the experiences of others, students begin to create their own experiences as they participate in programs and activities outside the classroom.

Experiential education has long been considered a necessary part of the academic program in higher education. Colleges and universities include cooperative education, practicum, and internships in various curricula to provide supervised practical experience for students. Moreover, through such experiential education programs, students are able to garner some employment experience before their graduation. Cooperative education, for example, “integrates classroom studies with paid, productive, real-life work experience in a related field” (National Commission for Cooperative Education, n.d.). Similarly, internships are appropriate for linking academic courses to professional opportunities and for helping students make good career choices.

Service Learning

Service learning is a special form of experiential education that intertwines community service with classroom instruction. It has two complementary goals: service to the community and student learning. Through service learning, students engage in organized activities designed to meet community needs and, at the same time, enhance their intellectual, social, and ethical development. The central tenet of service learning is “Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (Porter Honnet & Poulsen, 1989, p. 1).

The connection to curricula is what makes service learning different from traditional community service, and what makes it special. Through careful integration into established curricula, service learning becomes authentic pedagogy that gives life and depth to teaching and learning.

Service learning – variously described as an approach, a philosophy, strategy, method, program, and process – has deep roots in John Dewey (see, for example, Dewey, 1916, 1938). The educational theory advanced by this great philosopher included notions of learning from experience, reflective activity, community, citizenship, and democracy. From Dewey’s viewpoint, the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is vital to learning.

As a formal part of higher education curricula, service learning extends across the range of subject areas and disciplines – from architecture to zoology. Service learning may be integrated into such disciplines as anthropology, art, biology, business administration, composition, computer science, construction management, engineering, environmental studies, management, music, natural resource management, nursing, philosophy, physical therapy, psychology, religious studies, social work, sociology, political science, teacher education, and women’s studies.

Some course instructors include service learning as an option for extra credit or as a replacement for another assignment. Others integrate service learning fully into their courses. Certainly, service learning works best when it is not a peripheral part, or a mere add-on, to an existing curriculum or course.

A growing number of universities have been organizing stand-alone service-learning courses. Well-organized service-learning courses present objectives that do not conflict with discipline-specific objectives or compromise academic rigor. Such courses “encourage students to ask the larger questions that lie beyond the bounds of most traditional courses” (Enos & Troppe, 1996, p. 156). Thus, students focus not only on content but also on context – the context of the course and its subject matter, and how it fits into the social world.

Application of Concepts

In an expanded learning environment, students see the relevance of their coursework, marked by concepts, theories, and principles, to the “real world,” with its demands for effective practical application of such concepts, theories, and principles. Students should not be required simply to recall a concept in the form in which it was presented. If teachers want their students to develop genuine understanding of a difficult concept, they should ask students to explain it, represent it in new ways, apply it in new situations, and connect it to their lives (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003).

Service learning helps students develop a deeper understanding of complex concepts, theories, and principles. The methodology makes learning come alive as students analyze concepts and theories and apply relevant principles to their lives. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German writer, declared, “Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.” Principles grounded in education for active citizenship are particularly relevant to the purpose of higher education, providing a basis for students to get involved in the community – the world beyond the classroom.

Campus-Community Connection

Connecting the campus with the community, service learning helps students expand their opportunities for learning into the world around them while it invites the community into the learning process. Consequently, it calls for a new orientation on the part of teaching faculty and students.

As students engage in service activities, faculty should monitor the learning environment, help to keep students on task, and systematically provide corrective feedback and support. As they carry out their responsibilities in supporting student learning, faculty should motivate students and unleash their sometimes dormant imaginations and tap their creative energies. They should encourage achievement through cooperation and constantly challenge students to excel.

In the community, students work as volunteers, applying their academic knowledge and skills to address issues, propose solutions to problems, and meet genuine community needs. On campus, students reflect on their experience, considering its relationship to the lectures and discussions and to their reading and research. They may also take into consideration the impact of the community service experience on their personal and professional goals.

Service learning is based on reciprocity – the service reinforces and strengthens the learning, and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service. The service activity makes course content immediate and relevant; the coursework, through knowledge, analysis, and reflection, informs the service. In the service-learning model, “experience enhances understanding [and] understanding leads to more effective action” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 8).

Social Change

Effective service-learning practice uses a social change paradigm involving stakeholder collaboration. The aim is ultimately to create long-term change for the common good by targeting the social system.

With that in mind, students participating in service learning are required to get a good orientation on the community and the social service agency to which they are assigned. (In this context, “social service agency” encompasses nongovernmental and community-based organizations, public sector departments, and community institutions through which students may serve the community.) Students are required to understand the composition and character of the community as well as the agency’s mission, structure, programs, and services. They should also understand the social, economic, and cultural conditions affecting the lives of the people served by the agency.

Collaboration among stakeholder groups is vital to the process of creating long-term social change in a local community as part of the larger society. In my view, the best approach to organizing a service-learning program is to build a collaborative relationship among the various stakeholders – campus partners, including administrators, staff, faculty, and students and community representatives, including agency directors and social service practitioners. Together with their course instructors, students should participate in the selection, design, implementation, and evaluation of the service activities so that they have some ownership of the pedagogical process. For their part, community partners should help the campus-based project organizers identify real needs, provide administrative assistance, and contribute specific resources to the service project.

Service Sites and Projects

Service sites may include educational institutions, hospitals and health centers, nursing homes, childcare and family support service centers, community centers, parks and recreation departments, church halls, city halls, emergency shelters, food banks, and soup kitchens. In addition, thrift shops and other small businesses, human service offices, and museums may serve as sites for service projects.

Students may teach children to read, mentor at-risk youths, play games with elderly people in nursing homes, serve dinner at the local soup kitchen, organize projects to improve low-income neighborhoods, create computerized databases for community associations, conduct voter registration drives, or perform similar services in the community.

A group of students from an environmental science course at Western Carolina University may participate in the annual Tuckasegee River cleanup project. They would collect garbage or debris from the river and its banks, and before discarding what they collect, make relevant notes. For example, they would list the specific items they pick up and perhaps the sections of the river where the items were found. Later, when they return to the college campus, they would analyze the garbage to determine its characteristics and identify likely sources. Then they would share the results with community residents and offer suggestions for reducing pollution.

The Tuckasegee cleanup project provides a much-needed service to the community, whose residents would appreciate the benefits of an unpolluted river and a cleaner environment. The project also contributes to student learning. The participating students may learn about water quality through a laboratory analysis and develop a deeper understanding of pollution problems. As they interpret and explain scientific issues to local community residents and decision makers, the students hone their communication skills and make meaningful connections with local officials. They may also reflect on their personal and career interests in environmental studies, local government, public policy, or similar areas.

A construction management professor may use a Habitat for Humanity housing project to give students “hands-on” experience in working with equipment and building materials discussed in class. A social work professor may assign students to prepare grant proposals for nonprofit organizations, plan social activities at a nursing home, or provide direct services to clients at a community health fair. Examining disciplinary conceptions of power, community, exchange, ideology, or perception within the field settings of the service activity could enrich a student’s understanding of course content in anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, or political science (Borzak, 1981; Wagner, 1990).

Note that the service project does not have to be related to the students’ major (academic specialization) or career goals. What is important is that the project should contribute to solving community problems or meeting community needs while it enhances student learning.

Reflection

Service learning should be linked to academic content and standards. Accordingly, credit should be awarded for learning and not merely for completing a requisite number of service hours. What is important is not the quantity of the service, but the quality of the learning.

Such learning is demonstrated mainly through reflection, which is a vital component of service learning. Reflection provides an opportunity for students to process and make meaning of the service experience. A structured process, reflection includes self-evaluation as well as analysis of the

applicability of the service experience to academic learning. Service learning becomes truly transformative when opportunities for reflection are an integral part of the total service experience (NASPA/ACPA, 2004).

Commenting on the purpose of reflection, author Anne Colby and colleagues state:

The process of structured reflection ... can be very important in deepening students' knowledge of the relevant issues on many levels, especially when reflection on social problems considers root causes and analyses of policies and other factors pertinent to the nature and extent of the problem. ... Well-designed reflection can also stimulate consideration of what kind of person the student is, wants to be, and fears being and can help him move toward being the kind of person he admires and wants to be. Finally, reflection can help students develop capacities for effective communication, through discussions and written assignments. (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, pp. 100-101)

Reflection can take many forms; among them are journals, scrapbooks, portfolios, research papers, case studies, essays, posters, discussions, oral reports, audio-visual presentations, documentaries, role-plays, magazine articles, and letters to newspaper editors. For the most part, however, reflection is an interactive process.

In a reflection session, the facilitator should look not only for acts and facts, but also for views and values. As students swap stories, ask questions, make observations, raise issues, and analyze their experiences, they continue to derive meaning and come to understand how their small project fits into the "big picture."

It is through reflection that students connect course content to the community service experience and reveal their understanding of lecture and textbook material in relation to "real-world" situations. During the process of reflection, students sometimes even get the "Aha!" experience of insight and discovery. It is often then that they become fully aware of the impact of their contributions and consequently express a commitment to ongoing community involvement.

Service-learning experts emphasize that reflection should occur on three levels – the mirror, the magnifying glass, and the binoculars. In other words, it should be a reflection of the self (the mirror), making the small service experience large (the magnifying glass), and bringing seemingly distant concepts and ideas closer (the binoculars).

The EDIT system of processing experiential activities, conceptualized by Myers and Myers (1975), works well. EDIT consists of four steps:

1. **Experience:** Organize and implement the community service project.
2. **Describe:** Talk about the experience; answer probing questions about how the experience has made participants feel.
3. **Infer:** Examine the service activities in relation to issues or problems that were being addressed (e.g., poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, HIV-AIDS, and drug abuse).
4. **Transfer:** Analyze the project and the pertinent issues in relation to the participating students' own lives and their plans for the future.

For example, Western Carolina University students doing a service project at the Community Table in Sylva, NC, would be expected to reflect on their experiences in collecting canned foods, planning dinner menus, and feeding hungry, destitute people at the soup kitchen. The students would describe their thoughts and feelings as they performed these tasks. As part of this contemplative process, the students would gain insights about the circumstances in which the recipients of the services find themselves.

The students would consider questions such as these: What are the causes and manifestations of poverty? Why do so many people have to go hungry? What do I (the student) have in common with people who depend on the services offered at the Community Table? What are the wider social structures that cause some people to be hungry and destitute while others are living in the lap of luxury? How can I best assist in dealing with problems like these after I graduate?

Benefits and Outcomes

Service learning is beneficial to the community and to the institution as a whole. Students and faculty also benefit considerably from service learning as it breathes new life into the teaching/learning process.

For students, it provides opportunities for meaningful involvement with the local community. As they implement service projects, students usually develop greater awareness of social issues and the need for civic responsibility. They often learn leadership, teamwork, and social skills and improve their critical-thinking and analytical abilities. In the process, they tend to increase their self-confidence and self-efficacy. As they interact with community members of different backgrounds, students develop cultural awareness and an appreciation of diversity. Additionally, they are able to explore vocational choices while they gain valuable work experience.

In their study of the educative outcomes of service learning, Eyster and Giles (1999) provide evidence that it results in deeper understanding and application of course content. The authors found that students had “a deeper, more complex understanding of issues” and that service “made the subject matter come to life” (p. 70) for the students.

For faculty, service learning offers a new, interesting approach to education and fresh perspectives on learning. There is generally more contact with students in a learner-centered environment; improved student participation and commitment to the course; increased awareness of current societal issues as they relate to academic areas of interest; and opportunities for research and publication.

Through service learning, faculty also become active learners, experimenting together with their students and reflecting upon the learning activities they have jointly designed. As a consequence, faculty members broaden their own experience. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, is right: “To be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner.”

Great Teachers

Service learning should be an integral part of the academic program in higher education. Its benefits are enormous. University faculty and students

should experience the rich teaching and learning benefits that accrue to service-learning participants.

Service learning does give life and depth to teaching and learning. Faculty who use the service-learning methodology aspire to be much more than the mediocre teacher who tells or the good teacher who explains. They are likely to become even better than the superior teacher who demonstrates. Indeed, they may become the great teacher who inspires. As Horace Mann, the educational reformer, argued, “a teacher who is attempting to teach, without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn, is hammering on a cold iron.”

In a higher education setting, it has been emphasized, there should not be administration without compassion or instruction without caring. Similarly, there should not be intellect without character or service without learning. Service learning helps to spark ideas, ignite creativity, and make the iron hot, as students put their knowledge and skills to immediate use in planning and implementing projects. Learning put to immediate use tends to be deeper and to last longer.

Students should become lifelong learners; the lessons they learn in relation to virtues and values associated with citizenship education and civic responsibility should last a lifetime. This brings to mind Oscar Wilde's famous comment about education. The English (Irish-born) writer, who was lionized for his brilliant wit, asserted that although education was an admirable pursuit, nothing that was worth knowing could really be taught. Perhaps we should overlook the apparent cynicism and conclude that what Wilde really meant was that what is worth knowing is what is left after the specifics we have been taught have been forgotten.

Service to the community should be seen as an essential component, and not a sideshow, to the mission of higher education. And service learning should be a feature of every university student's experience. It will enliven and deepen the learning process, and it will strengthen students' abilities to become active learners and responsible citizens.

On a personal note, I do declare that service learning has given meaning and purpose to my life. And I daresay that what happened to Rabindranath Tagore has happened to me. Since the Nobel laureate for literature (1913)

says it so well, let me quote him:

*I slept and dreamt that life was joy.
I awoke and saw that life was service.
I acted and behold, service was joy.*

Special Invitation to Faculty

Finally, here is some information specifically about the services and programs offered by Western's Service Learning Department, together with a special invitation to faculty. The department provides an array of services, including teaching and research support, community service placements, consultation, and access to its growing library collection.

Operating as the university's community service and service-learning clearinghouse, the department collects, creates, classifies, and disseminates relevant resources for planning/organizing, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of courses and projects. Available resources include books, journal articles, conference papers, brochures, fact sheets, bibliographical resource lists, and videos. Partnering with more than 40 nonprofit agencies and community-based organizations, the department is a "one-stop" source for matching volunteer resources with community needs.

Service-learning fellowships are available to faculty members of all five colleges. Faculty Fellows assist the Service Learning Department primarily in creating and organizing resources, coordinating orientation and in-service training sessions, and conducting service-learning research. They are available to answer questions about service learning by telephone or e-mail; mentor faculty colleagues over the course of a semester or academic year; provide feedback on a curriculum, syllabus, or proposal; and share ideas about learning assessment strategies.

One of the department's key responsibilities is to promote and assist with the integration of service learning into various curricula and courses. In this regard, assistance includes in-class presentations, service-site management, course design, project assessment, and coordination of orientation and reflection sessions. The department also organizes faculty workshops, roundtable discussions, symposia, and a summer symposium.

Further opportunities for students as well as faculty will be provided when the proposed Center for Service Learning is established. The center, which will operate as a residential learning community, will facilitate the expansion of Western's service-learning program and take it to new heights.

Service learning should be part of every student's experience. The benefits are truly enormous. I therefore invite faculty to learn more about service learning by visiting the department's Web site (www.wcu.edu/studentd/service_learning) and by contacting me directly.



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