



From the Classroom to the Community: Best Practices in Service-Learning

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Abstract: As a pedagogy, service-learning connects students with the community while focusing on course outcomes. The community becomes a live text for reflection and enriches students' experiences they otherwise would not have in the classroom. This article provides tips and strategies for implementing service-learning in the classroom. These tips and strategies include developing the structure of the course, linking service-learning to outcomes, creating partnerships, working through logistics with partners, communicating with community partners, setting logistics, preparing students, creating reflections, handling challenging issues, giving credit for the learning, and assessing service-learning.

An essential core mission of many institutions of higher learning is service. One way that service is integrated into university life is through service-learning, which is considered to be a form of experiential education that provides students with an intentional and structured opportunity to apply what they are learning in the classroom to a particular community partner. With deliberate course planning, faculty members help students make meaningful connections between the course content and theory and their community experiences through guided reflective writing and classroom discussion.

Service-learning is different from volunteerism or community service in that there is no specific connection of the volunteer work or the service to particular course content or academic activity (Flecky, 2009; Furco, 1996). In such instances, students are engaged in community service “for” the community. Conversely, academic service-learning occurs when faculty create purposeful opportunities for students, typically in a credit-bearing course, that include creating reciprocal relationships with community partners and developing intentional reflection (Crews, 2002; Jacoby, 2015; Heffernan 2001a). As such,

service-learning does not simply provide service opportunities for students; rather, it is a collaborative venture that exists among faculty, students, and community partners working “with” each other to meet the needs of all parties and empower the community (Furco, 1996; Howard, 2001). It is a purposeful pedagogy that enriches and connects students’ experiences in and out of the classroom, enhances community relationships, and meets community needs.

Advocates (Furco, 2001; Pawlowski, Bruess, & Dickmeyer, 2010; Zlotkowski, 1998) generally agree that not only does academic service-learning encourage students to become more civic-minded, but also that well-designed service-learning opportunities invite students to remain active community members throughout their lives. While various models exist for implementing service-learning into any academic setting (Campus Compact, 2018; Jacoby, 2015; Heffernan, 2001b), this article provides 10 best practices for implementing service-learning in sophomore/junior level face-to-face academic classrooms.

Best Practice #1: Develop the Structure of the Service-Learning Opportunity in Your Course

Regardless of whether you are creating a new course or revising an existing course, begin with its feasibility for becoming a service-learning course. How might service-learning enhance student learning in this particular course? What assignments could be accomplished through a service-learning opportunity? What community opportunities might help students apply course concepts to examine community needs? One way to develop the structure of a particular service-learning opportunity is one that can be implemented in a face-to-face discipline-based course. In a discipline-based course, “students are expected to have a presence in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis throughout the semester using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding” (Heffernan, 2001b, p. 3). Many service-learning proponents (Heffernan, 2001b; Jacoby, 2015; Pawlowski et al., 2010; Sandy & Holland, 2016) believe that such ongoing semester-long projects with repeated opportunities for engagement with community partners and continued reflection provide the richest experience for students.

It also is important to consider the number of hours needed for students to complete the service-learning experience as well as the number of sites needed for the course. Time spent in the community should be substantive enough to meet learning outcomes and be as meaningful as possible for students and their partners. With a semester-long project, students may average 2–4 hours per week spent at the partner site or a total of approximately 20–40 hours throughout the semester. Although there is no set guideline for establishing a required number of hours, Sandy and Holland (2016) discovered that many partners wanted longer time commitments from students (i.e., more than 20 hours) in order to both provide quality education for students and short- and long-term benefits for the community partner. Sites should be selected based on their proximity and accessibility to students. In a given semester, the number of sites may depend on whether students work individually, in pairs, or in groups (Crews, 2002). From an instructor’s perspective, students working in groups at fewer sites can provide additional benefits that include sharing rides, collaborating efforts on projects, and reducing the number of partner sites to visit during the course.

Best Practice #2: Link the Service-Learning Opportunity to Course Learning Outcomes

Service-learning works best when integrated carefully into the fabric of course content to fulfill learning outcomes. As with any course, service-learning outcomes must specifically reflect academic and civic learning (Crews, 2002; Eyster & Giles, 1999; Howard, 2001) and students easily can link their community experiences with course content through reflections, journals, and written assignments to meet the service-learning outcomes.

It works best as a required course assignment (rather than an optional assignment) and it is ideal for all students to engage in the service-learning project so that all students share similar experiences for reflection and critical discussion of course content and theory while understanding their community experiences (Jacoby, 2015). And just as students are expected to spend time reading course textbooks, writing papers, or preparing presentations, they should also be expected to spend time fulfilling a service-learning assignment by spending time with community partners. Sometimes students view service-learning as outside additional work and do not see the direct connections with the course as a whole. Students should be reminded that the community, in essence, is a living text for learning and spending time with the community is necessary for completing assignments and fulfilling course learning outcomes. Thus, explicitly linking service-learning opportunities to course outcomes legitimizes the pedagogy, enhances the academic rigor of the experiences, and creates specific links to course and programmatic assessment.

Best Practice #3: Create Community Partnerships Before the Start of the Semester

Community partners must be selected carefully in that they not only reflect the service-learning outcomes of the course, but also so that they act as placements that can provide meaningful experiences for students. As (Whitfield, 2005) noted, “although the community should be the focus of our service-learning projects, they often become an afterthought in the decision-making process” (p. 248), which includes partner selection. Therefore, making personal connections with community partners before the start of the semester is important for creating a genuine partnership. Partners should be involved in the process from the beginning: They should be reminded about the difference between service-learning and community service, educated about the course, and made a co-educator in the educational process (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2013). Working together, both parties then can create a project that addresses the course learning outcomes and meets the community needs within the timeline of the course. These details should be confirmed in writing so that both parties understand the expectations of the project. Moreover, during this initial selection process, it is important to determine together how and to what extent students will receive guidance and leadership from the partner while completing their service-learning project.

Best Practice #4: Work Through Logistics With Community Partners

Creating a relationship with a community partner is important, but the practical logistics that involve this partner must also be considered. Heffernan (2001a) and Pawlowski et al. (2010) identified several questions that should be posed to any partner, which include whether (a) students will need background checks, (b) students must complete training session, (c) students can work independently or will require supervision, and (d) any policies exist regarding liability issues (e.g., accidents at the site). Addressing these questions in advance will make a more productive working relationship. Additionally, institutions may have existing policies governing students working off-campus, which should be consulted.

Other incidental issues beyond the confines of the classroom may occur during the semester that could affect the outcome of the project. These issues include health problems students or partners encounter, changes in site supervisors, or weather-related incidents. Logistics with partners should be thought through as best as possible, but flexibility is key when such issues arise; these issues can be used as teachable moments with students because, after all, service-learning takes place in the “real” world.

Best Practice #5: Keep Communication Open With Partners During and After the Service-Learning Experience

Once the service-learning project is underway, communication with partners should be continued by visiting the sites on occasion to observe what students are doing in the community or with the organization. During the semester, it is important to maintain contact with the community site supervisors and seek their feedback to determine whether students are accomplishing the task at hand or if any changes need to be made to the project (Cress et al., 2013). Because it is difficult to assess or grade a project if the nuances of the sites or the specific work students are doing in the community are unfamiliar, visiting the site firsthand provides context for grading reflections and assignments associated with the service-learning project. Site supervisors also can be engaged in conversations to assess the proficiency of student work.

At the end of the semester, community partners should be invited to campus to celebrate the service-learning project and share in the achievement of the project. Upon completion of the project, a post-assessment with the community site supervisor should be conducted to uncover the successes and challenges of the project (Whitfield, 2005). Because community partners often want more communication with instructors and feel left out of the feedback process (Steimel, 2013), this post-assessment can center on questions such as: What went well? What changes could be made to create a stronger experience in the future? Were students sufficiently trained? To what degree did the students conduct themselves professionally when interaction with community partners? How well did students fulfill the community partner’s objective for the project? Does the community partner want to continue the relationship with future projects? Community partners are genuinely interested in, and are dedicated to, educating college students (Sandy & Holland, 2006); therefore, soliciting feedback from partners can help student development, strengthen partnerships, and guide course development.

Best Practice #6: Prepare Students for the Service-Learning Experience

Students in service-learning courses are unfamiliar with service-learning as a pedagogy. In writing (e.g., syllabus) and through class discussion, students can be prepared for this unique experience by offering an explanation of (a) the difference between community service and service-learning and (b) how the service project will enhance their academic and civic learning. As with any assignment, explicit expectations and project criteria, as well as the benefits of participating in such projects, must be identified (Crews, 2002; Jacoby, 2015).

In addition, students should attend an orientation session that introduces them to the partner as a way to understand the place of service and their responsibilities in visiting their partners' communities. The director or supervisor of the community site should be invited to visit with students regarding the site, the mission of the organization, and the population with which students will be working. It should not be assumed that students are readily equipped with organizational-appropriate behaviors, so during this orientation, students should be informed about respectful behaviors of conduct (which include the use of appropriate verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors and dress code for the community site), the importance of their accountability to the partner, and a reminder that they are representing the course and the institution.

Best Practice #7: Create Purposeful Reflection Assignments That Address Learning Outcomes

Reflection is the intentional, structured, and systematic process created by instructors to facilitate student learning and critical thinking; it often is referred to as the hyphen in service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Reflection helps students achieve course learning outcomes, acts as the mechanism of organizing the messiness of service-learning, and allows students to “deepen their understanding of the academic content they are studying and the social issue they are addressing” (Furco, 2001, p. 26) through demonstrations of competencies of discipline-specific connections, exploration of personal values, and critiques of social systems and social justice issues (Zlotkowski, 1998). Some common methods of reflection include written work (e.g., journals, papers, narratives, blogs, discussion boards, newsletters), artistic and creative projects (e.g., paintings, music, dance, poetry, scrapbooks, billboards, photo books), and oral discussion (e.g., open sharing, small group work, presentations).

When preparing students for reflection, they should be guided to connect and apply the material by asking them to analyze, think about implications, and make conclusions as well as to identify how their boundaries have been changed and how they can act as change agents for others (Eyler, 2002). Eyler and Giles (1999) posited that critical reflection needs to be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. *Continual reflection* should be ongoing, and utilized before, during, and after the service-learning experience; *connected reflection* directly links service experience to the learning objectives of the course and allows students to synthesize “action and thought” (p. 18); *challenged reflection* moves students from surface learning to deeper, critical thinking and pushes them “to think in new ways, to develop alternative explanations for experiences and observations, and to question their original perception of events and issues” (p. 19); and *contextualized reflection* is most effective when content, topics, and reflective activities are appropriate for the setting, and meaningful for the students. These reflections challenge students' assumptions about social issues and provides a mechanism for making sense of what they are learning with what they are experiencing in the community.

Best Practice #8: Handle Challenging Issues Through Open Dialogue

Because students are asked to challenge their critical thinking and work through social justice issues from their community experiences, they may personally struggle with the dichotomy that exists between their assumptions about the world and what they are witnessing in the community. According to the Carolina Center for Public Service (2018), “social justice teachers ask students to critique the status quo, examine underlying assumptions and values, and explore their own roles in relation to social issues” (p. 5). Issues such as cultural diversity, social injustice, privilege, racism, poverty, and prejudices may arise throughout the service-learning project that can make students uncomfortable. Apprehension from students also arises when they do not fully understand the population.

To begin a dialogue, instructors should engage students in perspective taking into their community partners’ lives as a way to appreciate the demographic, economic, historical, cultural, and social time frame in which some community members were raised (Carolina Center for Public Service, 2018; Pawlowski et al., 2010). They should be encouraged to identify how community partners are both similar to and different from themselves, the opportunities that are available to them as students (e.g., how they are privileged), the opportunities community members have, and the structures already in place that may hinder opportunities for community members. This dialogue, whether public or private should be cultivated throughout the project via continued reflection exercises (Cress et al. 2013; Jacoby, 2015). It is important that students feel they are in a safe and mutually respected atmosphere to freely express their opinions, ideas, and thoughts.

Best Practice #9: Give Credit for the Learning, Not the Service

Grading reflections and service-learning assignments can be challenging as it sometimes is difficult to grade reflections while remaining sensitive to students’ expressed feelings or perceptions about the service-learning experience. One suggestion is to treat reflection assignments as any other graded, course-related assignment and evaluate students on whether they can demonstrate, integrate, and apply their learning (Jacoby, 2015). Prior to evaluating these reflection assignments, students should be provided with rubrics that will enable them to understand the difference between surface level of ideas (e.g., stating what they did or how they felt) and the competency and depth of reflective output (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). These rubrics should focus on how well students critically link the service-learning experience with the course content (i.e., make explicit connections between community experience and classroom theoretical concepts) and center specifically on how well course concepts are explained in light of the community experience, the integration of course concepts into the community experience, the ability of students to identify a personal sense of community gleaned from the experience, and the extent to which students are able to connect community experiences to larger social issues. Regardless of the method of evaluation, however, the focus of evaluation should be on students’ demonstration of learning and fulfillment of course learning outcomes, not whether they completed a set number of hours.

Best Practice #10: Assess Service-Learning for Academic, Personal, and Professional Outcomes

At the end of the semester, it is important to assess the overall service-learning experiences of students, instructors, and community partners. While assessment of learning outcomes is important, assessment of students should also include personal and professional outcomes regarding their overall community involvement, sensitivity to diversity, commitment to service, career development, and self-awareness (Conville & Weintraub, 2001; Gelmon et al., 2001). Students' perceptions of the project and the course as a whole should be ascertained (e.g., service-learning as an effective pedagogy, evaluation of hands-on learning, satisfaction of working in the community or with group partners, concerns/logistics about the service site, ability to perform community service, what they enjoyed about the project, suggestions for enhancing the service-learning experiences) as a way to improve future service-learning experiences.

Instructors also should engage in self-reflection of the service-learning project. Questions that instructors can ask for personal and professional assessment include: What have you learned from adding a service-learning experience in your class? How does the quality of learning (and your teaching) with the community service compare to traditional classrooms? From your perspective, how did you and your students benefit from the service-learning experience? How has teaching service-learning changed your teaching philosophy? How has service-learning changed your perspective of community engagement? What would you change to improve your service-learning project? What lessons did you learn? How can service-learning contribute to your scholarly endeavors? Aside from these questions, specific qualitative and quantitative assessment measures that assess service learning can be obtained from Campus Compact (2018), Conville and Weintraub (2001), Gelmon et al. (2001), and Seifer and Connors (2007).

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided 10 best practices that can be consulted when developing, implementing, and assessing service-learning in a discipline-based classroom. Service-learning is an intellectually challenging and worthwhile academic endeavor (Cress et al., 2013) on the part of instructors, students, and community partners. While service-learning may not be a journey that all instructors and students want to take, for those who do, it is an exciting journey that can leave a life-long impression.

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