

Why Service-Learning Is Bad

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Abstract

Service-learning has potential to transform teaching and learning in the academy and to call a generation of students to develop social responsibility and an ethic of service. Research on the learning side of the service-learning equation shows that students develop social responsibility, reduce racism, develop leadership and gain personal and social skills. There are however important questions which must be examined on the service side of the equation. The demands a learning orientation places on service limits its effectiveness and its ability to address community needs at a structural level. The service students do is often ameliorative and the explanations of social issues gained through service-learning are often individualistic. Through participation in service-learning, students may develop truncated understandings of the nature of social problems and of strategies for fundamental social change. This paper examines potential negative aspects of service-learning and identifies an agenda for strengthening the service provided through service-learning.

The service-learning movement is burgeoning. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of colleges and universities in the United States have some kind of service-learning program with more added every semester. The number of high schools, middle schools and even grade schools with service-learning is increasing. Conferences on service-learning are well attended. Both the quality and the quantity of research is increasing. Service-learning is widely praised by educators, faculty, administrators, students, parents, politicians, and community service agencies as a great hope for restoring relevance for the academy, as a strategy for creating a generation of students with an ethic of service, and as the answer to community social problems. Different representatives of the same groups also question service-learning because they claim that it does not address real community problems, because it is not real learning and because it teaches students inadequate understandings of service and social issues.

The service-learning movement is fueled by an uneasy sense that the academy is becoming increasingly irrelevant to real issues of society and by the increasing popularity of volunteerism in society. The President's summit focused national attention on volunteerism. There are so many follow up mini-summits that national figures must pick and choose which ones to attend and video recordings are used to provide a token presence. Some businesses are freeing employees to do volunteer work on company time. Community volunteer centers are adding staff. It is not unrealistic to talk of an emerging service movement and not too optimistic to expect a dramatic increase in the numbers of persons doing volunteer service and in the numbers of agencies depending on volunteers to accomplish their work.

The excitement and euphoria of the service-learning movement, fueled by dramatic stories of the benefits of linking learning and service masks underlying troubling issues. The limitations of service done in the name of service-learning are often overlooked and possible harm done by to communities by short term volunteers is ignored. Conversations about negative aspects of service-learning do surface occasionally in the hallways of the academy and in the lounges of service-learning conferences. There is talk of McService, service bites, quick fix service, happy meal community service, or service in a box. Discussions of the limits service-learning have surfaced on the Internet. Community leaders and agency representatives concerned about fundamental community change raise significant questions when given opportunity.

Unfortunately these voices are often informal and sporadic. Much of the discussion about service-learning is carried on by advocates. Most of the published research about service-learning is done by academicians particularly interested in the learning side of the equation. Community leaders and residents do not have a voice in the dialogue. The voice of community leaders committed to community development and structural change would be particularly helpful. Service is awarded something of a “sacred” status so it is neither popular nor politic to raise questions about the assumptions or unintended effects of volunteerism which often characterizes service-learning. However, if the service-learning movement is to reach maturity and live up to its potential, it must realistically face its limitations and broaden its emphasis beyond volunteerism. It must carefully examine what students learn about social problems and social structure through the kind of service service-learning does. It must examine the subtle effects of service on communities. This suggests both an agenda for planning and organizing service and a research agenda.

This paper is intended to be provocative and to generate such discussions and encourage such research.

Service-learning grows from mixed motives

Because of the strong emphasis on learning within service-learning, service can be subverted and become a “means to an end” rather than an end in itself. At its best, service should be defined by persons served and should be accountable to them in significant ways. Programs should be managed by local people and agencies controlled by them. Often service-learning is organized to respond to the needs of an academic institution which sponsors it, the needs of students, the needs of an instructor, or the needs of a course. The needs of the agency and the community often come last.

There are other forces which dilute both the motivation and the performance of service. The need for service-learning to gain legitimacy with doubting colleagues in the academy is a powerful force to redirect energies from service toward learning. Colleges and universities sometimes use service-learning as a public relations device to enhance their reputations in their communities in order to raise funds and recruit students or to mask negative impacts of other actions they take. Students sometimes use service-learning to make themselves feel good or to strengthen their resumes. They may use service-learning to avoid writing requirements or other course requirements when options are given. Agencies use service-learning to get free labor and to gain prestige. The fact that agencies will take almost any warm body is a sad commentary on

how much they need help. Participation in service-learning programs gives agencies access to a college or university and the prestige and help that brings. Religious students sometimes use service as a means to gain converts. Businesses support service to enhance their reputations and sometimes to legitimize or divert attention from other practices which may not be in the best interests of the community.

There is also danger of “using” individuals and communities in inappropriate ways as laboratories or as subjects for experiment and practice. Community members become objects rather than participants or passive recipients rather than actors. The fact that service-learning mixes objectives has potential for prostituting service by making it serve objectives which contribute to the students or the college or university rather than to the community.

Service-learning is based on a simplistic understanding of service

The service-learning movement is fond of the quotation from Martin Luther King. “Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s Theory of Relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

While it is true that anyone can serve, it is also true as Allan Keith-Lucas (1972 p.119) comments that, “To help another human being may sound like a very simple process. Actually it is one of the hardest things that anyone can be called to do.” When service-learning is done without proper selection of students and without appropriate training, orientation and reflection, it can support ineffective and sometimes harmful kinds of service. Such service trivializes service and demeans service professions.

Service-learning teaches a false understanding of need

John McKnight (1996) in an insightful discussion of “Professionalizing Service and Disabling Help” discusses the concept of need often carried by students into service-learning assignments. Need, he says, is often defined as deficiency or as the lack of something a client needs or wants. The deficiency is placed in the client. Deficiencies are translated into a set of disconnected parts and treated with specialized service. Needs are understood to reside in the individual rather than in the system. Each need can be isolated as a discrete deficiency. Service is provided in discrete units directly targeted to a particular deficiency.

Freire (1971, p. 53) uses images borrowed from a “banking” system to describe this understanding of education. The system acts as if students are empty receptacles to be filled by the teacher. Education becomes an act of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the student. Students are passive depositories and teachers depositors.

This understanding of need as deficiency reinforces simplistic understandings of social problems and ignores resources and strengths already in communities. It is rewarding for a student to share love, hugs, and mathematics with a student in a tutoring program, but this individualization of social issues ignores structural components and causes. Often students who do service-learning enter communities from outside. This reinforces the idea that communities

themselves are deficient and need outside resources to work at their problems. By defining needs as deficiencies, students are able to separate themselves from the problems they encounter. They fail to see that often the same social structures which work well for them create the needs in the communities in which they do service-learning. By focusing on individualized need and individualized service students miss the systemic nature of social life.

Defining need as deficiency also reinforces the fundamental misunderstanding among many Americans found by Bellah (1985) and colleagues. They discovered that while most people they surveyed thought the world was going to “hell in a handbasket,” most also were optimistic about their own personal futures. They failed to grasp the fundamental fact that their individual futures were intrinsically linked to the future of the society. A Somali proverb states that the presence of a man in a village who is too poor to own a camel is an embarrassment to the entire village. In America the village blames the man for his poverty! Unfortunately, service-learning when it is characterized by individualistic understandings of need perpetuates this kind of individualism.

Service-learning teaches a false understanding of response to need

Help according to McKnight (1996) is often offered as a mirror image of the individualized definition of need. The answer to need as deficiency is an outside person whose service fills the deficiency. This exaggerates the importance of the person who serves, demeans the person served and ignores resources in the community such as peers, families and community leaders. It fails to recognize the political, social and economic factors which create the need.

This definition of response allows service to be shaped to reflect the skills, schedules, interests, and learning agenda of the students in service-learning rather than to meet real community needs. Needs are defined in terms of what students have to offer. “To a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Resources in the community are often ignored. Too often service-learning reinforces assumptions of persons who need help that they do not have the resources to solve their own problems. It communicates to communities that they too are deficient and that the answers to the issues they face must come from outside. Service-learning tends to skew programs toward the needs of students rather toward the needs of communities. It often ameliorative rather than oriented toward change of social structures. It puts band-aids on deeply rooted problems and gives students an inadequate understanding of service.

Service-learning diverts attention from social policy to volunteerism

Most service-learning programs include volunteer service. The President’s summit on volunteerism, the many state and local follow-up summits and the visibility given to volunteerism by national figures such as General Powell have elevated volunteerism to almost sacred status. While the importance and significance of volunteerism cannot be overstated, volunteerism and private programs cannot substitute for appropriate governmental action and social policy. At a recent regional meeting touting volunteer service and service-learning, both the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the Mayor of the City of Harrisburg stated that government can reduce its role now that volunteerism is increasing. It is tempting to see volunteerism as a viable response to deeply rooted social issues.

The fallacy of that claim is evident when noting that \$16 billion annual reduction in programs for the poor in the recent welfare reform bill approved by congress compares with the \$11 billion total of all secular and private giving for the poor (Wallis, 1997). If service-learning diverts effort from social policy initiatives to volunteerism it will do a major disservice to those it is designed to help.

Service-learning encourages diversion of agency agendas

The existence of a ready source of well motivated and generally competent service-learning volunteers encourages agencies to divert energies to meet the needs and interests of the volunteers sometimes at the expense of their own mission. Time spent catering to needs of volunteers and participating in their learning robs time from agency work. Time required to develop and run programs designed for short-term, untrained volunteers from outside the community detracts from time needed to involve community residents in working at community issues and to design programs which have long term structural impacts.

Service-learning can do harm

Service-learning exists within a number of constraints imposed by its very nature. Students must serve on schedules dictated by the college calendar, sports events, classes, availability of transportation, and their many personal commitments. Safety and liability considerations impact what they can do. When service-learning is done within a course, activities must fit with course objectives. Many students have little experience working with people different from themselves or little exposure to the issues involved in their service activity. Many professors are experts in their disciplines but not in community service or cross cultural relationships.

Service-learning has potential to do actual harm to individuals, particularly to children with whom students work. Because students come and go, relationships are short term. What may be a casual relationship for a student may be very significant relationship for a child or young adult in the program. Breaking the relationship at the end of the service-learning assignment can be traumatic and can add to the fragmentation already typical of poor communities. Students may reflect ethnocentrism and racism in ways that are harmful. Idealistic students may inappropriately criticize agency practices and policies.

Implications for design of service-learning

Admittedly, the discussion above is provocative and based on stereotypes and broad generalizations of volunteer service and service-learning. There are many service-learning programs which do not fit the stereotypes. But unfortunately many do.

As it matures, service-learning must go beyond “good intentions” (Illich, 1990) and “do goodism” to incorporate “state of the art” theoretical understanding and principles of good practice for service and social change. A beginning agenda to help move in this direction might include the following points.

Service-learning must incorporate the perspectives of all of its stakeholders

Service-learning brings together six sets of primary stakeholders; students, faculty, educational institutions, service recipients, community agencies, and communities. Each of these stakeholders has its own agenda and interests. Unfortunately very few discussions of service-learning give voice to all of these stakeholders.

One of the major challenges of service-learning at this stage of its development is to bring together with integrity the interests and cultures of all stakeholders. This is no easy task. Sven Groennings after interviewing more than 20 service agencies on behalf of the Association of Episcopal Colleges wrote, "While both service agencies and educational institutions are stakeholders in service-learning, the partners represent two cultures, which differ in purposes and considerably in vocabulary. Each of the partnering sectors lacks a solid widely-shared understanding of the dynamics of the other. There are weaknesses in the structure of inter-institutional relationships ("disconnects") which hamper communication, conflict resolution and the development of leaders who are accustomed to working together" (Groennings, 1997). The "disconnects" are even greater between other pairs of stakeholders in the matrix. Too often conversation and planning is done by each group alone or in pairs, rather than with representatives from all groups.

Authentic partnerships between colleges and communities are essential

For learning to occur in service-learning there must be careful planning and clear objectives, the experience must be linked integrally with academic courses, and the experience must include structured reflection. The most critical factor in the service component is the local agency which provides the setting for students to work. It is important for the agency to have authentic roots in the community and to provide continuity for programs in which students serve and for the relationships which short-term service-learning students build.

Effective programs include training, supervision, monitoring, support and evaluation. Much of this must be done by the agency. To do this well requires a heavy investment of agency resources. Most agencies are already stretched beyond their capacities. They have limited resources to respond to unending need.

Priority must be placed on developing clear expectations and mutual understandings between partners. It is also important for the college or university to contribute their "fair share" to the partnership. There are many ways this could happen but often does not. Colleges might provide financial reimbursement for agency time invested in service-learning students. Or they might provide other in-kind resources such as research, consultation, use of university facilities, or program evaluation. However this is often difficult because service-learning is not fully incorporated into the infra-structure of the college or university. Individual faculty often carry the additional work load and cost to incorporate service-learning into courses. For authentic partnerships between colleges and universities and communities to develop, ways must be found to incorporate service-learning into budgets and into faculty and staff loads.

Principles of good practice must be followed

The *Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning* developed by more than 70 organizations at a Wingspread conference in 1989 (Hornet & Poulsen) provide a

framework for programs of high quality. These principles call for service-learning to include responsible and challenging actions for the common good, critical reflection on activities, clear goals, involvement of those with needs in defining needs, identification of clear responsibilities of all partners, careful matching of providers and needs, sustained organizational commitment, providing training, supervision monitoring, support recognition and evaluation of programs, flexible and appropriate time commitments, and participation with diverse populations. This set of principles provides an excellent checklist for planning service-learning.

The planning and evaluation of service provides an opportunity for service-learning to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach so central to the concept of service-learning itself. Disciplines such as social work, political science, sociology, organizational behavior and community development should be generously used by the administrators of service learning activities. Frequently practitioners of service-learning are long on motivation and good will but short on expertise that relates to social and community change. There is a particular challenge to design programs which can use short term service-learning students in ways which fit into long term community programs or to find ways for students to spend longer periods of time in agencies.

The learning agenda must include social structural issues

Learning in service-learning is both intentional and serendipitous. It is important to thoughtfully manage both areas. Curricular content should help students to develop what is often called a ‘sociological imagination,’ that is the ability to see patterns, structures and social context. C. Wright Mills (1959) talks about “personal troubles of milieu“ which are rooted in the character of the individual and “public issues of social structure” which transcend the individual. Most students do not make the distinction intuitively. They must be helped to see structural conditions. Training, supervision and reflection must give careful attention to sensitize students to see factors beyond those residing in individuals.

Students tend to reflect on service-learning primarily in egocentric terms. They are quick to comment on the meaning service added to their college experience or the relationships they developed. They frequently reflect on changes in personal attitudes such as decreases in racism and increases in empathy for persons in need. This is important. But reflection must also include critical analysis and understanding of theoretical issues, service strategies, social change, agency policies, social policies, and community structure.

Advocacy and community development must be included

The short term nature of service-learning almost forces it to rely on settings which provide opportunity for direct service. However, as service-learning matures it is especially important to broaden service opportunities to include advocacy and community development.

Research Agenda

The issues raised above suggest a research agenda. There is a great need for case studies showing creative and innovative ways to do effective service in service-learning. Descriptions of exemplary programs can be used as models for planning and evaluation. Studies of ineffective

programs can help identify critical factors for success. Research should specifically examine the impact of service-learning on local communities and on persons served. Doing this requires using outcome measures rather than more commonly used input measures such as hours served or tasks done. Case studies can be used effectively for assessment (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996).

There is also need for research on short term service and volunteerism particularly as it affects agencies and communities. It is important to understand at greater depth the issues raised in the first section of this paper. Work needs to be done to identify the critical factors which determine the outcomes of service-learning. Additional research on the impact of service-learning could contribute greatly to improving quality and impact. A check list for planning the service component of service-learning would be helpful.

Summary

Service-learning has great potential to transform teaching and learning. It also has great potential to provide quality programs and people to local agencies to work with them to transform communities. However, if done poorly service-learning can teach inadequate conceptions of need and service, it can divert resources of service agencies and can do real harm in communities.

As service-learning matures, it must realistically face its limitations and realistically recognize both strengths and weaknesses. The answer to criticisms is not to abandon service-learning but to structure both learning and service to build on strengths and compensate for limitations.

One of the challenges facing service-learning is to bring to the service end of the service-learning equation the same level of rigor, expertise, and critical analysis that has been applied to learning. This will include responding to the legitimate interests of all the stakeholders, following principles of good practice, developing strong college/community partnerships which reflect quality and reciprocity, teaching a sociological imagination, incorporating advocacy and community development opportunities, and developing evaluation and assessment strategies which will assure continued program improvement.

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