

Not Serious Stuff?

Service-Learning in Context: An International Perspective

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The broad enthusiasm for service-learning on U.S. campuses and in education abroad is an extremely welcome development. However, service-learning in both domestic and international contexts raises important institutional and pedagogical questions that have not received sufficient attention. Fundamentally, is service-learning primarily “good works” and, as such, a form of community volunteerism or is it an academic program based on “action research” through community engagement? As a consequence of an unclear understanding or resolution of this question, service-learning remains, for the most part, a minor (and sometimes suspect) activity on many campuses. It is frequently constructed and presented as a civic or religious duty rather than as a method of teaching and learning. As such, while institutions may tolerate or even welcome service learning, they may fail to regard it as inherently serious, let alone incorporate it into their core purposes.

Service-learning has been defined as a programme based on “engagement with underserved groups or organizations and projects focused on issues of the common good; structured reflections on service-related as well as discipline-specific concerns; and respect for the needs and interests of the community partner.”¹ Other definitions have stressed the importance of the creation of a new kind of pedagogy or an ethical ideology or, indeed, as a tool out of which educational reforms can be constructed.²

However service-learning is defined, though, it contains a set of potential complications that need to be addressed. A key issue may be summarized as follows:

In the United States, service-learning is now an accepted pedagogy, even if it remains at the margins of the curriculum in most colleges and universities.³

In short, the status of service-learning is problematic institutionally and academically. It is frequently not located in mainstream academic departments or is seen as an incidental activity nor does it, for the most part, achieve

parity of esteem with more traditional academic approaches. At the heart of this dilemma lies the fact that service-learning is “often little more than just institutional community service.”⁴

Service Learning and Volunteerism

Clearly, the emphasis must shift from service to learning if we are to achieve some strategic objectives. In essence, the debate about whether we write about “service learning” or “service-learning” (the pesky issue of the hyphen) has to be about real substance rather than style of the endeavor. The strategic objectives for achieving this shift are to achieve parity of esteem for service learning with other academic courses and to increase its academic credibility.

In order to achieve parity of esteem for service learning with other academic courses, the priority must be to demonstrate the educational value of service learning as pedagogy. This form of learning needs to be clearly distinguished from volunteerism. Volunteerism is obviously commendable and worthy, reflecting the idealism of youth. It may or may not have some educational value but that is not the central purpose. The purpose is to “do good.” Service-learning may or may not “do good.” It should at least, as Humphrey Tonkin argues, “not do damage.”⁵ The purpose is essentially educational. If that is a somewhat cynical posture, it reflects the need to move the emphasis from “service” to “learning,” and to move away from the rhetoric of social improvement.

The crucial mechanism that will enable this fundamental shift is the development of two kinds of appropriate curriculum: the first is a content-based course that creates an intellectual context in the given area; the second is an introduction to basic ethnography so that students may acquire some essential tools that will enable them to observe intelligently the environment with which they engage.

In contrast, the key concept in volunteerism is the notion of positive contribution to social good: arguably posited in the province of the Church rather than the university. Participation is a matter of free choice. No academic credit is given and the university probably has no crucial function in regulation. Where the university has a facilitation role, this is likely to be located in student life, the chaplaincy, or, sometimes, in a careers or community service office. The administration of volunteerism is analogous to that of a dating agency: introductions are made and the participants then get on with it. Outcomes may be uncertain and properly may be left unmonitored.

Clearly, no member of a civil society can object to voluntary “service”: time freely given to support projects aimed at achieving social good. That is what countless charities and not-for-profit agencies exist to do; but what is that to

do with universities? The objectives of universities are complex and, sometimes controversial, as discussions of the commodification of higher education make clear. While there is a broad consensus that learning and teaching are core activities, other questions remain. Are universities big businesses or are they agencies for social good? Can they be both? Volunteerism raises the question of what distinguishes the function of a university from the function of a social agency. Such an enquiry cuts to the heart of a dilemma. There can be no objection to doing good things but, if that is the priority, it may not properly belong within the academic environment except as a peripheral social or religious activity in which students may be encouraged to participate as part of their “training” for citizenship. To establish the academic value of service learning we must be able to demonstrate that a given topic is best studied through some form of service or, at least, that service is a serious enhancement to teaching and learning.

It is self-evident, for example, that a study of community theater is greatly enhanced through an engagement with such a theater. It is equally true that a marketing major may gain considerable insight, while perhaps making a significant contribution, through a period of meaningful commitment to a small charity.

The implication is that service-learning needs to be constructed in terms that enhance the core academic function of the university. It needs to be demonstrably serious, intellectually challenging and, crucially, have clear integration into the curriculum. Volunteerism, however valuable and worthy, may be located within any number of agencies where it may be a core activity. While there can be no objection to locating volunteer activities within university life, these activities should properly remain peripheral to core functions. In contrast, as John Annette has argued, service-learning:

involves reflective learning activities which enable a student to develop key skills and capabilities, and a greater sense of civic awareness and active citizenship. The experience should be of sufficient length to enable students to benefit fully from it, and they must be challenged to be reflective and to link their learning to their college curriculum.⁶

In short, the key concept in service-learning ought to be that it is an academic activity. As such it should be credit-bearing, located in a department, managed by a professor, and subject to the same academic demands (including evaluation) of any other course. It should go through the usual processes of approval that are carried out on a given campus and be subject to the same rigorous review of curriculum and quality.

In striving for academic credibility for service learning, there are some key questions:

- What do we want students to learn?
- What do students want and need to learn?
- How can these learning objectives be realized?
- Can experience through service-learning enhance the course, improve learning, and add academic value?

If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then service-learning has real credibility and emerges as a teaching and learning tool that is more effective and efficient than learning that remains only in the classroom. In other words, it enacts the Chinese proverb: “To know and not to do is to not yet know.”

The status of service-learning is not only governed by course content. It is also, as I have suggested, a question of institutional location. As Monica Pagano argues, it “is still being placed at the margin of higher education curriculum.”⁷ That is partly because of a frequently fuzzy indistinctiveness about the differences between service-learning and volunteerism; however, it is also a question of location within the structure of an institution. Service-learning has to be located within academic departments as a learning methodology. In that respect, it is not substantially different from the other tools that enhance learning: reading lists, research papers, tutorials, seminars, lectures etc. These are mechanisms through which, in combination, we seek better to educate our students. It would be patently absurd to separate tutorials or seminars, for example, from academic departments and to locate the theory and practice of small group teaching in the chaplaincy or careers office. If service-learning is to be seen as a serious mode of inquiry it cannot reasonably be separated and located outside of the academic context.

Service-learning which physically resides in a specialized unit on campus is, probably, not going to be taken seriously within the wider academic community in so far as the location is a metaphor for its distant relationship to the academic departments. In any case, service-learning activities have directly to relate to issues of curriculum development and pedagogy and that relationship has to be intimate and dynamic.

There is also a need for the institution to demonstrate a commitment through, for example, faculty training. Above all, the institution needs to create conditions that allow faculty to develop this pedagogical approach. The process is time consuming and, as with any new pedagogy, faculty need to have space in which to develop a better understanding of theory and practice. This

will involve investment in terms of course release time, training opportunities and so on. The value of work in this area also needs to be recognized when it comes to questions of tenure review. The emphatic link between publishing and tenure may need to be nuanced and modified. Like any other educational activity, service-learning requires significant resource investment. Unless it takes itself seriously and is considered to be serious in the wider community, the necessary resources will not be invested and the enterprise will be consigned to the underfunded backwaters of the academic environment as a harmless but hardly crucial pastime indulged in only by the committed few.

Defining Learning Objectives

To create parity of esteem within academia, service learning programs need to be constructed in concrete and credible terms. It follows that the learning objectives have to be defined as precisely as any other aspect of a course of study and this can be done in two ways: through establishing both discipline-specific objectives and generalized learning objectives.

Discipline-specific objectives

These objectives will usually be described in terms of demonstrating (rather than just talking about) the relationship between theory and practice in a specific area. For example, at the Foundation for International Education (FIE) in London, service-learning has three closely integrated and required elements. The first is a three-credit classroom-based study of U.K.-U.S. comparative social welfare: history and practice. At the core of the historical material is a comparison of the British Welfare State with Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's "Great Society." A review of contemporary practices (contrasting notions of philanthropy; diverse models of funding and government intervention, for example) completes the course which intends to create an intellectual context for the student on their placement. Learning objectives are defined in terms of acquiring knowledge of comparative U.S.-U.K. social history; understanding the role of public and private sector agencies; exploring issues in social policy; financing and managing community-based projects; social and political structures in another national context.

The other curricular element is a set of seminars aimed at, among other things, giving students the basic tools through which they can move from observation to analysis. In essence, students are taught elementary ethnography and, thus, take on the role of participant-observer in a form of "action research." Observation, recognition and analysis of cultural, social and political

difference are at the heart of this enterprise. The seminars also must be scheduled during the placement so that students have a discreet and reflexive space where questions, observation and problems can be examined by both the academic leader and the peer group of participants.

The third element is student placement within a community. The student is matched as well as possible to an organization where their skills will be most appropriately employed. The requirements are:

- 1) The relationship between FIE and the organization is sustainable. Community organizations may rely on a continued supply of well-motivated and qualified participants.
- 2) The student has the potential to be an active learner and the placement organization is willing to create an environment wherein the student can achieve that goal.
- 3) The student has to be committed to making as significant a contribution as possible within their abilities.

Through the combination of placement and coursework requirements, students are obliged to read critically, write effectively, speak clearly, listen carefully and act responsibly. These are clearly transferable skills. The whole creates integrated learning that is potentially transformative.

We know that students will gain in other ways: they will mature; they will learn that not everything that is taken as true in the U.S. is necessarily seen so in other cultures; they will confront their own stereotypes and see other realities in a less simplistic manner and so on. These outcomes are, however significant they may be to international educators, peripheral to the necessary discourse which places service-learning within a specific and credible academic context. The general principle is that the precise definition of learning objectives should be governed by the subject matter that is the focus of the course of study.

The arguments for the value of service-learning are frequently made in non-academic terms enforcing the sense in traditional academia that, while this is a “good thing,” it may be of peripheral interest. As a consequence, the emphasis on service (rather than learning) and on cross-cultural understanding in an international context undermines the credibility of the activity. That soft-centred rationale is on its own, simply, not good enough if the broader academic community is to be convinced of the essential seriousness of the endeavour.

General learning objectives

In order to enhance the status of service learning, specific objectives related to a given course need to be combined with a definition of general learning outcomes and anticipated transferable skills. In very broad terms students are taught social responsibility and intercultural sensitivity but it is possible to identify other learning objectives. At least some of the following outcomes are identifiable:

- An enhanced understanding of how social, political or economic systems function gained through participation and observation,
- An insight into the processes of negotiation and conflict resolution,
- Problem analysis (and perhaps problem solving),
- Ethnographic (action research) methodology,
- The ability to work in a team and the need to compromise personal preferences so as better to serve the group.
- Integrated communication skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing,
- Empowering students to take control of their own learning,
- Civic skills, such as learning about the realities of power and privilege, and social empathy.

As John Annette argues⁸, service-learning can be a form of political training in civic engagement and citizenship (however we may define those elusive concepts).

Conclusions:

Service Learning and Study Abroad

Dangers and Pitfalls

The idealistic tendency

The benefits of international education in general are traditionally, usually, described in relatively broad and inexact terms: global competence, cross-cultural communication, enhancing mutual understanding, personal growth etc. etc. Those of us committed to international education subscribe heartily to these notions and are driven by the mission inherent in our activities. We are convinced that education abroad, for the most part and to some degree, is a crucial and critical activity in the world where the interdependence of nations (for good and ill) is part of current global reality. Within the field of education abroad we can share these ideals in a relatively untroubled manner but in the

wider academic community we need to change the terms of the debate and go from humanitarian generalisation to specificity.

There is a challenge to go beyond definitions that are based on vaguely humanitarian and vaguely idealistic concepts. If we add imprecise notions of service to that liberal mix, the melange becomes softer yet and threatens to sag beneath the weight of starry-eyed idealism. Unless service-learning outcomes are monitored, made explicit and concrete, the whole enterprise will sink in a sea of liberal hogwash. This is a challenge for service-learning in general and a particular challenge for the concept in study abroad programming.

There is the related issue of service-learning as pedagogy. If it is true that learning is enhanced through these mechanisms, there is no reason to suppose that they can only be applied to the study of poverty. The problem with concentrating service-learning only in areas of social deprivation is that it further deepens the suspicion that the activity is inextricably constructed as a means of engagement with those who are less well-off, at home or abroad. It deepens the suspicion that there is in practice little difference between these activities and volunteerism. If the pedagogy is to have academic credibility, it must be seen as a tool that is appropriate to a broad range of areas of investigation. The study of theater is an obvious area where students could gain practical and theoretical insights, for example, into the financing of fringe or “off Broadway” productions through participation in community theater groups. A journalism major working for a time in a local newspaper would, also, be engaged in a combination of community contribution and learning that is at the heart of the enterprise. It is also perfectly possible to envisage a marketing course that integrates service-learning into its structure by having students contribute to the marketing strategies of charities and NGOs, or a finance course where students help these same organizations review their financial management practices, create business plans, development strategies and so on.

It might be argued that this approach blurs the distinction between service-learning and internships but that may be, in practice, no bad thing. The development of the internship as an academic activity has gone further, with emphases on evaluation and outcomes, than has the theory and practice of service-learning. At one level, the distinction is more a matter of emphasis and focus than substance. Both demonstrate the value of experiential education in that they require students to become active participants in the world’s messy realities. The essential difference lies in the nature of the reality with which the participant engages and in the subject matter upon which the student focuses.

The missionary tendency

Given notions of manifest destiny in the U.S.A and the (deeply suspect) notion that the U.S.A is the repository of the democratic ideal, there is the potential for unwelcome missionary-style intrusion. The wholly creditable desire of youth to contribute to social development abroad can manifest itself as the wide-eyed enthusiasm of the missionary determined to bring light to the lives of poor foreigners denied the benefits of being an American. Service-learning that is constructed as a sort of mini Peace Corps enterprise does no service, I believe, to the field as a whole.

Students and their teachers have to construct the experience as a partnership wherein students are learners in the community not necessarily contributors to it (though contributions may well be made). This may well seem an obvious point but the declared motivation of students and the rhetoric of faculty champions frequently suggests otherwise. This is not to deny that there is (or ought to be) a mutuality of benefit between the learner and the community but the field needs to be wary of its own rhetoric and conscious of the underlying motivations that may drive students to participate. As the popularity of service-learning grows, this danger will probably grow and may undermine the necessary precondition for true learning.

The Benefits

While there are good reasons to approach that increased popularity with caution, there are also good educational reasons to be proactive champions of these activities. Service-learning abroad contains enormous potential to create a holistic and integrated academic program for participants wherein there is direct correlation between what is experienced through participation and what is learned theoretically: to embody John Dewey's assertion that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education."⁹ There is considerable potential for added value in service-learning and this would apply equally in an international context.

In all contexts (domestic or international) service-learning has another positive impact. It serves to enhance the sometimes problematic relationship between gown (academia) and town (the world outside). The barrier between the student and the community may be artificial but it is real in some contexts. One benefit of service-learning is to bring the student, the university, and the wider community closer together in a context that is both serious and mutually beneficial. It inevitably enhances understanding and communication so that the ivory tower may not be seen as quite such a distant and unapproachable edifice.

When we construct credible service-learning programs in an international context, there are some additional added-value benefits.

Community engagement

Education abroad is, by its very nature, experiential: it locates educational benefit in learning processes beyond the walls of the classroom. Implicitly or explicitly, education abroad contains the assumption that crossing national borders creates potential for enhanced learning. At least part of any education abroad curriculum is the subject of “abroad” itself.

If we add service-learning to study abroad, we empower students to cross more than international frontiers: they cross the border between the classroom walls and the national culture wherein that classroom is located. As an engagement model, service-learning is a clear tool for giving students access to wider learning environments than those of the classroom. After all, to parody Gertrude Stein, a classroom is a classroom is a classroom, be it located in Miami, Beijing, London or Erewhon.

Perhaps the most cogent summary of these benefits was made by Howard Berry:

students go beyond simplistic notions of culture to encounter multidimensional levels of society and the human condition. When linked to intentional and coherent learning, the value of the experience becomes exponential. The service is informed by learning, and the learning acquires depth far beyond the classroom.¹⁰

Going beyond the first person

We also aspire to have our students cross metaphorical borders between the self and the “other.” Clearly, service-learning is a mode of participation that, when balanced with guided observation, should give students a capacity to go beyond the first person and develop analytical skills. In all educational enterprises we want students to move from a purely personal view of the “other” culture to an analytical perspective achieved through a combination of critical empathy, commitment, and guided reflection. The model of participant-observation serves these objectives well, given that it requires a balance between engagement and separation through the creation of discreet intellectual space.

A recurrent problem in study abroad is that students tend to construct their experiences only in terms of their first-person perceptions: “I learned a lot. I widened my horizons. I grew as a person etc. etc.” Those are not bad

outcomes in themselves but they are very limited. This also tends to be encouraged by the “journal” approach to writing which invites a “dear diary” personal and confessional mode. As educators, we want students to reflect not only on the self but on the space outside of the self. All of us see the world through our own eyes. We have no other eyes with which to see. The process of education is to try and create other lenses through which students can see into the space beyond the self — beyond the “I.”

Service-learning can be a highly significant mechanism that can enable students to cross the difficult border between self and the world beyond. It empowers students to penetrate the other; it gives them analytical tools to help them to understand that new place, and it may, consequently, create the social empathy that will truly be transformative. In short, it may take students from a preoccupation with their national “I” to a sense of being part of an international “we.”

In order to make such a significant contribution, service-learning has to be located within the context of core academic activity. It has to achieve parity of esteem and to be recognized as a valid pedagogy within higher education. The context of the debate has to be widened so that practitioners and theorists of service-learning go beyond talking to themselves and address their mainstream colleagues within and beyond the academy. Otherwise, respect, institutional commitment, and, above all, funding is unlikely to follow. In short, the field has to demonstrate that this is, after all, serious stuff.

Notes

¹Edward Zlotkowski, “Mapping New Terrain; Service-Learning Across the Disciplines”, *Change*, January–February 2001, pp. 24–33

²A succinct summary can be found in a publication of The National Society for Experiential Education: *The Role of Service Learning in Educational Reform*, Robert Bhaerman, Karin Cordell and Barbara Gomez (Simon and Schuster, Needham Heights, 1998), pp. 4–6.

³Humphrey Tonkin and Diego Quiroga, “A Qualitative Approach to the Assessment of International Service-Learning,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, X: Fall 2004, p.132.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 132

⁵In a plenary presentation at the Council on International Educational Exchange conference, Miami November 16, 2005.

⁶John Annette, “Service Learning in an International Context,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Winter 2002, p. 83.

⁷“International Service-Learning: Definition, Theoretical Framework and Practice,” presentation at the Council on International Educational Exchange conference, Miami, November 17, 2005.

⁸John Annette, ‘Where’s the Citizenship in Service Learning: UK/USA’, Annual Conference of The National Society for Experiential Education, October 30th, 2005, Philadelphia. Among the outcomes offered by service-learning he cites “Citizenship/Civic Engagement and/or spirituality, social justice, leadership development, multicultural education, practical application of academic course content, or enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.”

⁹John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York: Collier Macmillan, , 1938), pp. 19–20.

¹⁰Howard A. Berry “The Global Voices: Is US Higher Education Listening?” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Winter 2002, p. 233.