

Civic Engagement and Service Learning:
Theoretical Framework and Practical Application

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Civic engagement rooted in service learning began at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in 1988 after then-President Edward Bloustein, in his commencement address, called for citizen education and community service as a graduate requirement for all students in the State of New Jersey (Barber, 1991). Although this vision was never fully enacted, a Committee on Education for Civic Leadership chaired by Professor Benjamin Barber developed a program to address the crucial need for civic education through experiential learning. This program evolved into the Rutgers CASE (Citizenship and Service Education) program which is currently directed by Professor Michael Shafer.

The Rutgers CASE program is one of the largest, most international service-learning programs in the U.S. and was recognized by President Bill Clinton in 1993 as a national model of how universities can make service learning central to the undergraduate curriculum. CASE is an essential component of Rutgers' service mission to the citizens of the State of New Jersey.

CASE courses combine academically rigorous three-credit classroom courses with one-credit service-learning placements related to the subject matter of the course. CASE courses are taught across the curriculum and require students to do 40 hours of

community service per semester. Students work with Community Partners including elementary, middle, and high schools, special education facilities, urban after-school programs, museums, hospitals, soup kitchens, shelters for the homeless and victims of domestic violence, legal clinics, city and county agencies, libraries, church service centers, environmental groups, and cultural organizations. Community groups are specifically called “Community Partners” because, as Cotton & Stanton (1990) note, successful service-learning programs bridge the gap between the university and community by “cultivating a spirit of reciprocity, interdependence, and collaboration. When carefully considered, expressed, negotiated, and agreed upon, the needs and resources of each organization become complementary and mutually enhancing” (p. 101). The relationship between CASE staff, university faculty, undergraduate students, and community organizations is truly a partnership.

CASE courses challenge students to confront the complex, ambiguous human realities that lie behind the often abstract materials they are studying in the classroom and, thus, help students forge a link between service and learning by connecting the classroom to the world beyond its walls. Service learning conceptualized this way provides a moral education that encourages individual growth as well as community involvement through a methodology that combines theoretical knowledge with guided reflection. As Schultz (1990) notes: “Issues of socioeconomic power and control that may be invisible in the classroom become particularly important when it comes to planning strategy for community action” (p. 97). Thus, this type of teaching relies on an active learning model that is based on the principles that (1) students learn and retain material better if they are provided with opportunities to practice what they are learning,

and (2) students cannot learn the critical social skills and self-confidence they need to flourish in our increasingly complex world only in the classroom but need to learn these skills through experience.

On a practical level, service learning is an instructional methodology in which faculty and students work to develop meaningful linkages between material presented in the classroom and service to the community. Service learning pedagogy connects the student and the community and demonstrates to students how they can help meet the needs of their communities in specific and direct ways while enhancing their own theoretical learning as well as preparation for future jobs.

In addition to the direct educational mission of facilitating students' learning of theoretical materials in a practical context, service learning courses provide an educational experience that can address critical concerns in contemporary society. There has been increasing concern about the erosion of our sense of citizenship resulting, in part, from the demise of our sense of community (Astin, 1996). As Schultz (1990) argues:

Our communities and our world can no longer afford a moral education that encourages the isolation of reflection on values from lived reality. As a growing population competes for the planet's finite resources, unprecedented cooperation and involvement in community concerns will become even more important than they are now. Service in the community, combined with carefully designed study and reflection can begin to prepare students for the complex and often pain-filled world they will enter on graduation. (p. 99).

Thus, this type of educational experience can help repair the failure of our educational institutions by helping students develop the technical and social skills necessary to succeed economically and to function effectively as citizens in contemporary society.

Delve, Mintz & Stewart (1990) encourage educators to assist students to become involved in their communities in order to develop a better understanding of the needs and realities of the world around them. Breaking down the barriers to mutual isolation can help students take their places in a globally interdependent world. As these authors note, however, it is not enough to merely *require* students to do community service, it is imperative that the instructor *integrate* these experiences into classroom discussion. They label this process “The Service Learning Model” and consider service learning to be an intervention in student development.

The Service Learning Model (Delve, Mintz & Stewart, 1990) consists of five phases that comprise a student’s service learning experience: exploration, clarification, realization, activation, and internalization. *Exploration* occurs at the beginning of a service-learning activity in which the student is eager to explore new opportunities, wants to “help other people,” but does not feel any particular connection with the community group. *Clarification* occurs as students begin to explore opportunities presented to them and clarify what is important to them. *Realization* occurs when students begin to see how their experiences “fit together.” As Delve, Mintz and Stewart note: “Usually through a profound transforming experience, the student is able to grasp a larger truth for himself or herself; as a result, students become focused on a particular population or issue and more confident in their beliefs. At this phase, the concept of reciprocal learning becomes clearer to the student” (p. 15). Students begin to address larger societal issues during the *activation* phase and may become advocates for members of their community groups. Students begin to realize that they are learning more from their service than they are giving. In the *internalization* phase, students who fully integrate their service-learning

experiences into their lives begin to make decisions based on the values they have developed from their experiences. While not all students reach this phase, many do begin to make individual choices based on values they have learned from the community in which they have participated.

Artz (2001) cogently argues that it is not enough to have students just *become aware* of a social injustice through their community participation. It is essential for them to consider the “fundamental systemic practices and relations that give rise to the injustice they experienced at the interpersonal level” (p. 240). In this way, service learning must lead to sustained social critique or action. Service learning, therefore, becomes a transformative experience for both the student and for the community organization that benefits from the student’s efforts.

Given this orientation to service learning, educators must ask themselves how they can provide opportunities for students to act as socially responsible citizens and how the resources of the university (faculty, students, knowledge, budget) can be used to serve the community (Rubin,1990). By successfully answering these questions and, thus, developing an ethic of contribution in their students, faculty can have a profound effect on students’ future lives and on the communities in which they live and work.

References

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