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Review of Robert Kronick's Experiencing Service-Learning

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Robert F. Kronick, Robert B. Cunningham, and Michele Gourley.
Experiencing Service-Learning. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2011. x,
173 p. ISBN 9781572337589. \$19.

One of the newest additions to the growing body of literature on service-learning, *Experiencing Service-Learning* seeks to define and illustrate this action-based pedagogy via the experiences of students and faculty from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. These experiences occur primarily in Knoxville within programs for at-risk and low-income elementary school children but also within a summer medical internship in Honduras. Disciplines directly represented in the chapters are counseling, medicine, and public administration, though the concepts covered are certainly transferable to other university disciplines.

The authors successfully explore the guiding principles of service-learning, covering the key elements of sensing, reflecting, and acting. That is, service-learning succeeds when students have concrete, observable experiences (sensing); create meaning from that sensed information (reflecting); and behave in ways that impact others positively (acting). Reflection, defined as “integrating disparate sensed facts and general knowledge, and from this integration strengthening one’s beliefs or creating a new understanding about those facts and knowledge” (p. 28), receives the most emphasis throughout *Experiencing Service-Learning*.

In fact, Chapter 3, “Service-Learning in an Inner-City Elementary School,” consists almost entirely of students’ narrative and reflective reports on their experiences mentoring at-risk students at a nearby elementary school, and Chapter 4, “Service-Learners Reflect,” as the title implies, uses students’ written reflections to illustrate key concepts such as the importance of building a relationship with one’s mentee, or recognizing the impact of an elementary student’s home life on his or her success—or lack of success—in school. This wealth of examples and personal testimony is the book’s greatest strength. Through the engaging stories and reflections that pervade most chapters, readers gain a strong sense of the many benefits to be gained through service-learning—including cultural insight, critical thinking, troubleshooting skills, communication expertise, and the potential for transformational change within university students, the recipients of their service, and even the

public and social institutions themselves.

Lest readers be led to assume that all is rosy within service-learning pedagogy, the book closes with a chapter on “Implementation Challenges.” As the authors note, “Service-learning is not for faculty seeking to make the teaching task easier” (p. 146). This chapter explores such challenges as the time commitment (for professors and students alike), the logistics of placing students in the community, and the very real possibility of failure because of the many uncontrollable factors involved (e.g., community members who do not return emails, or students who lack the initiative to work in unstructured environments). Ultimately, though, the chapter concludes with many reasons for incorporating service-learning despite the challenges—reasons as diverse as giving students a leg-up on their future careers, or providing a venue for engaged faculty research. Given the typically heavy teaching loads at state comprehensive universities, any chance to merge teaching with research has merit.

One problem with the book, however, is its confusing sense of audience. In the preface, the authors acknowledge that “*Experiencing Service-Learning* is a book primarily for undergraduate students about to encounter service-learning and for professors wishing to understand service-learning from the perspective of their students” (ix). The discrepancy lies in the words “from the perspective of their students,” for much of the book appears to be written directly to the professors themselves. Chapter 7, for example, includes a bulleted list speaking directly to professors, exhorting them at one point to “figure out a way to create student enthusiasm for the project” (p. 144). One might also expect a text written “primarily for undergraduate students about to encounter service-learning” to address those students directly, with a fair amount of second-person “you.” Instead, “you” is never used, and the text often reads more like a book for professors wanting to learn more about service-learning—evident from its use of the third person (“they” with “service-learning students” as the referent [p. 25]) and its use of professorial language (“One probes the constraints and opportunities present in the environment” [p. 26]).

Another concern is the heavy focus on service-learning programs connected to urban elementary schools. Nearly every example in *Experiencing Service-Learning* pertains to programs in such schools. The only notable exception is Chapter 5, “Serving and Learning in Tegucigalpa,” where one of the authors recounts her experience serving in a medical clinic in Honduras. A reader hoping to encounter a variety of possible service-learning venues (senior centers, libraries, zoos, soup kitchens) and a variety of populations (preschoolers, teens, adults, senior citizens, cancer patients, rural farmers) will be disappointed.

That being said, *Experiencing Service-Learning* would certainly be a

useful book for faculty members planning a service-learning project with an area elementary school, and for their university students who would be participating in such a program. Moreover, despite the book's split personality—textbook for students and scholarly text for professors—it does immerse readers engagingly in the principles and possibilities inherent in service-learning. A quick, accessible read, *Experiencing Service-Learning* is yet another useful resource for anyone wanting to learn more about service-learning.

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