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Combining Service and Learning On Campus and in the Community

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BY BARRY CHECKOWAY

Student workshops are valuable resources for combining service and learning. The challenge, Mr. Checkoway points out, is to recognize their limitations, integrate them with other courses in the curriculum, and find ways to improve their quality.

Illustration by A. J. Garces

STUDENT workshops are a form of community service learning in which students develop knowledge and learn lessons by serving the community. Through them, students may become participants in housing reform, health care, environmental change, neighborhood revitalization, and other types of service. The workshops may involve organizing for social action, planning programs at the local level, or developing new community-based services. Like other forms of service learning, they enable students to serve the community, reflect on their experiences, and learn lessons or derive principles for the future.[1]

Student workshops can complement coursework in the academic disciplines and provide field training for public health, social work, urban planning, and other professions. Studies show that service learning can develop substantive knowledge and practical skills and contribute to lifelong social responsibility and civic values.[2]

Student workshops can also contribute to community problem solving and program planning. They can help people to assess needs, set priorities, formulate plans, implement programs, and create change. They can provide technical assistance that makes an important difference at the community level, especially in traditionally underserved areas.[3]

In this article I describe three student workshops for community service learning. They include a community planning workshop in an area of rural farmlands and small cities, a neighborhood revitalization workshop in a low-income area of a large industrial city, and a voter participation workshop that promoted the participation of traditional nonvoters.

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Community Planning Workshop

This workshop took place in east central Illinois, midway between Chicago and St. Louis, an area of agricultural farmland and several small and medium-sized cities.

The focus of the workshop was Champaign-Urbana, twin cities that are home to roughly 100,000 persons and the University of Illinois.[4]

The academic base for the project was the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois. Faculty members in urban planning rely heavily on field courses — studios, laboratories, or workshops — to provide opportunities for students to make direct contributions to clients while gaining experience and skill. Since workshops are a particularly intensive educational experience, students receive twice as much credit for them as for a typical class.

The community planning workshop began with my search for students who were committed to community planning. I sought students who wanted to collaborate with community organizations, and I required a written statement for screening purposes. I did not assume that acceptance into an undergraduate or graduate program was a guarantee that students were ready for this type of experience. Moreover, I believe that a commitment to work with a community client obligates the instructor to find the best available students.

Before the semester began, students participated in a weekend retreat. The weekend provided an opportunity to discuss the content and objectives of the workshop and to develop guidelines and operating procedures. An important part of the weekend was the holding of "community public hearings" to which local leaders were invited and asked to identify areas of need in which we might make a contribution. Planners, organizers, elected officials, and agency administrators identified more than 120 possibilities.

Students formed teams around two projects, for which they formulated proposals and learning contracts for the semester. Both teams agreed to meet on Tuesdays to discuss operational tasks and on Thursdays to reflect on their experiential learning. Tuesday "staff" meetings included reports of progress and discussion of tasks for completion in the coming week. Students sought feedback on their work and often asked questions for which the group could sometimes offer no answers. Thursday "reflection" sessions aimed to discuss relevant readings, relate theory to practice, and analyze the forces affecting the community. I facilitated most of these sessions, and some students found them a distraction from the real "work."

The "urban development team" tried to determine whether local financial institutions were "redlining" or refusing to grant mortgage loans in older central neighborhoods in favor of newer outlying areas. Although the team members were unable to document redlining with the available data, they concluded that redlining might be taking place and that local government should conduct hearings on lending practices, investigate the effects of newer development on older areas, and consider ways to provide new housing in the community.

The students prepared a report for presentation to the city council. They were also asked to formulate an anti-redlining ordinance for the community. They won widespread recognition from the local media and prepared an article for a statewide publication.

On behalf of a community organization that wanted local developers to pay for the public services required by private development, the students on the urban development team also came up with a plan for a "community impact fee." They prepared a memorandum on municipal regulation of subdivisions, reported on the actual costs of municipal services generated by new development, and recommended alternative approaches to growth management.

The "health planning team" studied public involvement in the subarea advisory council of the East Central Illinois Health Systems Agency, which was formed "to provide the maximum potential involvement of the public." Among the findings were that 24 of the 30 council members were from the census tract with the highest income and that no low-income, minority, or rural area was actively represented. Council members' attendance at meetings was found to be so poor that one-half of them should have been terminated according to the council's own bylaws. The study concluded that there were inconsistencies between federal aims and local practices.

The students presented a report on their findings to the regional planning commissioners and to state and federal officials. They called a meeting of local consumers contacted during the study, and they formed the Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC) to promote community participation in health planning.

Local consumers conducted community forums, leadership training workshops, and an unprecedented campaign to take control of the advisory council. They recruited a large number of council members, enlisted candidates to run for positions, and finally won a majority of seats. In response, local medical providers struck back, mobilized massive political resources, and elected their own slate to the local council.

Local consumers developed a strong community-based organization. They formed task forces to increase the access of low-income people, investigated the compliance of local hospitals, established a hotline for consumer complaints, and published the area's first medical directory. Fifteen years later the consumer organization is highly influential and still directed by a community organizer who got his start as a student in the workshop.

Neighborhood Development Workshop

This workshop took place in the South Austin neighborhood of Chicago. In one semester, 10 graduate and undergraduate students provided technical assistance and produced a report that helped a neighborhood organization to plan a housing project on a single demonstration block. The academic base for the workshop was once again the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois.[5]

The neighborhood development workshop began when I contacted the Metropolitan Area Housing Alliance (MAHA) for help in identifying a potential client. The MAHA staff recommended the South Austin Realty Association (SARA), an association of block clubs and civic groups working to maintain and improve the housing stock in the neighborhood. In an exploratory meeting, SARA leaders described the need for a study of the neighborhood as a potential reinvestment location. They also wanted proposals for housing alternatives for a single selected block. I described the workshop concept, assured them that the students would be responsive to neighborhood needs, and agreed to undertake the project.

The workshop was advertised at the university, and 10 graduate and undergraduate students were chosen on the basis of written statements and interviews inquiring into their intentions and interests. Students wanted to participate in a nonhier-

archical group process, or to be involved in the inner workings of a neighborhood organization, or to put their social ideals into action by working with a community group.

Before the semester began, an orientation weekend was conducted to discuss the content and process of the workshop. The weekend was followed by a neighborhood tour and a meeting in which local leaders described their expectations. Subsequent discussion was open-ended, beginning with the experience and research needs of the client but allowing room for negotiation and modification over time.

Students began meeting to develop a research strategy. Various group exercises helped clarify substantive and procedural issues. The students drafted a preliminary outline for review by neighborhood leaders, formed teams around major research areas, and selected assignments and a timetable for completion. We met twice weekly in three-hour sessions to report progress and to raise questions. At these meetings we exchanged information and learned from and supported one another. The meetings were also opportunities to discuss readings and consult with guest experts on housing and urban development. These sessions typically began with a presentation by a student or guest and then proceeded with a discussion on its implications for the neighborhood.

SARA's staff director responded to early drafts and invited reactions from community leaders, thus increasing the possibility that the work would respond to neighborhood needs. Neighborhood leaders held "office hours" when they were available for telephone consultation. Information from research was subjected to tests of reality to judge its relevance.

Students traveled to the neighborhood to gather firsthand information, to seek assistance from resource persons, and to conduct special studies in the area. Some students stayed overnight in a neighborhood church rectory during a period of intense work, which was an important experience for those who had never stayed overnight in the city before.

Completing the project proved more difficult than originally expected. Harsh winter weather caused cancellation of a few trips to the neighborhood. Twice students traveled to the neighborhood to meet with neighborhood leaders who did not appear. Student editors responsible for the first full draft of the project report found gaps in research and redundancies in writing; their requests for revisions met with some reluctance because of the increasing pressures of a semester that was drawing to a close. Although morale declined during this period, the students finally completed the report and presented the information to neighborhood leaders.

The report concluded that the neighborhood was an excellent location for revitalization and recommended that housing rehabilitation be the approach chosen for the "demonstration" block. Soon afterward, neighborhood leaders used the report to develop plans for a project on the block. They then used these plans in a proposal that led to a major contract from the federal government.

SARA's staff director wrote a long letter to the students citing the "superb job" they had done and calling for continuing neighborhood/university collaboration. He sent the report to federal officials who circulated it nationwide as a model of collaboration.

The students wrote short papers and completed questionnaires evaluating the workshop as an educational experience. Most felt that the course objectives had been accomplished. Some felt that the experience had broadened their knowledge of neighborhood and community development issues, that they had acquired new practical skills and career credentials, or that they had learned more than in the classroom. The students also evaluated (and graded) other workshop members, after which I reported their average aggregate grades (without change) to the university.

Voter Participation Workshop

Voting is the most widespread form of political participation in America, but some groups vote less than others and even struggle to exercise their rights. Indeed, those with the greatest stake in public decisions — e.g., low-income people and members of minority groups — do not participate actively or see themselves as a group that can create change.[6]

With encouragement from the dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, I developed a special one-semester workshop on voter participation. The school already had a history of preparing students to work for social change at the community level by involving them in individual field placements.

Faculty members and students formed a committee to promote voter participation by setting up nonpartisan registration centers in social agencies where people seek services and in communities where they live. Committee members asked their faculty colleagues to donate funds and, within one week, raised more than $500 for the project.

Six graduate students enrolled in the special workshop. Our initial meetings enabled us to get acquainted, discuss expectations, and develop guidelines for the semester. We agreed to meet weekly, form teams for major activities, and develop individual and group learning contracts. Each contract included specific tasks and a timetable for completion.

The weekly meetings provided opportunities to report progress and build support for implementation. We read books and articles, shared responsibility for leading discussions, and reflected on our experiences. I served as a facilitator, resource person, liaison between the university and the community, and recorder of grades at the end of the semester.

Educational Administration: Associate Professor. Doctorate required; **superintendency** specialty. School administration, scholarly productivity, funded research required. Tenure track; beginning August 1996. Competitive salary. For information, contact: Educational Leadership, College of Education, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5183; e-mail: bunda@wmich.edu; Fax 616/387-2882. *Western Michigan University is an equal opportunity employer, has embarked on a vigorous affirmative action program, and encourages applications from qualified women and members of minority groups.*

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Workshop participants worked with more than 300 students, faculty members, agency staff members, and community volunteers in a variety of efforts.

• Through campus and community forums, students worked to increase awareness of voter participation; one forum featured a professor who described student efforts to register the disenfranchised nationwide.

• Students conducted a statewide voter participation training workshop. Special emphasis was placed on skills to establish voting services, identify deputization and registration procedures, and coordinate community campaigns. More than 200 people from community agencies, human service organizations, labor unions, and grassroots neighborhood groups attended the workshop.

• In an effort to register low-income people and traditional nonvoters, students selected target districts, arranged with election officials to deputize registrars, and recruited volunteers to register voters in waiting rooms, unemployment offices, housing projects, health clinics, neighborhood centers, and other places where local residents lived or congregated.

• Students sent press releases, public service announcements, and letters to newspapers, radio stations, and television stations. They distributed fliers, posters, and other educational materials in the waiting rooms and intake areas of various social agencies. They prepared leaflets and canvassed neighborhoods.

• Some students applied their community education efforts to particular groups. For example, three students sought to involve low-income women who might lose their benefits because of proposed cutbacks in federal food programs. They prepared posters and other educational materials for designated state officials and made several personal visits to talk directly with welfare recipients in Ypsilanti.

• Students worked to turn out the vote. As the election approached, they distributed additional materials to agencies and residences. On Election Eve, they organized telethons to remind registrants to vote, and they provided them with directions to polling places. On Election Day, they offered transportation to the polls.

• In Toledo, students targeted older and disabled people. They enlisted a private company to provide vans, office space, phone lines, and a dispatcher to take transportation requests; an equipment supply company to provide wheelchairs for use in vans; area businesses to give funds for newspaper advertisements; and other students to help drive people to the polls. They distributed fliers to senior citizen centers, nursing homes, and associations serving the blind and the disabled. They also placed newspaper advertisements and arranged for radio and television coverage.

In short, the workshop provided participants with new knowledge and practical skills. The students formulated plans, designed programs, and produced results under real time constraints. They served the community in ways that enhanced experiential learning.

Lessons of Service Learning

Student workshops give students a means to acquire substantive knowledge and practical skills. Unlike education in which the teacher lectures to passive students, workshops offer hands-on situations in which students actively participate in solving problems and planning programs.

Moreover, the knowledge provided by these workshops is not readily available in the classroom. Workshops teach such skills as participating in the planning process, analyzing the effects of investments by public agencies and private institutions on neighborhood change, working collaboratively in teams with student peers and community representatives, and writing reports for community clients under time constraints. Such "know-how" is different from the "know-about" information available in the classroom.

The workshops provide new life experiences for students. In their evaluations, students stressed the value of working with people from different backgrounds, receiving immediate and candid feedback, seeing the community through the eyes of its traditional nonparticipants, working with people who experience discrimination or oppression, addressing a problem whose solution is beyond reach, and organizing to have a real impact on the world. Many university students come from backgrounds that differ greatly from the communities in which they worked. Student evaluations of workshops described educational benefits in terms of attitude development, values clarification, and greater awareness of problems in society.

The constraints of the real-world environment of the workshops offered an unusual experience for many students. University students often operate in an environment in which deadlines can be easily met, necessary information can be readily found, and individual performance is rewarded. In contrast, these workshops operated in an environment with short deadlines, incomplete information, and shared responsibilities. The students were evaluated by their peers, held accountable by community clients, and tested by reality.

Student workshops provide experience for students interested in community careers. Following the workshops, some students took jobs as planners, organizers, policy analysts, and agency administrators. Others took up roles as community advocates and political activists. Some took positions in planning agencies, human service organizations, grassroots neighborhood groups, community development corporations, and private companies.

Student workshops can strengthen young people's lifelong commitment to social responsibility and civic values. In contrast to students who sit silently in classrooms and accept community problems as a given, workshop students raise questions about issues, identify root causes of problems, and formulate strategies for improvement. Some workshop students have experiences whose effects are lasting. My observation is that workshop students demonstrate higher levels of community participation in later life than do students who study community in the classroom.[7]

Some students express satisfaction with the knowledge and skills gained in workshops. "I enjoyed the opportunity to take a leadership role and to have the freedom and responsibility to come up with ideas and implement them," wrote one workshop veteran. "This was my first attempt at a major project like this, and I found that my abilities were adequate in several ways," wrote another.

Student workshops can also provide university faculty members with new experiences and broaden their perspectives. Many faculty members have narrow academic backgrounds and could benefit from interacting with people outside their small circle. Faculty members who facilitate workshops may more easily overcome disciplinary barriers, better relate theory to practice, and better apply their teaching skills to meet student needs. Research,

teaching, and community service are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, faculty members who favor experiential education and service learning would likely also score high in research publications and student evaluations of their teaching.

However, many faculty members are trained in positivist research methods that discourage community participation in defining problems, gathering data, and using results. Others have internalized "banking" approaches to education that view teachers as providers of knowledge to passive student recipients. It is unrealistic to expect researchers to develop knowledge or instructors to facilitate learning when they have not had these experiences themselves.

In addition, faculty members can see that institutional rewards for community service learning are few. They perceive that service learning does not weigh heavily in promotion, tenure, and salary decisions. They may even become conditioned to regard service learning as a waste of time, a distraction from real work, or a threat to their careers in the university. Those who do have a commitment to service learning may lack institutional resources for quality work.[8]

Student workshops can help universities provide public service to society. Although some university officials discuss service as central to the institutional mission, there are few incentives and rewards to support this type of work. University officials tend not to articulate a mission for service learning, they tend not to formulate a strategy for its development, and they tend not to recognize its benefits for faculty development and student learning.[9]

This is ironic, for student workshops are strategically situated to enable the university to relate research and teaching to community concerns while also serving its own core academic objectives. The workshops do not require bureaucratic structures or special staff. Instead, they allow the university to extend its traditional mission and institutional infrastructure to broader constituencies in ways that strengthen its efforts. Student workshops can help broaden the scholarly responsibilities of the university and so make knowledge more accessible to society.

Student workshops can also contribute to community development. The student workshops that I have described here mobilized people to vote in elections, to prepare plans for neighborhood revitalization, and to strengthen community representation in the health-planning process. The student participants joined existing efforts to strengthen the supply of affordable housing, to increase access to health care, and to enable disenfranchised people to exercise their rights. They collaborated with community organizations and involved people in the institutions and decisions that affected their lives.[10]

However, it should be emphasized that community service was not the sole purpose of these workshops. Community service learning is a process of learning by serving the community. Learning and service are dual aims, and the community is the means. It would be as mistaken to assess the workshops in terms of their potential for service alone as it would be to ignore the fact that there are other ways to learn about the community.[11]

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What is the appropriate pedagogy for community service learning? What are the best means for reflecting on experience and generalizing for future action? These workshops included library research and participant observation, reading and writing, individual and group assignments, problem solving and program planning, and many, many meetings to think together and reflect on experience.

What is the role of the student in community service learning? Is the student a research scientist, an information technician, a diagnostician, or an organizational consultant? Learning and service each has its own role expectations, and there is no single definition that fits all situations. Perhaps students must learn to rotate hats, a skill needed in later professional life.

What is the appropriate role of the instructor? In these workshops I was a facilitator and resource person rather than a teacher or a supervisor, and this role change caused concern for some students. Some students were uneasy when I joined teams as a peer, helped in routine tasks, or frankly expressed ignorance. Other students resisted when I assigned readings, expected them to integrate theory and practice, or asked them to apply academic research to community situations. And I was discomfited by some of the conflicts that arose from the need to strengthen service and facilitate learning, structure the situation and promote participation in the process, encourage self-evaluation and report grades to the university, invest time in teaching and be accountable for research products, and show competence and admit ignorance.

What is the appropriate role for the client? In these particular cases, community clients largely defined the work to be done and participated in the various phases of the workshop process. This helped ensure that the product would be responsive to community needs and that the students would adapt to the community agenda. The clients were thus given a central role in defining the problem, which differentiated the workshop from the traditional classroom and appealed to some students for whom "practice" had more authority than "theory."

Community service learning runs the risk of focusing too much attention on technical skills and practical experiences at the expense of broader policy analysis and critical thinking. In the field, education students tend to exercise skills that they already have, to spend time on the routine work of gathering data, to concentrate on producing an end product rather than on arriving at a comprehensive analysis or critical assessment of policy alternatives or a broader critique of society. Students may spend long hours discussing client needs and handling the immediate demands of a situation. While this may provide a useful apprenticeship and an experience that makes students more immediately employable, it may also fail to introduce the knowledge that comes through in-depth intellectual experiences that are unavailable on the job. The deeper dilemma is that the university seeks to develop knowledge and strengthen learning for the long haul, while the community wants the information and results as soon as possible.

Student workshops are not the single best approach to learning for practice in the community. Indeed, the workshops may be limited in the opportunities they provide for the development of some types of knowledge and thus should be integrated with complementary coursework. Nor are student workshops the single best source of assistance for the community. The efforts of public agencies, private corporations, and other community organizations may be more suitable for a given situation. Outside assistance from any source is no substitute for community organizations that can solve problems and plan programs for themselves.[12]

However, in the final analysis, student workshops are valuable resources for combining service and learning. The challenge is to recognize their limitations, integrate them with other courses in the curriculum, and find ways to improve their quality.

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