



University of Nebraska Omaha  
DigitalCommons@UNO

Higher Education

Service Learning

Fall 1994

# Linking Traditional and Service-Learning Courses: Outcome Evaluations Utilizing Two Pedagogically Distinct Models

Jerry Miller  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Miller, Jerry, "Linking Traditional and Service-Learning Courses: Outcome Evaluations Utilizing Two Pedagogically Distinct Models" (1994). *Higher Education*. Paper 51.  
<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/51>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



MN01766

Handwritten signature/initials

# Linking Traditional and Service-Learning Courses: Outcome Evaluations Utilizing Two Pedagogically Distinct Models

Jerry Miller  
University of Michigan

National Information Center  
for Service Learning  
1037 Oxford Ave., Suite #290  
St. Paul, MN 55103-0197  
1-800-368-CERVE

*University students in two advanced introductory classroom-based courses in psychology were offered the opportunity for simultaneous enrollment in a content-related section of a large community service learning course. Students selecting the option did not substantially differ demographically from students who did not select it. Participating students rated the experience as being significantly more valuable than did non-participating students. Students did not differ either in their reports concerning gains in personal development or general mastery of course concepts, or in final course grades received, but participants did report an enhanced ability to apply concepts outside of the classroom. Differences in reports between students in the two courses highlighted the complexity of community service learning experiences. Implications of the findings for community service learning experiences at the university level and future research are discussed.*

NSLC  
c/o ETR Associates  
4 Carbonero Way  
Scotts Valley, CA 95066

Community service learning has been practiced on college campuses for many years. While the service benefits to the community and personal benefits to students are anecdotally ubiquitous, the more traditional educational benefits to community service learning participants is much less well documented. In fact, given the longevity of the service-learning field, there are surprisingly few published studies attempting empirically to assess the impact of these experiences. At the present time, there is a growing recognition that for community service learning to continue to grow as a valued component of undergraduate education, learning impacts must be researched, and the field must begin more systematically to identify the specific factors most associated with positive outcomes. The current study represents an effort in this direction.

### Previous Research

The existing literature on the impact of community service learning experiences on university students is very limited. Much of the research that does exist is theoretical, philosophical, impressionistic or anecdotal, and most has been concerned with secondary school students. The most widely supported conclusions from these studies would appear to be that students almost universally value these experiences (Conrad & Hedin, 1992; Hamilton & Zeldin, 1987; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; McCluskey-Fawcett & Green, 1992), and that involvement in commu-

nity service learning enhances self-esteem (Hedin, 1989; Wilson, 1974), improves participant social attitudes (Markus et al.; McCluskey-Fawcett & Green; Wilson) increases knowledge in the areas most directly related to the field experience (Conrad & Hedin; Hamilton & Zeldin), improves the integration of theory and practice (Markus et al.; McCluskey-Fawcett & Green), and is most effective when students participate in regular discussion groups oriented to helping students reflect on and analyze their experiences (Conrad & Hedin; Hamilton & Zeldin; Hedin). The current study replicates aspects of these studies at the university level in the areas related to student evaluation of these experiences and participant gains in personal and academic growth. In contrast with a number of previous studies, it did not attempt simply to measure changes in these areas which occurred to participating students. Rather, it compared changes reported by these students with those simultaneously reported by their peers in a shared classroom-based course which was used as a control group.

In the area of student academic outcomes, one other intriguing finding has been that involvement in community service learning activities results in improvement in students' final course grades. The understanding of these results has, in part, been that field experiences lead to a greater over-all mastery of course concepts. There are, however, several important issues present in the studies which have investigated this. Sugar and Livosky (1988), for example, reported that al-

most half of the students electing an optional community service learning experience increased their course grade, but the direct cause of the increase was that students received up to a 5% extra-credit bonus for choosing the option. To compound the grade increase issue here, there is some evidence suggesting that it is higher achieving students who more often select community service learning experiences (Serow & Dreyden, 1990). Markus et al (1993) reported significantly higher grades for students who were randomly assigned to community service learning activities, thus controlling for possible differences in student achievement levels. As is not atypical for these courses, however, students who were not assigned to the community service learning experiences were "required to write longer term papers based on library research" (p. 412). This differential requirement raises the often criticized possibility that grading criteria for the field placements could have been less rigorous than those used in evaluating traditional literature-based papers. The current project attempted to replicate the finding of an increase in final course grades for community service learning participants while avoiding the potential problems in these studies.

### Background for the Current Study

During the 1992-1993 academic school year, discussions were initiated in the Psychology Department at the University of Michigan, supported by the Department and Undergraduate Chairs, to consider linkages between several traditional classroom-based advanced introductory courses in psychology (developmental, personality, social psychology, organizational, etc), and a large ongoing community service learning course in psychology called Project Outreach.

Project Outreach was the outgrowth of innovative efforts begun in the department over twenty-five years ago to add meaningful, experiential components to a very large basic introductory course in psychology. As the field-based offerings for the introductory course grew in complexity and popularity, Project Outreach became a major free-standing course open to undergraduate students from throughout the university. At the present time, the course provides service-learning experiences, on a two hour credit/no-credit basis, for more than five hundred undergraduates each semester, placing them into over fifty community settings, organized by service-

receiving populations. Student requirements include completion of approximately forty hours of service field work, preparation of weekly journals, attendance at a weekly two hour lecture/discussion class, and submission of a final paper.

The proposal which emerged from the department discussions was to link traditional classroom-based courses with Project Outreach, thereby offering students an enriched educational experience. Each part of the linkage would complement the other: the traditional classroom would introduce concepts and theories, and the service-learning course would provide the setting in which to apply and evaluate these concepts, with observations then brought back to the classroom for discussion. It was decided that during the pilot year Outreach would be linked with the basic survey courses in both developmental and social psychology. Students enrolled in the survey courses would have the option simultaneously to enroll in the specifically related Outreach section.

Students, within Outreach, were placed into a wide range of relevant settings. Students from the developmental course were placed into day-care, pre-school and elementary school settings; students from the social psychology course were placed into community centers, shelters, and advocacy agencies. Course requirements and university credit received, both within Outreach and the classroom-based courses, were identical for both the cross-enrolled students and those not electing this option. Students were not offered any special incentives for selecting the enriched experience, and participation was completely voluntary. Students who chose the option were encouraged to utilize their field experiences in their formal papers. Each of the classroom-based courses was free to handle their side of the linkage as they saw appropriate. Participants in the developmental course option were randomly scheduled into all of the traditional course's discussion groups, while those in the social psychology course were placed into a single special discussion section that made intentional efforts to help students integrate in-class concepts with field experiences.

### Hypotheses

1. Students in both traditional courses who chose the linkage would expect it to be a more valuable educational option than students who did not choose it and, would confirm this at the

end of the term.

Previous studies, without exception, have reported that students value community service learning experiences. It seemed reasonable that those students who chose to enroll in the linkage would be even more likely to report feeling this way, and that after participation they would report it to have been a more valuable option than students who did not experience it.

2. Students participating in the linkage, in both courses, would report that it had enhanced their personal development in the course more than students who did not choose the linkage.

It was expected that by interacting with people in the community, and having the weekly opportunity within Outreach to discuss the impact upon themselves, participating students would report learning more about themselves and their interactions with others.

3. Students participating in the linkage, in both courses, would have an enhanced academic experience that would be reflected both in self-reports and in higher final course grades. Academic enhancement would be especially reported in the area of being able to apply concepts in the real world.

It was expected that by giving students the opportunity to actively evaluate and observe the utility of in-class concepts in the field, that their general understanding of these would increase, and that this would be reflected both in their own reports as well as in final course grades. In particular, and consistent with some previous research described above, it was expected that students participating in the linkage would especially report an increase in the particular area of being better able to apply concepts outside of the classroom, in that this was the most unique aspect of their differential experience.

4. Students participating in the linkage in the social psychology course would report a more enhanced academic experience than students who chose the linkage from the developmental course.

While all students who chose the linkage participated in weekly Outreach small group discussions to help integrate concepts and experience, students in the social psychology course were also involved in a single, dedicated, discussion section further oriented toward achieving this integration. By contrast, within the developmental course, linkage students were spread across all discussion sections, in which the primary focus was mastery of concepts. Therefore, it was ex-

pected that the unique social psychology discussion group would further enhance students' academic experience.

## **Participants**

35 students in the developmental course chose the linkage, representing 11% of the total students in that course. 22 of the participating students were present in class on the two days that the study questionnaires were distributed, and completed these. 17 students in the social psychology course chose the linkage, representing 5% of the total students in that course. 14 of the participating students were present in class on the two days that the study questionnaires were distributed, and completed these. Additional data, not included in the current study, indicated that the primary reason given by students in both courses for not choosing the linkage during the first semester was that it did not fit into their schedules<sup>1</sup>. Analyses in the developmental course revealed no significant demographic, educational, or experience differences between students who did and did not choose the placement option. By contrast, in the social psychology course, students selecting the option were significantly younger (19.2 vs. 20.0,  $p < .0001$ ) and less advanced in school (year 2.3 vs 2.9,  $p < .001$ ), and had more previous volunteer experience ( $p < .01$ ). There were no significant differences on any of the variables when comparing students who chose the linkage in the developmental course with those who chose it in the social psychology course.

## **Procedures**

Questionnaires were distributed on a single day at the beginning and end of the semester to students in both courses who did and did not select the service learning option. The beginning-of-semester questionnaire inquired about demographics (sex, age, race), education (major, class, GPA), and previous field-based experiences (Outreach, community service). It also contained a question concerning the degree to which students expected their linkage choice to affect their experience and performance in the classroom-based course. The end-of-semester questionnaire consisted of a large set of questions evaluating the linkage, of which eleven questions related directly to the four hypotheses of concern here. Students indicated their degree of agreement with items on a five point Likert-type scale. A copy of

the questionnaire items related to this study, with an indication of the hypothesis to which each item related, is found in Table 1. Final grades were also obtained for all students whose questionnaires were utilized in the study.

The manner of selecting student questionnaires to be used for analyses differed by course because of the different ways that each course placed students within it. In both courses, all students who chose the service-learning option were asked to complete the questionnaires, and all of their responses were used in the analyses. In the developmental course, all students not selecting the option were also asked to complete the questionnaire, from which a random sample of students ( $n=50$ ) was selected; while in the social psychology course, all students from two randomly selected non-participating sections completed questionnaires, with all of their responses ( $n=39$ ) being used for analyses.

All continuous variables were analyzed via  $t$ -tests, while discrete variables were analyzed via Kruskal-Wallis one-way analyses of variance. Analyses were done for all variables for each course separately, both courses combined, and between the two courses.

## Results

The results of the tests of the first three hypoth-

eses, showing the results by course, and for all students combined, are summarized in Table 1. The between course results are summarized in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1: Students, in both courses, who chose the linkage would expect it to be a more valuable educational option than students who did not choose it and, having participated in the linkage, this difference would be maintained.

This hypothesis was strongly supported for students in both courses. Students who selected the linkage, versus those who did not, more highly expected the experience to be helpful to them ( $p<.0001$ ), were more pleased with their option choice ( $p<.0001$ ), considered it to have been a more valuable part of the over-all course ( $p<.0001$ ), and believed that their choice had more positively affected their educational experience and performance ( $p<.0001$ ). While the levels of significance of these differences were extremely high for both courses, they were stronger in the developmental than the social psychology course.

Hypothesis 2: Students participating in the linkage, in both courses, would report that it had enhanced their personal development in the course more than students who did not choose the linkage.

This hypothesis received no support in either course, nor with both courses combined. Students

TABLE 1  
*Students Who Chose the Option vs. Students Who Did Not: Comparisons Within Courses and Combined\**

	Devlpmtl ( $n=22/50$ )	Social ( $n=14/39$ )	Combined ( $n=36/89$ )
I. Valued Option			
A. I expect my decision regarding an Outreach Placement to help my experience and performance in this class.	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
2. I was pleased with my choice regarding an Outreach placement.	<.0001	<.006	<.0001
6. Outreach placements appeared to be a valuable part of this class.	<.0001	<.001	<.0001
11. I feel that my choice regarding an Outreach placement helped my experience and performance during this course.	<.0001	<.003	<.0001
II. Personal Experience			
4. I gained a better understanding of myself through this course.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
7. I increased my awareness of my own interests and talents in this course.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
9. The information learned was relevant to my personal interactions with others.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
III. Academic Experience			
1. I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations.	<.03	n.s.	<.006
3. I developed the ability to solve real problems in this field.	<.0001	n.s.	<.008
5. I gained a good understanding of concepts in this field.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
8. I learned about social factors that influence people's development.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
10. The experiences I had in this course will affect my concentration/ career choice.	n.s.	n.s.	<.03
B. Final Grades			
	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

\* Response options consisted of a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." All significant differences were in the expected direction.

TABLE 2  
 Students Who Chose the Option:  
 Comparisons Between Courses

1. Academic Experience	
1. I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations.	n.s.
3. I developed the ability to solve real problems in this field.	<.0001*
5. I gained a good understanding of concepts in this field.	n.s.
8. I learned about social factors that influence people's development.	n.s.
10. The experiences I had in this course will affect my concentration/career choice.	n.s.

\*developmental > social

who selected the linkage reported no greater perceived gains in self-understanding, awareness of their interests, or information relevant to their personal interactions with others than students who did not choose the option.

Hypothesis 3: Students participating in the linkage, in both courses, would have an enhanced academic experience that would be reflected both in self-reports and in higher final course grades. Academic enhancement would be especially reported in the area of being able to apply concepts in the real world.

This hypothesis received no support in the social psychology course, and only mixed support in the developmental course. In neither course did participating students report any greater enhancement of their general learning of concepts than non-participating students, and there were no differences in final course grades related to participation. Students in the developmental course, however, did report a greater sense of being able to apply in-class principles to new situations ( $p < .03$ ), and an increased ability to solve real problems in the course area ( $p < .0001$ ). In contrast with the general learning areas, the items related to application of principles also achieved significance when responses from students in both courses were combined. Finally, while linkage students in neither course reported that the Outreach experience would have any greater effect on their concentration/career choices than the solely in-class experience of the non-linkage students, this was the only item that was significantly differentiating when responses from students in both courses were combined.

Hypothesis 4: Students participating in the linkage in the social psychology course would report a more enhanced academic experience than students who chose the linkage from the developmental course.

This hypothesis received no support. There were no significant differences between participating students in the two courses in reported enhancement of their general learning of con-

cepts, nor in a sense of being able to apply in-class principles to new situations. The one significant difference between students in the two courses, in fact, was in the opposite direction than expected: i.e. students in the developmental course reported a much higher improvement in their ability to solve real problems in the field than did students in the social psychology course ( $p < .0001$ ).

### Discussion

The most well documented, and here strongly supported, finding is that there is a group of students who highly value the opportunity to participate in community service learning activities. Expectedly, students who chose the Outreach linkage believed both before and after the semester that the tandem course experience was much more valuable than students who did not choose it. The magnitude of their positive feelings, indeed, raises the strong possibility that the mixed support found here for other hypotheses related to their experience may have been the result of the present study not having explored those aspects of the experience which participants found most personally beneficial, or of not utilizing measures that were sensitive enough to reflect impacts.

Participating students, contrary to expectation, reported no greater enhancements to their personal development than non-participating students. It is very important to note, with regard to these and other non-differentiating findings in this study, that this is not to say that participating students did not experience some of the gains found in previous studies. Rather, these negative results only reflect the fact that participating students did not report gains in these areas at a higher level than those reported by students who had the classroom-based experience alone. At the same time, it is also possible that the specific non-differentiating results related to personal development may be a reflection of an important difference in the impact of these experiences on

older, advanced university students, as opposed to that on high school-aged students on which much of the previous research was based. This may be particularly true when the primary orientation of both the field-based component and the shared classroom-based course used as a comparison group is strongly academic. The stronger academic orientation of both experiences in the present study would further appear to be consistent with the finding of a positive impact on student concentration/career choice. Although this variable was labelled as academic here, because it was felt to be more related to academic goals, it has clear personal development implications.

Findings related to the impact of the community service learning component on other aspects of the student's academic experience were also mixed. Students reported no enhancement to their general mastery of course concepts, and no differences were reflected in their final course grades. While specialized linking assignments may help to improve a student's understanding of concepts, field-based activities would appear to have their greatest impact on final grades when they are directly factored into the latter. Traditional in-class graded assignments and tests do not generally tap what successful community service learning experiences seem most positively to affect: first-hand knowledge of the real world, abilities in areas directly related to the field experience, and capacities for applying concepts to the world outside of the classroom. Written comments from two of the students on their end-of-semester questionnaires well captured how the linked experience had affected these aspects of their learning.

The topics that are raised in my developmental lecture are often the same topics discussed in class. In the Outreach lecture, however, the information is more detailed and is real. We do not just hear statistics and read about ideas in a text book, but we go out and experience it. For example, the idea of child abuse was brought up in both classes. First, in the developmental lecture I heard many statistics about it, some stories, and some scary effects that the abuse has on the child psychologically. In Outreach lecture, a woman from an abuse center came and talked to us, and the stories and statistics suddenly meant something. No longer was the information something to take notes on to be sure to remember weeks later on an exam. The information became a part of me and in my thoughts and I wanted to get into it and help the

people as best I could. This woman saw the abuse first hand. It was no longer that won't ever happen to me, or that doesn't really happen.

For instance, I was able to take my knowledge of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning and use it as a way to understand why kids think and behave the way they do. At the day care center I noticed that younger kids were more likely to fear being punished. They, therefore, tended to avoid situations that would get them into trouble. Older kids, on the other hand, were more interested in trying to impress those in authority. These children usually tried to be extra good with listening and following directions.

My observations coincided exactly with Kohlberg's theory because wanting to avoid punishment is at the pre-moral level, and wanting to meet the expectations of others is at the conventional level, which is more advanced than the pre-moral.

What must be appreciated in the mixed academic findings here is that helping students to be able to successfully apply knowledge learned in the classroom to the real world, and not just to understand concepts in a way that is measured by traditional tests, is a basic and critical goal of education. It is one, indeed, that is particularly important at the university level.

Testing hypotheses between the two courses also proved to be instructive in understanding the impact of community service learning experiences on students, with clear implications for reviewing other studies. If, for example, results from this study were only reported comparing students who did and did not choose the Outreach linkage, without regard to course, significant differences between students in each course would be lost. Two questionnaire items related to the application of course concepts achieved significance when combining courses, although neither achieved significance just in the social psychology course. In every area in which there were findings of significance, they were always stronger for students in the developmental course than the social psychology course. Although students in the social psychology course were all in the same dedicated discussion group, which deliberately emphasized an integration of concepts and field experience, as opposed to the multiple conceptually oriented discussion groups into which the developmental students were placed, the developmental students unexpectedly reported a greater increase in their "ability to solve real

problems in this field." It is possible that this latter finding was the result of the field experience having had a greater impact on students in the more concepts-oriented developmental course, in that the social psychology course already had a more intrinsically applied orientation. Or, it may have been the result of an unknown weakness in the single social psychology discussion section, an unevaluated factor, or some combination of these. All of these findings, however, serve to highlight the genuine complexity of community service learning experiences which must be understood and addressed in future attempts to evaluate them.

Hedin (1989), in an excellent essay on community service learning and its evaluation, discussed the vast range and complexity of experiences subsumed under the topic. The findings of the present study strongly underscore the validity and importance of her comments. In fact, while community service learning experiences are often described as if one can easily and meaningfully compare them, the number of possible significant differences between them makes this assumption highly problematic. Thus, to name only some factors, community service learning experiences vary widely along such potentially important dimensions as length and intensity of the experience, population/settings worked within, specific student responsibilities in the placement, type of conceptual preparation for the experience, nature and frequency of discussions and the goals of these, demographic characteristics of the students, how the experience is evaluated and whether course credit is received for it, whether the placement is voluntary or not, manner of placement into specific settings, quality of the placement, and the faculty commitment to community service learning experiences. All of these make it imperative that one be very careful in evaluating results of "community service learning" studies, particularly when comparing findings across studies.

Struggling with the complexity of community service learning experiences also underscores the early stage of study of these experiences. Future research must continue to move beyond anecdotal and qualitative assessments toward more objective and empirical methodologies. Studies must increasingly ask more sophisticated questions about which specific pedagogical models and field experiences, for which sets of learners, most effectively promote specific educational outcomes. Reports of research must provide more

complete information regarding the range of potentially mediating variables described above.

## Conclusion

There is ample evidence to suggest that community service learning experiences can potentially provide a rich opportunity for helping to achieve student and faculty goals at the university level, and must continue to be supported in their development. At Michigan, efforts have already been initiated to pilot three new models for linking Project Outreach with classroom-based courses, each with primary academic goals of enhancing concept mastery and application by more tightly integrating classroom and field-based discussion groups, carefully specifying journal expectations, and conducting more extensive placement evaluations. All of this proceeds with the clear recognition that there is obviously still so very much to learn about how best to organize and evaluate these experiences so that progress is made toward the ultimate goal of maximizing student learning outcomes.

## Notes

The author wishes to express appreciation to Carolyn Pinkerton for her assistance in data collection for this project; and to Jeffrey Howard for his thoughtful editorial review of an earlier draft of this paper, and supportive encouragement of all of us working in the community service learning area.

<sup>1</sup> Linkage information was better disseminated for the second semester, not included in this study, and linkage enrollment almost doubled.

## References

- Conrad, D., & Hedin, D. (1992). The importance of experiential education on adolescent development. *Child and Youth Services, 4*, 57-76.
- Hamilton, S., & Zeldin, R. (1987). Learning civics in the community. *Curriculum Inquiry, 17*, 407-420.
- Hedin, D. (1989). The power of community service. *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, 37*, 201-213.
- Markus, G., Howard, J., & King, D. (1993). Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning: Results from an experiment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 15*(4), 410-419.
- McCluskey-Fawcett, K., & Green, P. (1992). Using community service to teach developmental psychology. *Teaching Psychology, 19*, 150-152.
- Serow, R., & Dreyden, J. (1990). Community service



among college and university students. *Adolescence*, 25, 553-566.

Sugar, J., & Livosky, M. (1988). Enriching child psychology courses with a preschool journal option. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 93-95.

Wilson, T. (1974). An alternative community-based secondary school education program and student political development. *Doctoral Dissertation*, University of Southern California.

### Author

JERRY MILLER is the Director of the University of Michigan's Center for the Child and Family, and Faculty Coordinator of Project Outreach in the Department of Psychology.