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# Defining a Service-Learning Pedagogy of Access and Success

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Ask most college administrators how they define access and they would probably reply "inclusive opportunity." Ask most college faculty how they would identify a benchmark of success and they would probably reply "critical thinking skills." Indeed, our traditional notions of educational access and success tend to be either numerically delineated, "the number of entering or graduating students" or characterized as producing rationally oriented "leaders" and "citizens".

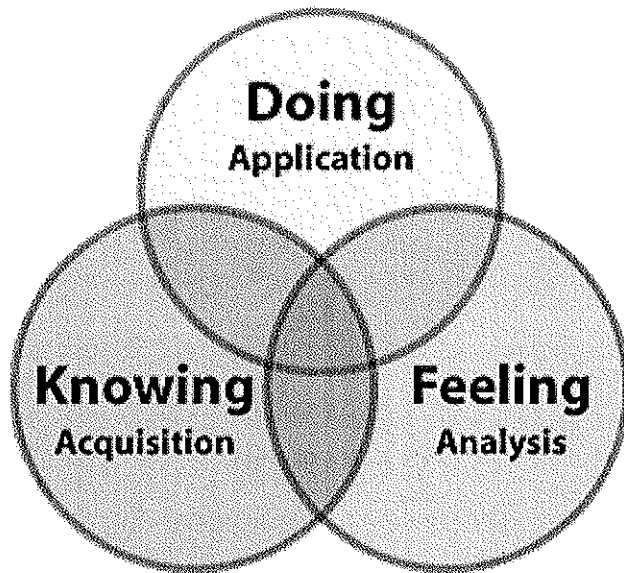
Certainly, expanding the educational participation of our increasingly diverse student body and developing the analytical abilities of our future leaders are laudable goals. The problem, however, is twofold. First, while we have strived to broaden access, our teaching and learning processes are often quite exclusive: faculty voices dominate class sessions; readings are not tied to contemporary events and issues; and assessment is based on accumulated facts.

Second, while we have endeavored to ensure developmental success, the outcome of our efforts (e.g., our graduates) may lack the motivation and problem solving skills to tackle real-life issues: students compete for grades rather than focus on individual learning; faculty forgo community-based assignments for multiple choice exams; and graduates tout careerism rather than community. The result is that our educational access and success objectives remain unrealized. Students are disengaged from their classrooms because our teaching strategies are limited to lecture and recitation, and graduates remain disconnected from their neighborhoods and communities because their ways of knowing are limited to abstract logical arguments. At worst, such traditional methods serve to disenfranchise those who have been historically under-represented, thereby perpetuating racial, cultural, and economic divides. At best, situational access merely represents being present and academic success is restricted to increased cognition.

Higher education faces a severe pedagogical and epistemological predicament. How do we redefine access as active participation that incorporates the visions and voices of all learners? How do we redefine success as responsive knowledge acquisition and utilization in building democratic bridges between individuals and groups? And, how do we create fully inclusive learning environments that facilitate community-centered critical consciousness? Campus Compact has responded with a novel and provocative answer: service-learning. The goal of service-learning is development of civically minded students who possess analytical problem solving abilities and self-identify as community change agents as a direct consequence of their community-based learning experiences. The epistemology of service-learning is a promising revolution that has sparked an instructional evolution where access and success are equated with teaching and learning practices that effectively link students with each other and with their communities as critically engaged learners. Indeed, research confirms that students who participate in service-learning evidence a wide array of outcomes including critical thinking skills (Kendrick, 1996); problem solving and reflection skills (Cress, Kerrigan, & Reitenauer, 2003); communication skills (Jordan, 1994); commitment to helping others (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999); and self-concept development (Berger & Milem, 2002). However, other researchers have found that students involved in community-based learning experiences were not aware that civic responsibility was even a goal of the course (Cress, Collier, & Reitenauer, 2005; Ikeda, 1999; Jessen & Ramette, 1998).

Undeniably, faculty play a vital leadership role in structuring meaningful community-based learning experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Driscoll, 2000). Instructors are the catalysts for creating connections between the course content, the service experience, and broader student learning outcomes. The challenge faced by colleges and universities today is to further identify, hone, and integrate service-learning teaching strategies that truly enhance access and success. So, what might be the central tenets of a service-learning pedagogy of access and success to which faculty might aspire?

Nearly three decades ago, Bowen (1977) argued that "higher education should equip students to discover what is right in society as well as what is wrong" (p. 49) in developing cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities that allow for full individual engagement with our communities.



In other words, beyond mere intellectual development, students must learn to know (understand), to feel (make meaning), and to do (apply their skills) as aspects of integrating themselves as contributing members of society (see [diagram 1](#)). Essentially, a service-learning pedagogy of access and success springs from this tripartite foundation of: 1) the acquisition of knowledge (understanding); 2) the analysis of issues (meaning making); and 3) the application of skills (doing).

**Diagram 1:** Service-Learning Pedagogy of Access and Success

### **The Acquisition of Knowledge (Understanding)**

A basic premise of education is that the accumulation of knowledge leads to an increased sense of intelligence. Unfortunately, we have excessive examples of where "smart" people do "dumb" things to others and the world around them whether intentionally or unintentionally. Similarly, too often students are sent out into communities without adequate preparation for understanding the needs and nuisances of their clients and community partners (Reitenauer, Cress, & Bennett, 2005). Case and point, over one-third of students reported that their understanding of social problems, and knowledge of people from different races and cultures was weak or very weak prior to their service-learning experience (Cress, 2003). The consequence can be students who blame victims for their own victimization and resentment from the community who accuse higher education institutions of using them to perpetuate inequities in power and privilege. Such a situation promotes neither *access* nor *success*.

To counteract preconceived stereotypes and misinformation, carefully selected readings can provide factual data as the cognitive scaffolding for building increased understanding of community issues. Pea (1993) contends that faculty who provide students with the resources and means for acquiring appropriate contextual knowledge of real world issues facilitate the development of "distributed intelligence." He suggests that the capacity to, "think well — our

intelligence — resides not just in our heads but is distributed throughout the physical, social, and symbolic environment" (Perkins, 1994, p. 105). By actively relating course content to actual community issues, students become capable of distributing their intelligence to social, economic, environmental, health, and political issues. This, in turn, positions students to utilize their knowledge for problem solving efforts rather than mere charitable acts of service. As such, *access* for at-risk populations is improved and the likelihood of *successful* interactions with the community is increased.

It may seem rudimentary, but the more instructors explicate the educational intent behind community work the more likely are students to deepen their understanding of themselves and their communities. Contemporary readings on civic responsibility, racial/ethnic issues, and gender/women issues are significantly related to students' understanding of local political issues, understanding of local social issues, and understanding of how to make a community difference (Cress, 2003). Since students often engage with aspects of the community that are unfamiliar to them (both the people and the issues), background readings and opportunities to discuss the social and political contexts of the service experience add considerably to student elucidation and understanding.

Centering our acquisition of knowledge in the community offers us the ability to enhance critical thinking skills by linking them with broader notions of intelligence (Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1995; Kolb, 1984). This newly shaped community-informed intelligence helps us move beyond the construction of an "argument culture" that conditions our approach to political, economic, social, religious, and cultural issues as a fight between opposing sides, to a new civic responsibility paradigm that emphasizes critical consciousness and collaboration. As community participants, learners become "whole persons who develop knowing in context, by becoming agents of their own learning through the construction of identities within their community" (Wildman, 2004, p. 254).

### **The Analysis of Issues (Meaning Making)**

If our understanding within a community context is the first epistemological step for increasing access and success, then meaning making through critical analysis is the second. As Dewey (1916) aptly asserted, mere knowing is not enough. For Dewey, "pedagogy and epistemology were related — his theory of knowledge was related to and derived from his notions of citizenship and democracy" (Giles & Eyler, 1994, p.78) through the intentional utilization of critical reflection. Indeed, Dewey (1933) argued that reflective thinking is the key to whether an experience is actually educative. He believed that to truly comprehend an experience, it is imperative to consider how you are affected by it. In other words, connecting our thinking with our feeling is what generates meaning of the circumstances.

According to Walters (1994), in contrast to traditional notions of reflection (a.k.a., critical thinking skills) where the emphasis is on abstract logical arguments that are seemingly analytical, impersonal, universal, and objective, it is possible to extend our understanding of critical analysis to a wider suite of human capabilities that connect the person to the community (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Walkner & Finney, 1999). As Gallo (1989) describes, this definition of critical analysis takes us beyond "disembodied logicism" to more holistic notions that include empathy, compassion, and imagination in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions that affect the well-being of community members (Halpern, 1996). Barnett (1997) characterizes students engaged in this type of meaning-making reflection as "critically connected beings". Such individuals appreciate the intricate and meaningful

interdependence between themselves and their community. They are able to analyze, for instance, the multiple factors (e.g., economic, political, sociological, psychological) that lead to community challenges like homelessness, while concurrently feeling concern for those who are homeless. Moreover, they come to recognize that homelessness is not cured through soup kitchens. Nor does our responsibility as community citizens end with ladling the soup. As Dewey (1933, 1938) suggested, formal analysis is insufficient for such purposes. Instead, reflection centered in the subjective meaning of the experience is what connects us together as human beings.

All too often our reflective practices have relied on mere descriptions of service experiences. Student journals highlight client interactions, list the issues, note problem incidents, and clock the number of hours at a community site. Such depictions are an entry place for bridging understanding. But if we desire to leverage positive community change by strengthening *access* and *success*, then, as Collier and Williams (2005) suggest, reflective analysis must include not only our observations, but also personal relevance and connection. Student papers, and small group and large group discussions should encourage learners to address such questions as: How do you feel when you reflect upon the interaction you described? What assumptions did you bring with you about the people in this relationship? What assumptions do you think the community partner had about you? Has the experience changed your personal understanding of service? What knowledge gained from your academic major (concepts or theoretical models) might explain the underlying processes of this community issue?

Thus, meaningful reflection in service-learning experiences allows students to situate thinking, feeling, and action within actual community contexts. The result is that "through the process of effecting transformations [the] human self is created and recreated" (Greene, 1988, p. 21) with a fuller potential for affecting others.

### **The Application of Skills (Doing)**

In a recent survey of service-learning participants, only half of the students reported an increased understanding of the relationship between community issues in their service experience and local political issues (Cress, 2003). Improving access and success in our communities is premised upon our ability to develop students as community problem solvers who can evaluate potential solutions utilizing local, national, and global sources in forming and implementing a trajectory for change. Rather than simply referring to de-contextualized abstract knowledge as the normal scope of problem solving, a fundamental relationship is developed between an examination of the world and effective action (Bowden & Marton, 1998; Walkner & Finney, 1999). In this spirit, service-learning offers students the opportunity to become critically engaged individuals by analyzing underlying assumptions about community problems, and then testing those ideas through application of their knowledge and skills.

Indeed, one of the unvoiced secrets of service-learning is that things can and often do go wrong. Even with the best of intentions community members can react negatively to the presence of students, community agencies may experience staff changes and not uphold their responsibilities, and/or conflict may occur within and between student teams (Voegelé & Lieberman, 2005). In short, failures happen.

How learners and faculty respond to the dynamics of failure impacts community *access* and *success*. Conflicts and misunderstandings that are addressed early in the service experience can usually be remedied. One strategy for clarifying roles, responsibilities, and tasks is to develop an Action Learning Plan for Serving (ALPS) as a goal setting and service orienting experience for

students and community members alike (Reitenauer et al, 2005). The ALPS can then serve as an individual, team, and group framework for reflecting upon assumptions, expectations, timelines, and duties. Moreover, the skills required for a successful service-learning experience are made both evident and prominent. Such an approach helps faculty facilitate a service-learning environment that sharpens student application of knowledge and skills.

As Halpern (1996) suggests, students become mindful of their interdependence with community when service-learning allows them to be more consciously aware of their actions and thought processes in the midst of application. The consequence is personal and community empowerment since students see themselves linked with community life beyond college (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Parks (2000) describes this kind of shift in critical consciousness as a distinctive mode of meaning making where students become critically aware of composing one's reality. As one's identity forms within this context of and in connection to the community, students' self-authorship coordinates their beliefs, values, and behaviors (Kegan, 1994). Thus, students become equipped for creating community change as congruence between their beliefs and behaviors align. Indeed, nearly three-fourths of surveyed students reported that as a result of participating in a senior Capstone community service course, they had a better understanding of how to use their skills to make a difference in their community and that the service experience helped to transform their views of the world and themselves by deepening their motivation and ability to promote social justice and equity (Cress, 2003).

### **The Service-Learning Pedagogy of Access and Success**

Improving our communities now and in the future is dependent upon providing the leadership to give students the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are less self-referenced and more community-referenced (Astin & Astin, 2000). The Service-Learning Pedagogy of Access and Success is a method for achieving those goals. Through the acquisition of knowledge that connects instructive readings with community challenges, the analysis of issues that reflects upon objective as well as subjective social, political, and psychological factors, and the *application of skills* that encourages learners to actively employ their multiple talents, students are positioned on a path to become consciously engaged community members. Such individuals are "able to place themselves in the context of a diverse world and [to] draw on difference and commonality to produce a deeper experience of community" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, p. 22). In so doing, students have a broadened understanding of their role in complex community, state, and national issues and develop the capacity to enact change that leads to increased *access* and *success* for everyone.

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