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Service Learning RESOURCE GUIDE

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SERVICE LEARNING AND CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

by Robert J. Exley, Ph.D.

Introduction

His name was Joe, and my experience with him frustrates me even today when I remember it. He was a bright, articulate, and persuasive student in an Applied Leadership Theory course I was teaching for honors students. He was a typical community college student in many ways—a bit older, married with one child, working full-time, and taking three courses. He was that pseudo-intellectual whom many of the other students admired. He had no problem questioning the need for many of the class assignments as well as the validity of course content. I liked him for his contributions to the class. But I was disappointed in his unwillingness to genuinely enter into the course. Finally, I confronted him in class.

“Joe,” I stated, “you are a natural leader with your classmates. Why will you not accept your abilities and be the leader you are capable of being?”

“I don’t need this,” he angrily replied. Then he went on to say, “I don’t have time to be involved with others, and I don’t want anyone thinking that I am the source of answers to their problems. Please, just leave me alone!”

He was an experienced Emergency Medical Technician who wanted to become a Registered Nurse. He was extremely capable academically, but he was unable to accept his skills and abilities. He did complete my course and was subsequently accepted into the nursing program. He lasted less than a year. He dropped out of school with excellent grades in all of his courses. I do not know for certain, but I assume that he was unable to accept success and grew tired of other students looking up to him.

My course did not include service at that time. I used a variety of small group assignments and case studies. My failure with Joe did, however, light a fire in me

to find a way for my students to truly experience, in a way that would be unavoidable, the content of my leadership course. It led me to discover service learning, and I had to completely redesign the course. To do so, I had to deal with many questions and resolve numerous doubts.

- Is service learning about *what we teach* or is it about *how we teach*?
- Are we speaking of the *content* of the discussion or the *methods* used during a session when we emphasize the importance of reflection?
- How can I make the service learning component *an integral part of the course* and not just another add-on assignment?

These are but a few of the questions that come to mind when beginning to integrate service into the learning expectations of a course. Starting with the basics helps.

Remember the simple who, what, when, where, why, and how questions of curricular design. Who are we teaching? What content and information will we be teaching them? When is the most appropriate time to teach this in the context of their education? In what setting can students best learn this course material? Why is it important to teach this content and to teach them in this manner? And how can we be most successful in teaching this information?

The answers to these most relevant questions frame the use of service learning. Many semesters of trial and error, discussions with colleagues, research within the fields of experiential education and service learning, and the solicitation of genuine feedback from students produced the following strategies for integrating service into the curriculum.

Getting Started: Identifying Course Competencies

To begin, overcome the natural belief “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The best way to accomplish this is to undertake a naive review of the existing competencies and learning expectations in the course. Ask the really tough questions about the course as it is now designed: the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions.

Who and What

This comprehensive review will reveal the areas where your current design may not be the best fit for today’s community college student. For example, students today are far more consumer-oriented than those of just a few short years ago. Student consumers expect that the learning will be directly applicable to their immediate life interests. Students want to be able to see a visible connection between what they are learning and how that affects their daily lives. I call this the “test of connectivity.”

Many times, the course competencies and learning objectives are still relevant, but the means by which we are “teaching” and the student is “learning” fail to meet this test of connectivity. Service learning provides a process for helping the students see this connection. However, service learning is not an all-or-nothing teaching strategy, and curricular integration does not mean that you must abandon other methods of instruction.

How and Why

A very important aspect of curricular design is determining the most effective way for getting the message across. Research on effective teaching (Cruickshank, Bainer, and Metcalf 1995) emphasizes the importance of using a variety of teaching strategies in the course of instruction. Service learning is just one teaching strategy, but it works extremely well for many different disciplines and with many different personalities. One must be cautious and thorough when determining how best to use it with certain courses. A common mistake is to assume that service learning must mean a minimum of 20-30 hours of service per semester combined with regular classroom reflection sessions. Be aware that this is only one way to use service learning; many others exist. Although there are no magical formulas, certain principles determine the role and scope of service learning for a given course.

Identify the Competencies Best Suited to Service Learning

Once you have completed your review of the course and are satisfied with the competencies and learning objectives, it is time to decide which ones are most suited to the use of service learning. Remember that service learning requires the instructor to combine the use of service outside of the classroom with the learning experiences and assignments within the classroom. In short, competencies best learned via active learning are better suited than those that remain in a theoretical or intellectual mode. For example, a competency that requires the student to demonstrate rote memorization of content lends itself less to service learning than does one that demands the student demonstrate an applied comprehension of a concept.

Each instructor must determine the fit of service learning to the particular course. Keep in mind that the degree to which you use service learning is directly related to the course competencies and learning objectives you choose. The degree of importance of the course competency you choose may dictate the amount of service time required of the student. I have chosen to focus on service time because this seems to be the one consistently asked question by instructors new to service learning. However, the amount of time is secondary to the learning that you want to occur. It is the learning that matters most, and the most effective arena for that learning to occur is in the relationships and exchanges between and among you and the other students.

Table 1 illustrates how to restructure class time and identify academic products or assignments required from the student.

Student Learning Expectations

Once course competencies have been identified, the next step is to determine how to assess student learning in relation to the service requirement. You have the full range of options available to you for assessing student mastery of course content including objective and subjective examinations, oral reports, essay papers, pop quizzes, group projects, etc. As you do so, be sure that the assessment practice matches the degree of importance of the learning objective.

For example, when service is a small component of the course (four or five hours) and related to a competency of low importance, then the academic product (an oral report or one-page essay) should produce a minor grade in the grade book (equivalent to a pop quiz). How-

ever, if the same service component (four or five hours) relates to a highly important competency, then the classroom experience to facilitate this learning should involve a very significant academic product producing a major grade in the grade book (equivalent to a major exam).

Table 1. Service Time, Class Time, and Course Competencies

DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE OF COURSE COMPETENCY	AMOUNT OF SERVICE TIME	
	Low	High
Low	The amount of class time used for discussion/reflection should be relatively small. The academic product could be a one-time essay or oral presentation.	The amount of class time used for discussion/reflection should be a moderate and consistent aspect of the class. Academic products include routine assignments such as a guided journal.
High	The amount of class time used for discussion/reflection should be limited but intensely focused. Academic products are very specific based on clear learning objectives.	The amount of class time used for discussion/reflection should be significant and routine. Academic products demonstrate learning of clearly identified objectives.

Reflective Teaching Strategies

The appropriate use of reflective teaching strategies represents the most critical aspect in assuring the effectiveness of service learning. Harry Silcox, in his *A How to Guide to Reflection* (1995), provides a useful description of the various means for reflective teaching. He demonstrates how different strategies accomplish

different learning objectives. The instructor must identify the learning objectives first and then match the most salient reflective strategy to the desired outcome. Table 2 provides a brief description of the various types of reflective teaching that may be used with service learning.

Table 2. Reflective Teaching Strategies (from Silcox, *A How to Guide to Reflection*)

TYPE	PRIMARY RESULT	DESCRIPTION
READINGS/CREATIVE PROJECTS	Foster group bonding and leadership; facilitates directed learning	Specific assignments include essays, music, videos, artwork, etc.—both in class and out.
JOURNAL WRITINGS	Foster personal growth	Student maintains a regular journal that the faculty member reads and responds to.
DIRECTED WRITINGS	Foster directed learning	Student produces essays that address specific questions or issues required by the instructor.
“FEELINGS-ORIENTED” ORAL REFLECTION	Fosters group bonding and trust	Class members participate in a group discussion regarding their service experiences.
“STUDENT AS EXPERT” ORAL REFLECTION	Fosters citizenship, leadership, and cognitive learning	Student leads a classroom session providing a critique of a reading assignment or presenting a solution to a problem.
“COGNITIVE TEACHING” ORAL REFLECTION	Fosters leadership, directed learning, cognitive learning, personal growth, and critical thinking	The faculty member leads a teaching session that fosters critical thinking skills and problem solving.

The Course Syllabus

The course syllabus you create should clearly define the role of service in the course and how the service connects to the course content. The student deserves an explanation for why service is important to his or her learning. The description should include all information that the student needs to begin making the connection between his or her service, the course content, and daily living. The following is an example of a curriculum worksheet that I have found helpful when redesigning the Applied Leadership course following my experience with Joe.

Curriculum Worksheet

COURSE TITLE:

Applied Leadership Theory

COMPETENCY:

Personality and Self—each student will demonstrate a knowledge of his or her own personality tendencies and their impact on leadership effectiveness.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE:

To foster group bonding and trust.

ORAL REFLECTION/FEELINGS:

Students participate in multiple class discussions on the various assignments.

READINGS:

The Endless Streetcar Ride Into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose (Shepherd 1985). This essay deals with developing personal insight.

ACTIVITIES:

Meyers-Briggs Personality Trait Indicator—each student completes this in class.

Stand and Declare—an in-class activity where students take a stand on an issue and defend their point of view.

ASSIGNMENT:

Philosophy statement or personal obituary—This one-page, in-class writing assignment requires the student to assess his or her personal values.

Note: This worksheet provides an example for only one of the competencies in the course and is geared to a specific learning objective from the first week of class.

Conclusion

Service learning is a serious and effective teaching strategy that can be successfully implemented with a little planning and design work, as long as you remember these steps:

- Review the existing course,
- Identify key competencies,
- Define student learning expectations,
- Select appropriate reflective teaching strategies, and
- Produce an informative syllabus.

These strategies can help nearly any faculty member keep a student like Joe engaged in learning and leadership.

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About the Author

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