



# Communities & Workplaces as Learning Environments: Reflections on a Life's Theme

## Robert Lee Sigmon

*Partnerships: A Journal of Service Learning & Civic Engagement.*  
*Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 2010*

---

### Abstract

In the January/February 1998 issue of the Council for Independent College's newsletter, *Independent*, the front page headline announced receipt of a \$1.5 million grant to enhance community-campus partnerships. Goals were to review the impact of service-learning, internships, and other forms of experiential education on faculty, staff, students and community members. CIC President Splete shared that "We're going to look more closely at the ways in which colleges develop interdependent, mutually beneficial partnerships with their communities—and we will develop ideas to enhance those connections. Through these efforts we hope to help colleges better understand how these important links with their communities affect such internal processes as the curriculum and the way faculty work."

Robert L. Sigmon was one of the primary researchers on the project. A few years after participating in the project, Sigmon wrote about the value of communities and workplaces as learning environments. With the creative editing assistance of Dr. Lisa Keyne, his original paper has been slightly revised, but re-emphasizes his lifelong passion for strengthening community voice in experiential education initiatives of higher education.

---

### Introduction

Multiple reports suggest that as many dollars are spent on educational activities in the workplace as in higher education; new knowledge is being created beyond campus walls and labs; "practice wisdom" and "native intelligence" are readily available beyond the campus; and the range and flexibility of learning content and practices flowing from the context of real work in real time in active communities and workplaces is a mostly hidden resource.

Workplace and community learning can be characterized by a pedagogy rooted in responding to the practical impulse to deal with concrete situations at hand.

Learning in institutions of higher education is often characterized by a pedagogy of “telling and testing” as a means of transmitting knowledge.

These differing practices about the context and content of learning offer challenges to both sectors as they seek to link student learning and community interests.

In workplace and community settings that see educational activity as important, three families of learners are recognized.

- Employees, (full time or part time) be they front line direct care providers or producers, technological support staff or policy makers and top managers, are the top tier family of learners.
- The General Public/Customers, or those seeking assistance from the primary family, comprise the second tier (e.g., patients in a health care setting).
- Students and volunteers are a third tier.

Over the years I have seen the following types of systems for supporting employee learning in workplace and community settings:

1. In-house training departments that offer learning events in the context of workplace priorities, using pedagogical strategies ranging from a controlled curriculum (“telling and testing”) to imaginative self-directing learning.
2. Tuition assistance programs which offer reimbursement to employees who enroll in approved formal classes related to their jobs or professional growth interests.
3. Training industry vendors with niche educational resources contracts with workplaces to offer specialty knowledge/skill services. Some of these come from the academy.
4. Professional associations or guilds (“communities of practice”) determining many educational activities as a part of certifying or recertifying specialists.
5. Problem-based or situation-based experiential learning. In general, this is an under- recognized process which flows something like this. Employee A is stumped or sees a dilemma and cannot proceed on her/his own. Employee B, more skilled and knowledgeable, is asked for help. Employee B in effect becomes a teacher/mentor and Employee A the learner. A related pattern is self-directing learning that most of us undertake in work settings. We are often unaware that our self-directing learning is of value and can be recognized as legitimate learning.

6. Employee to employee sharing of what her/his role entails. The genuine curiosity of one employee about the what and how of a colleague's work, coupled with that colleague's desire to share, drives this kind of learning.

Apprenticeship arrangements are one version of this practice.

Conscious learning strategies focused on customers, service acquirers, volunteers and students are far less developed in workplace and community settings. Clinical training arrangements in many professional training programs are often luxury items in community groups, small businesses or non-profit organizations.

*In the day to day of the working world, I am struck by how production-oriented even the service-oriented community based organizations are. There is no time for learning; it is a luxury no one can afford. We don't have time for learning or for reflection. We are too busy writing grants or trying to think that we are helping people... I think that reflection has the most fundamental practicality. We **need** time to engage in analysis and reflection. This is taken away from poor people, and I think that is the most dehumanizing element of being poor.*

As reflection practices are strengthened on many campuses, not only students will benefit. Community cooperation with academic centers can be mutually beneficial and reciprocal.

Some workplaces and community groups decry the fact that college graduates arrive unprepared for work. So we begin to see resources such as *Meeting the Demand: Teaching 'Soft' Skills*, prepared by Delta Pi Epsilon, the national honorary graduate society for business education programs.

*Research shows that affective skills, such as the ability to work with others, to communicate effectively, to demonstrate initiative and self-direction, to solve problems, and to generally demonstrate a positive work ethic, are the skills most demanded by employers of today's entry-level employees. However, it is this same set of skills that industry and political leaders claim our schools are not adequately teaching the youth of America. A gap between these "affective" or soft skills demanded by today's employers and those skills provided by our educational institutions seems to exist (Wilhelm, p. iv).*

The first paper in the collection addresses The Skill Building Challenge: Preparing a Bridge for the Workforce Skills Gap.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, an advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education, convenes "the business community, education leaders, and policy-makers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education to ensure every child's success as citizens and workers in the 21st century. The Partnership encourages schools, districts, and states to advocate for the infusion of 21st century skills into education and provides tools and resources to help facilitate and drive change"

(<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php>).

There is a dynamic relationship between the academic institution and the workplace or nonprofit agencies, the places at which students gain experiential education and integrate service-learning into their curriculum, to prepare fully equipped college graduates. This relationship must be nurtured and considered reciprocal.

In order to maximize the potential, there must be concentrated conversation between those who can link community needs with student learning. Together, when both community needs and student learning are connected, the cultural nuances in communities and workplaces, workplace and community infrastructure, become essential in creating and sustaining effective partnerships.

**Call to action:** Document the nature and scope of learning practices in the workplace and community as a precursor to working out agreements about linking student learning with community interests. Also consider the creation of learning pathways for students employed in workplaces while also enrolled in classes.

### Cultural nuances in communities and workplaces

*We would like to see faculty and students come into our spaces with an interest in how we see ourselves, our situations and our hopes. And particularly, see that there are multiple perspectives about what matters, about what and how to do the necessary work.*

*Universities engaged in outreach often assume that the community is needy and deficient. With such an assumption, campuses cannot expect the community to be an equal partner. For the self-defined role as expert, as an inherent attitude, creates a tension that may or may not always be brought up to them by the community . . . This plays out when students come to us to give and contribute without any awareness that the community has some expertise.*

I have heard these and similar stories at workshops or through surveys that reflect community partners' perceptions that higher education does not consider them full partners.

When speaking at a workshop about my impression that campuses "create safe places unhooked from the world ... and what students and faculty do on campus in pursuit of learning does not necessarily have immediate consequences beyond those boundaries," an experienced community organizer with a long history of involvement with students challenged me.

*I can't imagine an institution more imbued with the intricacies of politics, power, and privilege than an educational institution. It is precisely this notion that education is somehow removed from the world that masks what I feel poor people know either intuitively or intimately. And that is campuses, especially in the USA, are deeply connected to the operant power structures in our society, and also engage deeply in reinforcing and in perpetuating them. The idea that the world is somehow separate from the educational institution creates a false division between what is 'experience' and what*

*is 'world.' In my opinion, it is all experience and world: structured differently, perhaps, but nevertheless, not beyond examination. The students cannot examine their educational institution's politics or policies because they are too busy 'learning.' It is no different than a working person who has no time to examine their own daily life because they are too busy loving it.*

"It is all experience and world . . ." " . . . come into our spaces with an interest in how we see ourselves . . ." " . . . universities . . . often assume that the community is needy and deficient . . ." These comments suggest that some of our fundamental cultural positions must be examined as we seek to engage campuses and communities in shared work.

Seth Pollack (1996) offers a strategy for exploring assumptions about the community being more involved in linking community interests with student learning. He has suggested that our views of service, education and democracy are contested areas in our culture, and the stance an individual or organization takes influences how communities and campuses connect their interests. These contested areas are:

- Along a continuum of possibilities, is service seen as providing charity to "those less fortunate," or creating and sustaining service programs to minister to those unable to care for themselves; or providing opportunities for individual growth and capacity building among those seeking more economic and spiritual well being; or as a means of addressing deeply imbedded social dilemmas by new forces which alter power and domination alignments in favor of more equality among all?
- Does the education offered by workplaces, communities and campuses provide knowledge and skills to students for fitting into the status quo in the culture or for working for fundamental change and transformation in relationships and power alignments?
- Since the creating of the Constitution, notions of democracy have been contested. Do we see able citizens from all walks of life as full and active participants in the process of governing or do we choose to promote an elite, educated, domineering group to govern on behalf of the masses?

**Call to action:** It would be ideal to see workplace, community and campus representatives design a process whereby these contested areas are examined locally in businesses, governmental units, non-profit organizations, community based organizations and educational institutions. Once the information is gathered, together explore where the connections and differences for learning are, and what the reality and potential are for forging learning alliances with individuals and organizations. Out of this kind of inquiry, the pedagogical, infrastructure, partnership issues and workable structures can become clearer.

Workplace and community cultures vary and are in a period of rapid change. To what extent are workplaces and communities prepared for or amenable to being a more active participant in the education of the young? What in their cultural habits and changes contribute or hinder offering more opportunities for young people to learn and work in their settings?

### Workplace and community infrastructure

*We are not prepared to deal with all the requests coming to us. The expectations for interns, service-learners, volunteers, co-op programs, community based research, career exploration are all so different and expect different things from us. We have not yet taken the time and energy to work out a policy and procedure on our end.*

*Involve us from the get go in the designing, planning, implementation and assessing students who work with us.*

As K-12 schools, community colleges, public and private higher education institutions, as well as special interest groups (e.g., retirees) seek to be engaged in public work in some way, workplace and community settings are often faced with multiple requests with widely divergent expectations. Schools and colleges send out students for:

- Exposure
- Skill development
- Practice in real work, real time situations

My experience is that campuses do not differentiate enough these three categories and thus confuse the workplace/community groups. Assisting workplaces and community groups to better understand what student learning goals are has potential for increasing the capacity for workplaces to support students. With the past decade of emphasis on academic based community service-learning, attention to workplace and community system development to manage the volume of students has often been neglected.

Workplace, community-based and academic based learning facilitators, who stand as in-between-the-systems mediating agents, are challenged to invent and sustain appropriate administrative and managerial forms for facilitating learning for all parties. Several patterns have emerged over the past couple of decades.

- In the early stages of relationship building between campuses and community groups, an individual to individual informal approach is often the pattern. Without any coordinating presence, faculty members or community outreach workers from the campus search for "sites" for student learning with a secondary interest in the outcomes for the community. One college administrator described it this way:

*At this level in my practice, I look for two characteristics in an employer or community resident with whom I want my students to work and learn —someone who demonstrates a passionate, spirited, competent commitment to her/his work and someone with a keen desire to contribute to the growth of young people.*

These are mentors who can be very helpful in supporting students. However, as demand grows, there becomes a point at which this ad hoc approach becomes problematic for workplaces and communities.

- Campuses create a Public Service Center, a Volunteer Center or a Service-Learning Center to identify community interests that can be linked to student learning. The dominant focus in many of these is that the student learning agenda is the initiating thrust and the campus staff look for connections in the community that make a good match. With careful planning, the notion of the community providing the context **and content** for learning is possible in these arrangements.
- A clearinghouse approach, coordination by a community wide Voluntary Action Center, a United Way or some form of interagency council, creates a “wish list” from agencies and organizations for voluntary action assistance. The clearinghouse identifies tasks and suggests matches, yet the next stage of establishing relationships, declaring interests and capacities, negotiating roles and expectations, arranging details of when and where and how long, and sorting out the reflection and assessment pieces still remains to be done in each specific locale. The focus of many clearinghouses is not learning, but on arranging person power to serve “community needs.” When a clearinghouse assists with thoughtful preparation that includes learning agendas, then this can be a winning combination for all parties.
- Partnership Agreement Models such as those between academic health sciences educational centers and local community hospitals offer an approach rooted in a shared understanding and common purpose of the two entities.

For fourteen years I oversaw the arrangements which brought twenty full-time tenure track faculty from over a dozen academic departments into a community hospital 30 miles from the university on a daily basis along with an average of 100 health science students. To manage this, the university and the hospital developed five year operating agreements spelling out common grounds for serving the hospitals’ interests and serving the learning interests of students. Then each budget year, the two parties would negotiate a formal contract agreement, spelling out just how many professors and students would be rotating through, in what areas and with what privileges in the hospital, and most importantly, who was to pay for what. A mediating administrative unit, jointly paid for by the hospital and the university, monitored the arrangement. The faculty conducted research, taught and also served the



medical needs of the indigent population of the area. Cross disciplinary teaching/learning took place. Tensions between the hospital and the teaching service often arose, but the administrative staff strove to build and sustain conditions and relationships which made it possible for the tensions to be creative and not destructive.

Some colleges are now engaged in larger, organized approaches looking at human and environmental issues in a broad and connected way. Growing out of regional planning efforts, broad based future search processes or other similar patterns, institutions are forging analysis and plans for improving human and natural systems well being. In these arrangements, the context and content for learning clearly evolves from a community interest perspective. There is a conscious effort to link the student learning interests within the context of the priorities of the regional body. Campuses are discovering that within this integrated, comprehensive framework they can locate unlimited opportunities to fulfill their major mission of preparing students for an active and contributing life as well as contribute to public well being in the area. Campuses are also being seen as active members of the "fabric" of the wider community and not set apart, or acting solely as "experts."

In some instances, a few major external funding sources have insisted that local community groups be equal partners in funding and program design activities which seek to link community interest with student learning and/or campus engagement on a wider scale. Funding goes equally to the community groups and the campus. Power and control over program is shared equally. Outcomes and assessment strategies are determined collaboratively.

**Call to action:** Explore the structural supports in place in workplaces and communities for linking student learning with community interests. Identify where the context and content for learning grows out of community interests. Link your findings to the suggestions made in parts I and II.

### Creating and Sustaining Partnerships

*Healing the tensions experienced by community folk will occur when academic folk begin to let go of the need to be the expert and begin to realize that community organizations are not passive recipients of outreach; rather they are active contributors to the teaching and learning process. Service does not flow one way.*

*We need to break down racial barriers. Stereotypes based on socioeconomic status – particularly those harbored by traditional students – need to be challenged early on in a program.*

*I believe that dialogue is the key that runs through all this work. We need to listen to each other, to hear, to share, to feel safe enough to share our feelings, talk about our*



*differences, understand what has helped shape our thinking, our beliefs, how we see the world and each other in it. . . The idea of dialogue assumes that we are all equals, with equal amounts to share. In order to really listen, you must truly believe that you come to the dialogue as equal partners – that the learning and listening will be mutually beneficial, that we each will be enriched in some way.*

These observations by community practitioners experienced with student engagement frame a dialogue about partnerships. What comes through in these comments is a plea that thinking and practice move from a paternalistic/expert dominance pattern to a sense of partnership and shared ownership.

With these concerns as the bedrock for forging partnerships, a practical concern relates to the aim of partnerships. Are we focused on instrumental or sustainable partnerships? Instrumental partnerships focus on getting a single project going. They last for a semester or shorter term, typically involve two partners and are not dependent on close interpersonal relationships among the partners. Sustainable partnerships focus on creating a long term—five or more years – basis for mutual work and learning among multiple partners. Common interests are thoroughly explored, and close personal relationships are essential. (17)

Since most community-campus relationships are initiated by campuses at this time, and the campuses speak of “their” partners, there has been little in the literature about the costs and benefits of this partnering to business, governmental, non-profit and CBO entities. To empower the community to be greater participants in initiating conversations, I worked with community partners to create a “poster” or template that assists community partners in paying attention to practical considerations as their services are increasingly in demand. Workplace or community representatives asked to create opportunities for students to work and learn in their settings can review their responses to the items on the poster and hopefully have a basis for opting in or out of the request.

## POSTER FOR WORKPLACE AND COMMUNITY SETTINGS

### **Questions to ask when approached by a college seeking opportunities for students and faculty to learn and contribute in your community or workplace setting.**

1. Given what needs to be done in this place at this time, in what ways will community residents be impacted or served well by student/faculty service and learning activities?
2. What has been our relationship and communication pattern with the academic group seeking to locate students with us?
  - a. What capacities do we have for creating or sustaining an active learning environment for students and faculty?

- b. What challenges exist for building or sustaining a high level of trust and communications with the school or college? **And what steps can be taken to address them?**
3. What policies and procedures are in place in this organization with respect to supervising students, for pay or not for pay? Who has responsibility for contracts, liability, confidentiality, accountability, transportation, attendance records, pay, space allocation, assessment, and ownership of the work products of the students and faculty?
4. What are the direct and indirect costs to the workplace or community organization in this relationship?
5. On a personal level, if I am to be a direct supervisor or major contact of student(s):
  - a. Given my current work responsibilities, what is the minimum/maximum time I have to participate in the planning, negotiating, orienting, counseling, overseeing, befriending, assessing with student(s)?
  - b. What is my time worth in working with a student(s)? What should be a fair compensation or trade-off for my teaching and work with a student(s)?
  - c. Am I prepared to insist that a faculty member meet with me, some residents of the community to be impacted, and the student(s) prior to and during the activity?
  - d. In what ways will this activity contribute to my own learning goals?
  - e. In what ways will this activity contribute to my capacity to serve the greater well being of the citizens our group seeks to serve well?

Workplace and community groups are encouraged not to limit their sights only to student engagement, but to look for broader areas of common concern which bring them together with campuses, exploring what it means for campuses to be more engaged in the overall fabric of a community and vice versa. Since leaving fulltime work in the field, I know there have been significant advances in integrating community-based research (CBR), as well as efforts to integrate philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship. These additions well-complement experiential education and service-learning in the community.

Much has been written about partnerships. Each setting has the opportunity to invent new or adapt already tried patterns. A three year study by NSEE, focused on sustainable partnerships in three parts of the country. Their tentative hypothesis linked student learning and community interests.

*When individuals and organizations, as self-conscious partners, claim their own voices; listen carefully to other voices; build trust and respect in relationships; discover common ground; declare shared goals; and assess their impacts with rigor, they become more able to create sustainable partnerships that link service-learning and community development (19).*

There is no one blueprint for creating and sustaining partnerships. A consistent theme in the studies I have seen points to building and sustaining personal relationships and trust as major factors.

**Call to action:** a) Representatives from all interested parties spend up front time in getting to know one another as persons as well as their roles. Listen to what matters to each person. Make sure communication patterns are based on sharing opinions rather than 'the absolute truth,' check the implications of past relationships perhaps tainted by passivity or dominance, and make time for these conversations to be a part of most formal and informal ongoing gatherings. b) During this process carefully consider the short and long term interests of each entity. Evolve policies, procedures and operating structures which provide guidance and support for the levels of engagement chosen.

## Conclusion

Discovering the richness and patterns of learning which emerge from the context and content of community life at multiple levels; exploring the contested areas of service, education and democracy among all the players; inventing workable administrative mechanisms for managing the day to day efforts; and sustaining the engaged partnership systems which grow out of these efforts requires intentional, focused and well managed attention by institutional and grassroots leaders. Workplaces and communities can evolve supportive conceptual and management systems for engaging creatively with campuses that seek to broaden the base for learning sufficient to prepare young people for lives of commitment.

As an approach to learning from the context and content of community interests evolves, with community and campus relationships of trust and integrity at the core, then it is reasonable to expect that over time we shall see a resurgence of the young and the old in their commitments to sustaining a more just society and active democracy where linked learning and doing are at the core of the educational enterprise.

## References

Council of Independent Colleges, from *Engaging Communities and Campuses, Project Announcement and Working Paper*, Washington, DC. January, 2000.

National Society for Experiential Learning report by Larry Baillis, *Evaluation of the NSEE's National Community Development Project: Final Report (first draft)* November, 1998, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.

National Society for Experiential Learning, *Building Sustainable Partnerships: Linking Communities and Education Institutions*, by Robert Sigmon, Winter 1998.

Pollack, S. S. *Higher Education's Contested Service Role: A Framework for Analysis and Historical Survey*. Stanford, Calif.: Haas Center for Public Service, 1996.

Wilhelm, W.J., Logan, J., Smith, S. and Szul, L. *Meeting the Demand: Teaching "Soft Skills."* Delta Pi Epsilon, 2002.