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ee-Learning: The Best Road to Adulthood?

by Linda Chisholm

A cartoon in the March 2006 issue of the *New Yorker* pictured a disheveled young man staggering into a room uttering these words, "I went away on spring break a boy, I return an alcoholic." Funny? Well, yes, unless you have read of a student dead of alcohol poisoning or learned of a friend's daughter date-raped at a college party. Or, less dramatic but no less notable, if you have interviewed and hired recent college graduates and been struck by their inability to write and speak the English language correctly and their lack of general knowledge that you would expect every college-educated person to have.

Barrett Seaman paints a similarly bleak picture of America's college and university students in his recent book, *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess* (2005). As indicated by his alternate subtitle, Seaman describes "what your college student won't tell you" about campus life, showing little by way of studying and a lot by way of out-of-control parties. The book contains no surprises for deans and others who work with today's college students and see their performance in class and their behavior outside of the classroom. While it is true that countless students do not fit this pattern and successfully finish their college education as responsible adults, the negative trends documented by Seaman have led some to wonder if college catalogs should be labeled "the Surgeon General warns that college attendance may be bad for your health."

These issues may seem far removed from the topic of ee-learning, defined by Eskow as the pairing of electronic and experiential learning in a single mode of pedagogical practice (Trevitte and Eskow [2007](#)). Yet it is my argument here that ee-learning—particularly when it is based on the service-learning model of pedagogy already adopted by some institutions—can offer a means of imparting the behaviors and values of mature adulthood far more effectively than many current forms of on-campus practice.

The Decline of Community in the Traditional College Campus: Some Historical Reflections

The college in America has, since its earliest days, been understood as a place for adolescents to grow into adulthood. Too old to stay at home under mother's watchful care and father's discipline, yet too immature to assume adult responsibilities, the nineteenth-century adolescent was sent to a college as a safe transitional place (Handlin and Handlin 1971). Usually in a rural setting away from the temptations of the city, often church-related, and possibly for a single sex, the nineteenth-century college provided a protected environment in which mature, wise adults could direct students' growth into intellectual, emotional, and spiritual adulthood. The college acted *in loco parentis*. Faculty, who often were also clergymen, oversaw not only the studies but also the extracurricular lives of students. Parties were chaperoned. Required chapel was an occasion for the students to absorb the beliefs and values of their teachers, who took turns delivering the daily homily. Faculty members lived in the campus community, where they saw the students in various roles on campus and were in turn seen by them. The teachers were not just intellectual role models but also models of ethical behavior. The apex of the curriculum was the senior-year course in moral education taught by the president.

Of course, students chafed under such control and sought to break out whenever possible. Campus riots and organized protests were not unknown. Pranks and crib sheets gave evidence that beating the system was an admired goal for some. But nonetheless, students called the college their *alma mater* and sang with vigor such songs as "Harvard, fair Harvard, I was molded to manhood by thee." Young people went to college to become not just scholars, but gentlemen as well. There they acquired the behaviors and values that would make them honored when they returned to the small towns of America to become leaders. Some got no

further than learning how to wear the right cravat, but for most, the process inculcated the values and characteristics associated with being a responsible, educated, and mature adult.

Today much has changed. Huge institutions, large classes, faculty living far from the community, unsupervised dorms, and unsupervised parties all conspire to separate students from adult example, adult experience, adult behavior. Demands on faculty time similarly work to distance teachers from students, so that professors are unaware of the behavior of students outside of class and unavailable to provide contrary examples. The push to publish places research first on the faculty member's list of priorities, and in many institutions the faculty union contract limits the number of contact hours even the most dedicated teachers can have with their students. At the same time, there are ever fewer occasions, such as convocations, at which the college community gathers to express shared values. While many smaller liberal arts and community colleges have tried to avoid such corrosive effects in their campus settings, economic pressures to increase enrollment have made it difficult to maintain the nurturing environment of previous eras.

And yet, as parents and as a nation, we continue to send our adolescent sons and daughters to college, expecting them to return as mature, self-disciplined adults. Too many, as the *New Yorker* cartoon suggests, come back not more in control of their lives, but less so, still lacking the qualities of the mature adult. In the face of this simple truth, why do we persist in believing that separating young people from adults and limiting their real contact with older peers—the all-too-common pattern in so many college environments today—will lead to their growing up?

The Professional Co-op Model and the Service Learning Model: Their Relative Benefits

As one strategy to address these problems, many colleges both large and small promote adult socialization and skill development through co-op or apprenticeship programs. Typical examples would include programs in which students serve as interns in the healthcare professions, teaching aides or tutors in K-12 schools, or assistants in the fields of publishing, business, or law. The advantages of this model are considerable: Student participants often receive a salary; they gain intensive exposure to the working environments they seek to enter; and they begin to internalize the sort of adult social identity that may be lacking within the walls of their university campuses. Moreover, for some professions, such programs are likely to be the only way for students to gain direct exposure to the real-life settings of their chosen field prior to graduation. At the same time, this model does have its limitations; it typically does not instill any broader ethos in students beyond their own career advancement. While it may succeed in socializing students as working adults, it does not generally promote the broader humanitarian, philanthropic, or leadership values that we associate with the traditional university education.

It is for this reason that another model—the service-learning model—has continued to provide a vital alternative that is both practical and holistic in socializing students as responsible, professionally skilled adults. In the United States and all over the world, reliable service agencies are providing needed help to communities. These organizations are led by caring, highly responsible, self-sacrificing, honest, mature, imaginative, and hard-working individuals. They are professionals who know their subject and can apply their education to real problems. They know how to make the most of limited resources. The nature of their work requires that they know something about political systems, cultural norms, organizational behavior, financial management, and a host of other subjects that the educated, effective, and mature person should know. They must not only know *about* these things; they must know how to use them constructively to gain community support and engage paid staff and volunteers in a positive enterprise. In summary, they are just the sort of people we hope our children will become—and, consequently, ideal teachers of the values and behaviors of adulthood. They are genuinely interested both in the individual student volunteer and in imparting knowledge.

In the last two decades, educators in the United States and around the world have become skilled at the pedagogy of linking formal academic study to community service. One can find examples of curricula linked to community service in practically every academic discipline and professional training program, as

documented for the Ford Foundation (Berry and Chisholm 2000). In this model, community service becomes just as important a source of information as the classroom, the library, the Internet, interviews, case studies, the laboratory, and the studio. As in these traditional learning contexts, the service experience is rigorously analyzed and critiqued by its practitioners and participants. A number of studies have examined service learning as a pedagogical model, often with favorable assessments; research has shown that service learning can be a powerful educational tool ([Exhibit 1](#)). However, universities have yet to take the next step in service learning: leveraging the power of technology to facilitate the off-campus work of student volunteers. If service learning has become a powerful means of learning using the traditional on-campus teaching methods, there is no reason why it cannot be incorporated into electronic learning models, as well.

Combining the Service-Learning Model with e-Learning Technologies: Possible Modes of Application

The potential of e-learning technologies to support and enhance the service-learning model is considerable, especially in light of the power of such technologies to overcome time and space constraints that may otherwise limit the applications of such a model. Information technology can allow student volunteers more flexibility in study time, freeing them to meet the practical demands of professional settings. As such technology promotes convenient communication with mentors or colleagues at remote locations, student volunteers can receive advice, feedback, or consultation in a timely fashion while they meet the challenges presented by their projects.

As we imagine linking distance learning and community service, several possible patterns become apparent:

- Students engaged in the same type of service, such as literacy education, prenatal health care, or micro-business, whether in their local communities or in other locations around the world, could be enrolled in a distance-learning course with an expert in the field.
- Students could perform service at a location far from campus while continuing their on-campus studies via e-learning guided by home institution faculty.
- Partnerships between academic institutions offering ee-courses could create shared classes with truly international faculty and equally diverse student enrollment.

Within these different modes, the possibilities of practical application are myriad. Imagine, for example, students enrolled in a distance-learning course in international economics. One student may be in the Peace Corps in Senegal, another a Jesuit volunteer in Honduras, another volunteering at the International YMCA in Hong Kong, and another at the United Nations office in Manila. Each student could offer the class a different perspective on the effects of World Bank or International Monetary Fund policies on the region in which he or she is serving.

Other possible scenarios may be imagined as well. One might envision an electronic degree program organized by teachers from Silliman University in the Philippines, Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador, Ben Gurion University in Israel, and Wittwatersrand University in South Africa—all institutions that specialize in environmental issues. Imagine the richness of such a program if the students were all addressing environmental issues in their own communities around the world, comparing the problems they were encountering, and sharing their experiences with proposed solutions. Likewise, imagine the collaboration that might take place between students in New Orleans and Aceh, Indonesia, as they participate in flood recovery efforts while studying the impact of such disasters on human settlements and the human psyche—perhaps under the direction of the faculty of Imperial College, London.

Such applications may just as easily involve efforts closer to home. Students in a single city could complete their undergraduate degrees while working full time at not-for-profit organizations, using online technology to pursue their studies at home, at night, or on weekends; some employers would so welcome the added education for their employees that they would make further time available for such learning at work, especially if the educational projects assigned to students could benefit the organization. Whether the case

be local or global, electronic learning technologies hold much potential in making learning and service not only compatible, but mutually enhancing.

Implementation Issues: Recommendations for Institutions

Arranging such service-learning ee-programs requires attention to a number of issues if the program is to have academic integrity, if the service is to be beneficial to the host agency, and if the students are to be safe and adequately supported. Based on my experience with service-learning initiatives and pedagogies, I would highlight just a few fundamental issues for institutions to consider as they plan and implement such programs.

Establish Partnerships to Accommodate the Distinctive Needs of the Community

One of the reasons that academic institutions committed to electronic learning have not taken the step of linking study to service is that the task appears daunting. But that is largely because these institutions are accustomed to working alone. Acting as small fiefdoms, they have for the most part failed to build collaborative partnerships with other organizations. Twenty-five years of traditional service-learning experience have convinced practitioners that such a one-sided approach is unwise and unproductive. While the university brings important expertise to a problem, the institution must listen to community organizations to determine how community needs can be met by student volunteers. The determination of the specific service work to be done must be left to established service organizations whose personnel are uniquely qualified to identify what will be most helpful in a particular community.

This also means that the university must seek out the right partner, depending on the topic to be studied and the learning outcomes sought. This is best done by finding what a service-learning leader in Jamaica has humorously but accurately called "the native informant"—someone familiar with the work of a large number of service providers in a particular location or a particular field. Such a person would know which agencies are well led and would be able to assist the university in making contact with these partner agencies. Once potential partners have been identified, the process of negotiation begins as the university and the agency explore whether the partnership will work to meet their respective goals.

Establish Work Commitment

The first question the agency personnel will ask is how many hours a week and for how many weeks the volunteer will work. Most agencies have had enough experience with traditional service-learning students and volunteers over the years to know that having a student engaged in service fewer than ten hours a week is more trouble than it is worth. The time spent in planning a program, orienting, supervising, and evaluating is greater than the benefit and therefore not worth the investment for the agency. As previously noted, however, information technologies can play a key role in this context because they allow greater flexibility for students to distribute their time between study and on-site volunteer work. Students in an ee-learning program could work longer hours at their service, and do so at whatever time of day, week, or year is most useful to the agency.

Establish Academic Credit

The first thing students and faculty will want to know is how academic learning is measured, evaluated, and credited. Academic credit should not be awarded for service alone, but for demonstrated learning. Students in a biology class are not given credit for looking through a microscope but rather for their understanding of what they see (measured by tests or written papers); similarly, students volunteering in a center for at-risk children are not credited for having taught children to read but rather for their knowledge about the academic subject. In such a case the subject might be the process of learning to read, the effect of poverty on children, or any of a host of other topics. The student volunteers may interview professional staff, read case studies of the agencies where they serve (if given permission by their supervisors), and, as in traditional study, seek information from the library and Internet. The point is that the student and professor agree on the subject to

be studied and the way in which the student will present his or her findings. The professor is in charge of evaluating the student's learning and of assigning a grade.

Ensure Needed Facilities and Infrastructure

One important issue that universities and agencies may need to negotiate, particularly in poorer parts of the United States and in less-developed countries, is the availability of appropriate computer facilities.

Universities establishing ee-learning programs will want to know not only that there are available computers, but also that there are available connections should the students take their own laptops, and that the power source is reliable where the student resides. To address this issue, universities and service agencies may need to distribute costs, and students may need to accommodate such costs as well.

Provide Cultural Orientation

Another important consideration is how the students will be oriented and continually advised about the culture of the agency and the location. This concern is of importance whether the student is doing the service locally or away from the home community. While we usually think of culture on a grand scale—regional or national—the reality is that every small community and every organization has its own culture, which the outsider must be aware of and prepared to respond appropriately to. The healthy young person going into a residential treatment center or home for the elderly, the middle class student working in impoverished urban or rural settings, the literate working with the illiterate—all require cultural sensitivity. Of course, students are not expected to have this knowledge before entering a service-learning program; rather, working cooperatively with others very different from themselves is a primary skill they will acquire during the course of the program. The point here is that in planning an ee-learning program, the sponsoring university must ensure that someone will oversee and guide the student in gaining this skill. Sometimes a professional at the agency can direct such learning. Sometimes a faculty member can be the cross-cultural communication teacher. Experience indicates, however, that by far the best arrangement is a combination of on-site teaching and off-site academic supervision, so that the students can learn from each resource as needed.

Consult with Other Organizations

In arranging an ee-learning program, especially if the students are to be engaged in service far from home or campus, a university would do well to consult with organizations such as the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership ([IPSL](#)) that are experienced in placing students in service overseas or in diverse domestic locations and linking the service to academic learning. An organization such as IPSL, with its almost twenty-five years of service-learning programs in international and intercultural settings, knows how to establish partnerships with appropriate service agencies and work with the sponsoring university to design electronic course work that takes full advantage of the learning opportunity offered by the service setting. The learning will surely include the usual content of academic courses but, we would hope, also the learning which comes from intentional observation of the skills and qualities of the service professionals, the community members, and other leaders of the community.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities have a deep financial, ethical, and intellectual investment in maintaining their campuses and their control over the process of moving young people into adulthood. But the fact is, in far too many cases, the current system of campus-based higher education is failing our young people. Leveraging the advantages of technology to extend higher education into professional environments where students can work alongside powerful adult role models could only be a good thing for all. Recognizing that higher education must be a part of the preparation for adult responsibility, the wedding of electronic learning and experiential learning—especially service learning—may be just the answer parents, students, and our society have been looking for.

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