

## **Incorporating Service Learning in Your Courses: Tips from the Trenches**

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# **Incorporating Service Learning in Your Courses: Tips from the Trenches**

## **Leah Greden Mathews**

### **Abstract**

Service learning is a form of experiential learning that can benefit the student, the campus, and the community. This paper is designed to introduce faculty to service learning, and assist instructors with the nuts and bolts of designing and implementing a successful service learning experience for students.

### **Introduction**

Innovative teaching is increasingly valued on college and university campuses, but faculty are faced with serious time constraints and thus may not always have time available to investigate new teaching techniques. Service learning is a form of experiential learning that can benefit the student, the campus, and the community. It can provide a unique link between traditional course work and the real world not realized with other teaching pedagogies such as the use of case studies. This paper is designed to introduce faculty to service learning and assist instructors with the nuts and bolts of designing and implementing a successful service learning experience for students.

### **Background: What is Service Learning?**

Service learning links students with the real world by having them provide a valuable service to an organization that is linked with the course content in some way; most often this will be a nonprofit or governmental organization. For example a course in Environmental Economics may have students do service learning projects with local environmental groups or government

agencies that deal with environmental issues; an Econometrics class may have students doing regression analysis for a community group (Hoyt). There are many types of service learning projects. Some projects involve ‘action research’ where students do research specified by the organization, while other projects are more like traditional volunteer work. One example of a service learning project involving action research in a Natural Resource Economics course involved a student researching the in situ value of water for the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition; a volunteer work type project is building homes for Habitat for Humanity for a Land Economics course.

### **Motivation: The Benefits of Service Learning**

Service learning appears to offer benefits to students in a number of ways, in part by providing “an avenue to connect students’ living with their learning” (Astin et al). Research by Phillips indicates that requiring students to actively use the material they’re learning may lead to improved retention. This may imply that students’ economic literacy can be improved by incorporating service learning with traditional course work. In addition, recent research by Astin et al found that service participation had a significant positive effect on academic performance. Providing students with relevant, real-world experiences also prepares them for life after graduation, and may contribute to a sense of belonging to the community.

However, it’s not just the students that can benefit from service learning. The class environment may be enriched by discussions of student experiences with service learning; faculty may find it

easier to lead discussions on some topics when the students are also providing real-life examples of textbook phenomenon (Mathews). Faculty may also find service learning can be used to further their own research program (Willis). The organization receives a valuable service in exchange for the opportunity costs involved with student monitoring and guidance (which vary depending on the project). In addition, the organization's economic literacy may be improved by hosting an agricultural economics student. The campus may also benefit from improved university-community relations.

### **A Strategic Plan For Incorporating Service Learning in Your Courses**

First, faculty need to consider whether the goals of service learning projects (including putting theory into practice, or *praxis*) fit with their overall course, teaching, and professional goals. Generally, if you have as one of your course objectives that students be able to link their classroom experiences with the real world, then service learning may be a good fit. However, it may be that incorporating an innovative teaching technique cannot be accommodated with one's shorter term constraints, including the time constraints of a tenure clock. Service learning may be a better fit in courses that are more applied in nature or issues-oriented, and may be easier to incorporate in some classes when compared to others. The general rule of seeking out people on your campus or in your community that may have experience or an interest in service learning, and making contact with faculty on other campuses that have used service learning successfully, applies here. Before you decide whether or not to offer service learning in your courses, ask these individuals about their experiences so that you have a realistic set of expectations about

time commitments, pedagogical usefulness, and potential pitfalls. Willis offers specific advice on how to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of service learning for faculty.

Once you have made the decision to use service learning, begin by incorporating service learning into just one course, and begin planning at least one semester in advance. In addition, seek out assistance from offices on your campus that may be of assistance. Many universities now have offices devoted solely to service learning or experiential education; if your campus is not one of them, it probably has an office or position devoted to helping students find volunteer opportunities in the community which can help with organizational contacts. Use these contacts--and your own--to help you determine a list of potential service learning sites for your students. If possible, contact them (or have your service learning or volunteer office contact them) to give them a clear picture of your goals and objectives for student experiences with service learning. Ask organizations if they would be interested in learning more about how their organization can fit into your service learning plans, and if they are willing to forgo the opportunity costs involved (mostly time spent guiding and monitoring students). While you don't necessarily need to have projects already set up for students before the semester begins, it is useful to present project options for students to consider. In addition, it will be less frustrating for students if you or your campus connections are able to 'weed out' organizations that may not be interested in participating in service learning projects with your students. Service learning is a very flexible pedagogical tool; a list of sample projects and relevant organizations is provided in Table 1 to give faculty an idea of how it can be used in different courses.

As with any teaching innovation, the design of the service learning project is important and requires some up front work on the part of faculty. Ideally, this design phase will benefit from the experiences of other faculty who have used service learning in their courses, as well as your campus service learning or volunteer office. McGoldrick and Ziegert provide a compilation of theory and applications of service learning in economics in several different courses that will be of great use to faculty interested in service learning. In some cases it may also be useful to incorporate the needs and objectives of the organization(s) that will be involved. Some of the items to consider when designing a service learning project include: how can I ensure experiences will be relevant to the course and meaningful to students? Will service learning be required or optional? Will students perform group or individual projects? Will they serve in non-profit, government, or for-profit organizations? How will I monitor and evaluate the projects?

In order to ensure that service learning experiences are relevant to your course, it must be the case that the service work performed by students can be tied to the course work. Initially, you, the faculty member must be able to make these links; ultimately, the students must also be able to do so in order for service learning to have pedagogical value. It is often easiest to see the potential links between service opportunities and course content with issues type courses, but Principles courses are also full of economic concepts that community organizations deal with on a daily basis such as unemployment, immigration, and poverty and income distribution. When choosing your first course to incorporate service learning, think carefully about these connections and choose the course where classroom concepts can readily be linked with potential service opportunities.

In order to ensure that student experiences with service learning further the goals and objectives of the course, students must articulate the linkages between their service work and experiences with the organization they serve and the course content. Ideally, this will be an on-going task throughout the term of the course. There are several ways to have students report on these connections including journaling, on-going class discussions, frequent short (one page) papers, or a question on each exam. In addition, at the end of the course students should be able to summarize the collective usefulness of their experience as it relates to their understanding of the course content; this may take the form of an end of class written report, oral examination, or end of class discussion.

Should service learning be required or optional for your students? Personally, I have always given students a choice between a research paper and a service learning project in order to allow student preferences to guide their experiences. Some faculty may not feel comfortable with the idea of requiring service. On some campuses, there is a student service requirement or a culture of service so that a required service learning project would not be out of the ordinary; in fact, it may fit in nicely with some campus missions. While the perception of student choice may be appealing for some, depending on how service learning and other (substitute) options are designed, there may be additional administrative burdens for faculty if students are given a choice between, say, a service learning project and a research paper. This may derive from the fact that in order to be successful, the service and research options may require different components and assignments; keeping track of two sets of these may have high administrative costs.

The question of whether or not students should do individual or group projects must also be decided. Letting students decide, perhaps based on whether or not there is mutual interest in working on a specific topic or for a specific organization, is often very attractive to students. Many students have noted that it was useful to have other students working with them; it can build comraderie, and can facilitate understanding of the links between the course content and the service experience. Logistically, it may also be useful: students can carpool to their assignments, and may be able to schedule group meetings thus promoting more efficient consultations. Depending on your course goals and objectives, it might be fruitful to consider having the entire class--faculty included--perform service with the same organization. This may be a good fit if faculty are involved in a 'first year experience' type course.

Non-profit organizations tend to be good institutions to place students. They often lack the labor required to fulfill their mission in the manner in which they prefer, they are accustomed to having short term help and the time involved in making organizational introductions, and as a result tend to be fairly comfortable allowing students to work within the organization. In addition, non-profit organizations tend to appeal to many faculty and students' philosophical notion of service, given that their work is often focused on serving the community. Government organizations may also be good sites for service learning projects, especially for courses with policy content.

Service learning projects can, however, be designed to place student in for-profit firms though this type of project tends to be less common. One problem with placing students in for-profit firms is clarifying the distinction between service learning and an unpaid internship so that it is understood clearly by the firm and the student. In general, internships have the goal of providing the student with practical experience; service learning projects have the organization's needs at



their core rather than the students'. Regardless of whether the service is to be performed in a non-profit, government, or for-profit organization, "the actual service should be meaningful and help the student conceptualize the mission of the entity that is served" (Ayers). As previously stated, in addition the service work must relate to the course content.

Monitoring service learning projects throughout the semester is not essential. However faculty may find that some type of monitoring or on-going discussion of service learning experiences is useful or even necessary in order to ensure that service experiences are helping students with their understanding of the course content. Monitoring may also be useful in order to ensure that students are performing the agreed amount of service hours. One way to do this is to require intermittent consultations with the students where each student reports on what she has done, how many hours she has worked to date, and how her experience with the organization relates to the course content. Another way is to schedule in class discussions of service experiences; this may be especially useful if students are working in several different organizations and faculty wish the remainder of the students to become familiar with and benefit from other students' experiences.

Evaluating service learning projects can be challenging since in many cases, students may not be producing any output for the organization that faculty can grade as they would traditional term papers or exams. Even if students are producing output in the form of a research report for a non-profit organization, for example, the criteria for grading that report may be quite significant from the typical research paper grading criteria since the objective of the service learning project is to fulfill the organization's goals, and you may not know (unless you ask them directly) how

well the report meets the organization's needs. One way to get around this is to grade students based on effort, such as the number of hours of service performed for an organization, or how well they met the delineated expectations such as journal assignments and participation in class discussion. Requiring a final report where students are required to outline the goals of the organization they worked with, their role at the organization, and how their work linked with course content may facilitate final grading of service learning projects. Contract grading may also be useful with service learning projects due to the inherent flexibility of the service experience that makes many student experiences unique.

### **Conclusion & Implications**

As with any teaching innovation, there are costs and benefits to incorporating service learning in your courses. High on the list of costs are the start-up costs of designing and implementing an effective service learning project. This paper provides instructors with a basic set of tools to facilitate incorporating service learning into their courses which should reduce these start-up costs. In effect, this paper allows faculty to make more efficient use of their scarce time resources and thus teach more effectively.

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Table 1: Service Learning Project Examples

<b>Course</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>References</b>
Principles of Micro or Economics of Health Care	hospital or outreach program	survey of low-income individuals without adequate health care access	Caplan
Managerial Economics	schools, Centers for Economic Education	student-based instruction	McGoldrick, Battle, & Gallagher
Econometrics	American Lung Association	investigated factors that influence the amount of money & the number of hours per week that is contributed	Hoyt
Environmental or Natural Resource Economics	Land-of-Sky Regional Council	how to insert principles of natural capitalism into strategic economic development plan	Mathews
Land Economics	Habitat for Humanity	build houses	
Agribusiness	organic growers' association	assist with marketing plan	