



The Journal of the Education Research Group of Adelaide
ISSN 1835-6850

Volume 2, Number 3, February 2012

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Differentiating service learning in an Australian higher education context

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Abstract

Service learning is a form of experiential learning that situates the learner in a community setting whilst working with a community partner. Distinguishing service learning from other forms of community-based experiential learning has been problematic. A rubric such as Furco's 'Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionization of Service-Learning in Higher Education' has proven helpful. This rubric is based on experiences in the United States and needed to be modified to capture the different educational environment that exists in Australia. This paper argues that if service learning is to be a powerful and sustainable pedagogical approach Australian universities will need to develop their own models for understanding and implementing service learning. An approach that synthesises workplace learning and service learning to create a new model of community experiential learning is suggested.

Introduction

This paper examines the challenges experienced by one Australian university as it sought to define and differentiate service learning from other forms of experiential learning. Service learning was adopted by the institution as part of a wider teaching and learning framework that formally emphasised experiential learning as an essential component of every program (Lee, 2007). The challenges discussed in this paper are not unique to this university. At Australia's First Service Learning Summit (Griffith University, 2011) these challenges resonated strongly with other institutions. The purpose of this paper is to bring these issues into the public arena and evoke discussion about service learning.

Service learning is a form of experiential learning that situates the learner in a community setting whilst working with a community partner. The nature of the service is clearly defined and chosen intentionally to align with the principle of mutuality. That is, the service needs to be of benefit to the community but at the same time it also needs to afford the student an opportunity to develop an identified learning outcome, relevant to their discipline or profession. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service learning as;

a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p.112).

A fairly simple example of a service learning activity is a course in junior primary/primary education that sends students out on placement six weeks after commencing their university studies. Unlike traditional work integrated learning placements, and their subsequent

placements, this practicum has nothing to do with learning how to teach. It is not about learning how to manage behaviour or any skill explicit with teaching. It is all about recognising the school as community and being involved with the school at all levels. These pre-service teachers spend time in the canteen, with grounds person, at the front office, the library, in literally every facet of the school including with various teachers in class rooms. They reflect on their developing understanding of the role of teachers within a school, how the school acts as a community, and the relationships they form with staff and students. They discuss critical incidents and deconstruct these incidents.

The service learning practicum differs from a work integrated learning practicum where a student would be in a class doing things like planning and teaching lessons, managing behaviour, and marking. What the service learning activity gives the student is a broader appreciation of how a school works and where the role of teacher fits within the broader understanding. At the end of the practicum most students know whether they have chosen the right profession and are also well orientated for their future placements.

Service learning has been in the pedagogic landscape in the United States (US) for over 40 years (Beatty, 2010) although the literature abounds with debate over its nature and purpose (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004; Furco, 2002a). Even within the US, where the concept and practice developed, service learning is still not always well understood in higher education and remains only variously accepted.

Great claims have been made about service learning as a powerful pedagogical approach and it has been described by Butin (2006, p. 476) as having the potential to be 'the skeleton key to unlock the power and potential of post-secondary education as a force for democracy and social justice'. Service learning has been powerfully influenced by Boyer's seminal work 'Scholarship Reconsidered' (Boyer, 1990). Service learning, Boyer argues is 'serious, demanding work, requiring the rigor and accountability traditionally associated with research activities' and that it 'must be tied directly to one's special field of knowledge' (p.22).

Participation in service learning has been demonstrated to improve academic performance, writing skills, critical thinking skills and values (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Hou, 2009). Service learning events are demanding of students and are designed to intentionally and explicitly confront students with fundamental questions relating to both personal and professional identity. Fundamental questions relating to professional and personal identity can be asked in traditional, formal higher education environments such as in a lectures or tutorials, but they can't be answered there. The expectation is that by engaging in service learning, students are able to develop an enhanced understanding of what it means to be a professional and a citizen in the 21st Century. They are what L Dee Fink describes as 'significant learning' events (Barnett, 2004; Fink, 2003a, p. 11) which are those learning events that require a synthesis of foundational knowledge, application skills, integration of knowledge, a consideration of the human dimension, caring and learning how to learn. Service learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates all these aspects of teaching and learning and in doing so has demonstrated enhancement of student autonomy and self assurance (Parker et al., 2009). Importantly, these collaborative environments are also ideal for authentically developing many of the generic qualities we claim of our graduates, but are so hard to develop in formal higher education teaching and learning spaces.

As a formalised approach to learning, service learning is relatively new to the Australian higher education setting. It is not yet clear how the method might integrate into a higher education sector which is profoundly different from the United States (Langworthy, 2007).

It is also the case that typically programs are already content heavy and many, if not most already have well developed work integrated learning courses which have strong community connections. In this sense it might be that a discrete service learning course might be of little benefit to their students. In these cases the existing work integrated learning experience might be leveraged to include a service learning dimension through minor modifications to assessment. For example a work integrated learning placement in veterinary science might ask students to re-consider their role as a member of the community dealing with questions such as why don't people come to vets? What is the responsibility of vets to care for animals whose owners can't afford treatment? What role do vets play in de-sexing beyond caring for those animals that are brought to the clinic?

The challenge of an agreed definition and purpose

A formal implementation of service learning at an institutional level needs to ensure that the objectives sought from service learning are aligned to institutional agendas and mission statements (Holland, 1997; Keating, 2006). Beatty (2010, p. 181) asserts three dominant models of service learning. The professional model which is about cognitive learning and education, the civic engagement model which is about creating active and engaged citizens and the social change model which relates to empowerment of communities and social change (Beatty, 2010, p. 181). The model chosen by an institution subsequently affects everything from the nature of the institutional infrastructure required to support service learning to the design of the courses and subsequently, to what type of learning can be expected. Holland (1997) cautions that inconsistency between the university's mission and the role of service learning may cause confusion and anxiety to those involved in the teaching.

A number of guides to institutionalising service learning exist and these have supported US educational institutions in embedding the approach with a variety of disciplines. One such rubric is Furco's rubric which was originally developed in 1999 and underwent a revision in 2002. It has been used successfully on many campuses in the United States (Furco, 2002b, p. 2). A major strength of the tool is its holistic focus on service learning combined with the recognition of the need for flexibility given diverse campus contexts (Furco, 2002b, p. 3). The rubric identifies four synergistic elements to the institutionalising of service learning, they are; (1) the relationship between institutional mission and the goals of service learning; (2) community participation and partnerships; (3) academic issues pertaining to faculty, departments and students and (4) structural and programmatic issues necessary to advance and sustain service learning. Of particular interest for the discussion in this paper is Dimension 1: Philosophy and mission of service learning which identifies three stages in the institutional development of a definition of service learning and these are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Furco's three stages of Dimension 1: Philosophy and mission of service learning

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
There is no campus-wide definition for service-learning. The term "Service Learning" is used inconsistently to describe a variety of experiential and service activities.	There is an operationalized definition for service learning on the campus, but there is some variance and inconsistency in the application of the term.	The institution has a formal, universally accepted definition for high quality service learning that is used consistently to operationalize many or most aspects of service-learning on campus.

Source: (Furco, 2002b)

Furco argues that to transition from one stage to the next, the institution must meet all of the criteria for the next stage. It is not possible for an institution to be in-between stages. The

rubric is designed to encourage discussion and debate and to identify what might be needed next in order to move the campus onwards.

Furco's rubric has been helpful in that it predicted very well the very difficulties that did in fact emerge. Further, the rubric acted as a form of validation in that it affirmed these difficulties were normal and to be expected. However, the United States has an educational system and culture quite different from other countries and very different from Australia. It should be expected that a model for institutionalisation designed for a specific context, might require modification if it is to be used in a different educational context. For example service learning, having been developed in the United States and embedded in its education system, results in the term having some form of meaning in that education system. That is, there can be a reasonable assumption that there will be activities labelled as 'service learning' albeit that at Stage 1 it is acknowledged as contested and variously defined.

This is not the case in Australia where service learning may be completely unknown to an institution. This institution's experience would suggest there is a stage that occurs before stage one where there is nothing in the institution called service learning. Table 2 below illustrates how Furco's rubric might be modified to incorporate those educational systems like Australia where it cannot be assumed that service learning has any meaning at all.

Table 2: Furco's modified stages of Dimension 1: Philosophy and mission of service learning

Stage 0	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
There is no term "service learning" used to describe learning activities, despite the possibility of activities that reflect service learning type characteristics.	There is no campus-wide definition for service-learning. The term "Service Learning" is used inconsistently to describe a variety of experiential and service activities.	There is an operationalized definition for Service Learning on the campus, but there is some variance and inconsistency in the application of the term.	The institution has a formal, universally accepted definition for high quality Service Learning that is used consistently to operationalize many or most aspects of service-learning on campus.

The lack of an awarding term did not mean that the University's programs did not engage students and communities. Indeed learning and teaching arrangements that reflect service learning-type philosophies have been employed in some discipline areas for many years, for example the 'Lapsit' project (Diamond, Meiners, Schiller, & Kalms, 2007). This project engaged early childhood education students collaborating with local government libraries, particularly in low socio-economic areas with low rates of literacy, organising early childhood reading events. In these events young children literally sat in the 'lap' (hence the name) of their parent/carer while they were engaged in a number of literacy events such as stories, rhymes and songs (Diamond et al., 2007). These types of activities are captured under a number of different names relating to practice based learning such as practicum and workplace learning.

Projects like these were successfully developed without reference to a designated pedagogy called service learning. They were pursued because they were pedagogically sound and needed by the community. In this respect it might be argued that a formalised, institutional approach to service learning has little merit. However, these projects are ad hoc, with their success often dependent on a few key people who drive the projects. What an institutionalised

approach can offer service learning is the chance to be sustainable with the university engaged through long term maturing partnerships with community organisations.

In terms of pedagogy there may be no difference between service learning and a practicum. The discrimination of an experiential learning activity in terms of whether it is, or is not, service learning, may be better articulated by ignoring the nomenclature that is assigned to the activity, and critically analysing the teaching and learning arrangements to an agreed set of service learning characteristics. For example Pigg and Gronski (2000, p. 791) call for a new type of experiential learning model to be developed that combines the technical component of the practicum, work place learning (or other nomenclature) and service learning.

Conclusion

Service learning is potentially an important part of a students' educational experience in that it provides a pedagogically advanced framework for preparing students while engaging with and contributing to, the social fabric of our communities (Bruckardt et al., 2004; Hrivnak & Sherman, 2010). Meaningful service learning type activities have evolved perfectly well without needing to have a formal pedagogy called service learning and associated institutional agendas to support them. However, the value of a formalised, institutionalised, service learning agenda is that it is likely to result in service learning being offered to students in a more regular and ongoing way, and lead to long term sustainable community collaborations.

An Australian model of service learning is needed to respond to the different educational contexts that exist in the United States and Australia. Pedagogically similar, but analytically different learning environments such as service learning and workplace learning may be difficult to discriminate. On the other hand, a synthesis between workplace learning and service learning potentially has much to offer and might be the starting point for the development of this model.

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Birbeck, D 2012, 'Differentiating service learning in an Australian higher education context', *ergo*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 27-32.

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