

Service-Learning: Connecting Practical Experience With Classroom Instruction

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Abstract

Academic programs in Parks, Recreation and Tourism have long required undergraduate students to perform professional fieldwork, practica, and/or internships as a part of their formal preparation. A current trend in higher education is to integrate this type of experiential learning throughout the academic process through a “service learning” pedagogy. This article discusses the foundations of service-learning, describes the criteria for establishing service-learning experiences, and the potential benefits of this type of teaching pedagogy.

Keywords: Service-learning, experiential education, recreation leadership.

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Experience and education have been closely associated for decades. Dewey developed a philosophy of experience in his book *Experience and Education* (1938). Yet the idea that all experiences were not equally educative was posited by Dewey:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some, experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted (1938, p.25).

Consistent with Dewey’s observations, contemporary models of human learning and instructional design have emphasized that significant learning occurs as a result of connections that learners make between new information that they encounter and existing cognitive structures that have developed from previous experiences (e.g., Bearison, 1982;

Damon, 1983; King, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Sigmon, 1990; Stanton, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Optimal learning, therefore, is not possible through disconnected classroom experiences that are directed at forcing students to compile a litany of new information for addition to an existing “files” of loosely connected data. Rather, optimal learning is a dynamic process through which new information, in the form of facts, concepts, principles, and procedures, is associated with and integrated into existing networks of knowledge in the form of schema and related cognitive structures. The key to such learning is association of new information with existing structures to create substance and meaning. Honnet and Poulsen (1989, p. 1) observed that “Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both.” Because internships, fieldwork, and other forms of “service learning” provide (and may even demand) opportunities for creating associations between classroom learning and field experiences, such learning experiences have great potential for being extremely effective mechanisms for achieving optimal learning. This paper describes the “service-learning” pedagogy that is becoming increasingly popular on university campuses and explores the central role that the parks, recreation, and tourism discipline may have in service-learning.

What is service learning?

During recent years, the challenge of identifying types of experiences that may be educative and facilitate development of associations that promote optimal learning has evolved into the service-learning pedagogy. Service-learning has been defined as follows:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning (Jacoby & Associates, 1996).

The interrelationship between the knowledge gained in the classroom and the learning that occurs in the field service is demonstrated in Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning. Kolb’s model identifies a concrete experience, reflection on the experience, synthesis and abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Service-learning activates all of these elements and thereby creates a unique and powerful learning experience.

When defining service-learning the hyphen is intentional as it represents the very essence of service-learning pedagogy. Whereas the majority of instructional programs rely on passive learning, service-learning requires the active engagement of the students in the process. Rather than students passively taking notes in a lecture and repeating what they absorb on written exams, students in a service-learning class must actively process information learned in a service. That processing results in long-term retention of skills and knowledge.

In 1995, 70 universities offered service-learning courses, with an average of 15 classes per campus. Service-learning classes are being offered by wide variety of

disciplines including education, sociology, psychology, English, accounting, political science, counseling, and social work (Miller & Steele, 1995).

How does service-learning differ from traditional internships, volunteerism, and fieldwork experiences?

Essential components of the service-learning pedagogy that separate it from most required volunteer service or the performance of professional fieldwork or practicums are the requirements of reflection and reciprocity. Jacoby and Associates (1996) noted that “service-learning is based on the pedagogical principle that learning and development do not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself but as a result of a reflective component explicitly designed to foster learning and development ” (p. 6). Reflection provides opportunities for students to grasp a deeper understanding of the theoretical concepts and principles of a class within the context of community service. Whereas the community setting provides a living laboratory for the actual application of the skills, techniques and knowledge gained in a class, the classroom provides opportunities for students to make connections between what was learned, what was successful and what requires additional knowledge or practice.

Students may reflect through a variety of methods, such as impromptu presentations, small-group discussions, essays, journals, role playing, problem solving, photo essays, or other activities that provide opportunities for sharing and relating experiences to classroom topics. The instructor of the class must develop probing questions that challenge students to reflect on affective, cognitive, and behavioral levels (Bonar, Buchanan, Fisher, & Wechsler, 1996). For example, an affective-type question might be “Did anything happen at the homeless shelter that surprised you?” A cognitive-type question would require students to reflect on a relevant topic from the class to the community service experience, such as “What types of behaviors were exhibited by the children aged 5 to 7?” Behavioral reflection would require students to better understand their own behaviors as contributing to the community situation. An example of this type of question might be “Is there anything you are doing or not doing that resulted in the participant’s negative behavior?” The instructor should schedule opportunities for reflection during class using a variety of methods. It is useful to weave these opportunities for reflection within the lecture. For instance, an instructor might pause in the middle of a lecture on managing participant behavior to permit students to inquire regarding specific situations they had experienced in the community.

Reciprocity is the second concept of service-learning that is essential in distinguishing this pedagogical method from traditional internship, volunteer, and fieldwork experiences. Kendall and Associates (1990) observed that all parties in the service-learning situation are learners and aid in shaping the experience. Students may fulfill an essential need within the community, such as providing leadership for an after-school recreation program at a local homeless shelter. As such, students may serve as role models for the children in the program and assist their parents in realizing that they may overcome their environmental challenges and assume responsibility for their own

needs in the future. The students may derive a sense of belonging to the community, a sense of social responsibility, and a better understanding of the needs of their future constituents. Rather than performing a volunteer duty, such as serving meals for people who are homeless, service-learning experiences are most beneficial to students' learning when they are provided opportunities to work *with* participants to affect long-term changes.

A Case Example: The University of Utah

The University of Utah provides an example of an institution with significant commitment to service-learning opportunities. That university has formally recognized 90 service-learning classes within a variety of disciplines, including civil engineering; geography; pharmacy; liberal education; biology; social work; family and consumer studies; technical writing; psychology; and parks, recreation and tourism. During the 1995-96 academic year, over 1500 students were enrolled in these service-learning classes generating more than 38,500 hours of community service (Bonar et. al., 1996). The University of Utah has also adopted a policy of including service-learning pedagogy as a criterion within the teaching assessment consideration for the formal review for tenure and promotion of faculty. The University's Lowell Bennion Community Service Center has a Service-Learning Scholar program, a Public-Service Professorship Program (awarding release time for one or more faculty each year), a "Borchard Service-Learning Faculty Fellows Program" (mentoring program for faculty new to service-learning) and a "Borchard Fellows Research Project" (awarding release time for four faculty to conduct service-learning research and/or teach service learning classes).

The Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah is working toward full involvement in the University's service-learning program. Toward that goal, the Department is evaluating each of its courses in terms of eight criteria that have been established by the University for designation of courses as service-learning classes:

1. Students in the class must provide a needed service to individuals, organizations, schools, or other entities in the community.
2. The service experience must relate to the subject matter of the course.
3. Activities in the class must provide a method or methods for students to think about what they learned through the service experience and how these lessons are related to the subject of the class.
4. The course must offer a method to assess the learning derived from the service. Credit is given for the learning and its relation to the course, not for the service alone.
5. Service interactions in the community must recognize the needs of service recipients, and offer an opportunity for recipients to be involved in the evaluation of the service.

6. The service opportunities must be aimed at the development of the civic education of students even though they may also be focused on career preparation.
7. Knowledge from the discipline must inform the service experiences with which the students are involved.
8. The class must offer a way to learn from other class members as well as from the instructor (Bonar et al., 1996, p. 48).

The applied nature of studies in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism has created a situation in which a number of courses reflect these eight criteria. Among the more significant of these is PRT 331, "Recreation Leadership and Supervision," which has been approved as a University of Utah Service-Learning Class. In PRT 331, students learn first hand the difficulties and rewards of being a recreation leader in Salt Lake area community centers, schools, homeless shelters or related facilities. How the University of Utah service-learning criteria are reflected in this class is presented as follows:

Students provide a needed service: Students contract with community or not-for-profit organizations, such as the Glendale Community Center, East Millcreek Community Center, Traveler's Aid Society Homeless Center and transitional housing. Participants in the student led activities include at-risk youth, latch-key children, and children living in the local homeless shelters. Through service-learning activities the community participants are provided opportunities for the development of positive socialization, physical skills, and the ability to interact with other participants without aggression. As the students near the fulfillment of the service-learning component, the students are required to prepare a transition plan for the community participants. This transition plan recognizes the needs of the participants for continuity and continued service. The transition plan includes a strategy for assisting the participants to cope with the termination of the interactions and identifies services or options for the continuation of the program.

The service experience relates to the subject matter of the course: Students practice leadership skills and behavior management techniques reviewed in the class lectures. Additionally, students study the different behaviors displayed by different age groups, which influence the style of leadership used in varying situations.

Activities in the class provide methods for students to think about what they learned through the service experience and how these learnings relate to the subject of the class. Weekly reflection sessions provide opportunities for the students to relate the content of the lectures to the experiences gained in the community setting. Students maintain journals and complete assignments designed to facilitate the blending of affective, conceptual, and behavioral learning.

The course offers a method to assess the learning derived from the service. Credit is given for learning and its relation to the course, not for service alone. Assessments are completed in both written and verbal formats. Students complete midterm and final

self-assessment papers based on the learning objectives established at the beginning of the class. Although the site supervisors report students' attendance and reliability, points are earned according to the students' performance and their ability to complete the written and verbal assessments.

Service interactions in the community recognize the needs of service recipients, and offer opportunities for recipients to be involved in the evaluation of the services. Supervisors at each of the community agencies are asked to evaluate the ability of the students to fulfill their responsibilities as recreation leaders. Participants in each of the programs are provided multiple opportunities to evaluate the program during informal feedback activities (e.g., placing smiley face stickers next to the activities they enjoyed most). Parents are invited to attend Parent-Leader conferences at which behavior, play and socialization strategies for their children are discussed. In the case of the program held at the family homeless shelter, a concurrent therapy session is held with the parents while the children are attending the evening play program. The program helps the parents to cope with the challenges of residing in a shelter for 40 families, as well as the emotional trauma of homelessness.

The service opportunities are aimed at the development of the civic education of students even though they may also be focused on career preparation. Guest speakers from community organizations are encouraged to speak with the students in the classroom regarding the service mission and the benefits of their programs. The focus of several readings, videos, in-class discussions and assignments is to provide students with a better understanding of the societal role recreation leaders provide to our community.

Knowledge from the discipline informs the service experiences with which the students are involved. The students in the PRT 331 class have been instrumental in providing positive role models for the children. The students have developed leadership, program and intervention plans that remain with each agency. Over half of the students have remained volunteering and/or working for the agency after the class has concluded. In the case of the Traveler's Aid Homeless Shelter, the organized program provides an opportunity for the children to participate in a supervised activity which would not exist without this service-learning effort.

The class offers a way to learn from other class members as well as from the instructor. The instructor facilitates weekly discussions, questions, and feedback from the students utilizing a variety of methods including brainstorming, focus groups, and impromptu two minute presentations.

In addition to PRT 331, The Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism has been involved in providing students the opportunity to become involved in community service through one-time or short-term experiences in conjunction with a variety of classes. Through various traditional courses, internships, and fieldwork experiences, for example, students may provide recreation activities at a shelter for homeless families, lead people with disabilities on adventure recreation experiences, rehabilitate human-impacted recreation sites in the natural environment, and lead challenge-course initiatives for at-

risk-youth. In addition, all students are required to successfully complete a minimum of two fieldwork practicums or internships.

A variety of benefits have resulted from involvement in service learning. These are summarized in a survey of student reactions to the service-learning approach in PRT 331. Students in the Recreation Leadership and Supervision class emphasize that service-learning activities make them more interested in attending class (73.2%), help them to understand the basic concepts and theories of the subject (67.8%), and help bring the lessons learned in the community setting back into the classroom (65.4%). Students also indicate that they do not believe that they would have learned more if more time had been devoted to classroom learning rather than to leadership exercises than in the community setting (64.2%). These results paralleled responses obtained during previous student evaluations of all University Service-Learning classes (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Spring 1996 Evaluations of Service-Learning Classes

Question	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
The service I did in this class provided a needed service to individuals, organizations, schools, or other entities in the community.	66.6%	16.6%
This course helped me understand the basic concepts and theories of the subject.	63.2%	20.1 %
I could have learned more from this class if there had been more time spent in the classroom instead of doing service in the community.	23.7%	63.9%
The service activities I performed in this class made me more interested in attending class.	43.0%	20.9%
The course helped me bring the lessons I learned in the community back into the classroom.	63.2%	14.6
Through the course I had the opportunity to share the experiences I had and the lessons I learned in the community with other students.	64.6%	17.3%

Notes. Number of responses = 144, number of classes = 11

Adapted from *Service-Learning in the curriculum: A faculty guide to course development*, by L. Bonar, R. Buchanan, I. Fisher, & A. Wechsler, 1996, October. Salt Lake City: University of Utah.

The benefits of the service-learning experience have been reflected in statements made by the students in the Recreation Leadership and Supervision class over the past three years.

- o Through my leadership in the community I have learned to recognize what techniques work in handling participant behaviors and how vital it is to be organized. I realize that I am most comfortable with a democratic style of leadership, but I must learn to use a more authoritative style of leadership when working with this age group.
- o Through my leadership in the community I have learned to speak on the kid's level, to communicate effectively. I have finally been able to contract behaviors with children so that I do not have to yell to get them to do things for me.
- o When you lectured regarding age characteristics and leadership implications, I never realized how short children's attention spans could be. You were right. Plan four times as many activities as you think you might need, because the children get bored quickly.
- o I have learned to be prepared when leading a recreation activity. I have found that the games will only work when they are well thought out. I realize how quickly the children get bored and how much easier it is to go straight from one game to another when you still have their interest and attention. I should have listened in class the first time. It wasn't until I had a disastrous experience that I realized that there is more to recreation leadership than playing games.

Additionally, both the instructor and site supervisors have observed that the students involved in the service-learning class are more motivated to ask questions and make comments during lectures regarding their experiences. A comparison of evaluations completed found that students completing the 30-hour service-learning experience received higher overall evaluations on leadership skills than students completing a one-time three-hour community leadership experience, even though the site supervisor and instructor were the same in both settings. Additionally, the mean test scores average 18 points higher for the classes completing the 30-hour service-learning class than students in the same class who have not completed the service-learning component. Attendance in the class is more consistent, although the service-learning class requires a greater time commitment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Eugene Rice (1996), who serves as Director of Forum on Faculty Roles and Awards for the American Association for Higher Education, included "experiential learning" among his discussion of three "major pedagogical developments that are having a powerful impact on faculty worlds" (p. 26). Consistent with Rice's observation, we have reviewed

the foundations of service-learning as a form of experiential learning, we have described a set of criteria for establishing service-learning experiences, and we have reviewed the benefits of a service-learning program. In conclusion, it may be useful to share a few general suggestions with faculty members who are interested in initiating service-learning experiences. Program directors interested in facilitating service-learning should first contact the community service center on their campus. These centers may be able to provide additional information and resources similar to the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center at the University of Utah.

The selection of community sites at which service-learning is conducted is a critical second step in order to ensure that the full benefits of the experience are attained. Generally, potential site supervisors will be quite excited about service learning possibilities; most report that no significant costs for the organization result from implementation of a service learning program. It is recommended that hospitals, community centers, shelters, rehabilitation centers or other non-profit organizations be considered for the community sites. These are the type of locations where students may encounter social problems that may provide a deeper community responsibility or understanding of the vital role our discipline has in the quality of life of people of all abilities and disabilities. An essential element of the service-learning pedagogy is the requirement that experiences closely parallel the theoretical and practical knowledge being taught in the course. This requires instructors to establish a partnership with community leaders and professionals to provide appropriate experiences and supervision for students. These community leaders become on-site instructors while working closely with the University sponsor.

The first attempt at a service-learning class will require additional time than the more traditional approach. Therefore, a program wishing to implement a service-learning class may consider starting with a one-time or short series of service opportunities followed by reflection exercises in the classroom. During this phase the instructor should train the on-site supervisors; develop and refine the contract format between the student and community site, evaluation forms, reflection journal or diary format; and institute other administrative details. This phased or incremental introduction to the service-learning pedagogy will be beneficial in ensuring the provision of a class that facilitates all four spheres of service-learning: knowledge, service-learning experience, reciprocity and reflection. It is these dimensions which provide the unique difference between the more traditional fieldwork or internship programs and service-learning classes. Finally, it may be useful to consider adding service-learning to existing criteria used for evaluating professors' teaching contributions in their review, promotion and tenure process. The University of Utah has observed in a few cases that reviewers have classified service-learning pedagogy within the service component rather than within the teaching component of the evaluation. Therefore, the university has initiated a program to educate faculty and administrators regarding the importance of service-learning as an important innovation in teaching.

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