Defining Service-Learning

Since Robert Sigmon’s seminal article “Service-learning: Three Principles” (1979) helped to establish and formalize the pedagogy, individuals, as well as programs and institutions, have created numerous definitions for “service-learning.” Although specific understandings vary, as the field has grown and matured, the range of definitions has begun to converge on several core characteristics of service-learning. A few oft-cited definitions include:

Service-learning is 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 personal values and civic responsibility.”

Service-learning is a “method under which students… learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with… an institution of higher education… and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students… and includes structured time for the students… to reflect on the service experience.”

“Service-learning is the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service-learning is Dewey’s: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning… Learning starts with a problem and continues with the application of increasingly complex ideas and increasingly sophisticated skills to increasingly complicated problems.”

Consensus on the essential elements of the pedagogy:

• integration of learning goals and service goals
• academic learning goals supplemented with at least civic learning goals and often other categories of learning as well (e.g., personal growth, professional development, inter-cultural competence, ethical inquiry, research skills)
• organized, structured process
• reciprocal (co-created) collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, and institution that fulfills collective objectives and builds capacity among all partners
• critical reflection
• duration and intensity sufficient to produce meaningful learning and service outcomes
Conceptualizing Service-Learning as Pedagogy

Service-learning (SL) is a collaborative and democratic teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic learning and to advance public purposes. Students partner reciprocally with community members and with faculty/staff in experiences related to both academic material and issues of public concern. Through guided reflection, students examine their experiences critically and articulate specific and actionable learning outcomes, thus enhancing the quality of their learning and of their service. Students, faculty, and community members all serve as co-educators, co-learners, co-servers, and co-generators of knowledge. (Clayton, 2011)