

# SERVICE- LEARNING ESSENTIALS

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Questions, Answers, and Lessons Learned

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# CHAPTER

# 1

## Introduction to Service-Learning

**T**his chapter defines service-learning and highlights the differences between service-learning and other related experiences. It includes service-learning's fundamental principles, theoretical foundations, and an overview of its history, benefits, and current scope and practices. This basic information is designed to be useful for those new to service-learning as well as for those with substantial service-learning experience. Colleagues who are immersed in the myriad details of service-learning often tell me that they find it refreshing and inspiring to periodically review its underlying concepts, theoretical underpinnings, and guiding principles. I wholeheartedly agree with them.

### **1.1 WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?**

***How Is Service-Learning Different from Volunteerism and Community Service?***

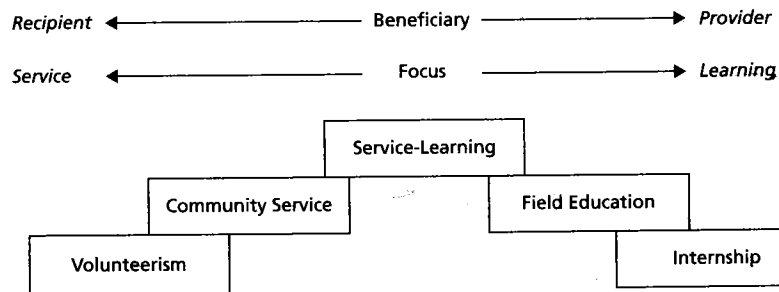
***How Does It Differ from Other Forms of Experiential Learning Such as Internships?***

***Is This Service-Learning? How Will I Know If "I'm Really Doing It"?***

***Is Civic Engagement the New Service-Learning?***

Although there are multiple definitions of service-learning in use today, I define service-learning as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured

opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes (Jacoby, 1996c). The hyphen in service-learning symbolizes reflection and depicts the symbiotic relationship between service and learning. Some definitions clearly state that service-learning must be part of the formal academic curriculum (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013). The definition that I prefer, however, offers a broader umbrella that intentionally includes experiences facilitated by student affairs professionals, campus ministers, community partners, and student leaders, as long as those experiences incorporate the fundamental elements of service-learning, reflection, and reciprocity.



**FIGURE 1.1.** *Distinctions Among Service Programs*

Source: Furco, 1996, p. 3. Used by permission.

I find it helpful to use Andrew Furco's (1996) often-cited model to highlight the uniqueness of service-learning and how it is distinct from other forms of community-based work and experiential learning. Furco characterizes each program type by its intended benefit and its degree of focus on learning and service.

Volunteerism and community service, on the left side of the model, focus on and are intended to benefit the individual, organization, or community served. Volunteerism, on the bottom rung of the model, is a form of charity. It is about providing service, with no intentional link to reflection or learning. While volunteer activities can be ongoing, they often occur on a one-time or sporadic basis. Many service-learning advocates view volunteerism as a one-way, rather paternalistic kind of "feel good" concept that infers the perpetuation of the status quo and dependency.

Moving up a rung, community service programs engage students in activities designed to meet human and community needs. Such programs may be more structured and more sustained than volunteering, thus providing greater

benefits to the recipients of the service. Community service does not necessarily include reflection and may lack academic credibility. In addition, the term often refers to a court-imposed sanction.

On the right side of the model, the primary intended beneficiary of internships and fieldwork is the provider, or student, and the main focus is on learning. Internships are experiences in which students engage to learn more about their area of study and to gain practical experience in a potential career field. They may or may not be connected to academic courses or involve reflection. Field work, or field education, is generally connected to the curriculum, often in one of the professions, such as teaching, social services, health, or law. While field work provides benefits to the recipients of the students' service, the focus of field work is on enhancing students' learning in their field of study. Reflection may be part of the experience. Both internships and field work may address human and community needs, but they do not necessarily do so.

Located in the center of the model, service-learning intentionally seeks to strike a balance between student learning and community outcomes. One of the foundational principles of service-learning is "Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990, p. 40). Service-learning is based on the assumption that learning does not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself, but rather as a result of reflection designed to achieve specific learning outcomes. In this sense, service-learning expands on the concepts of community service and volunteerism (Furco, 1996).

In service-learning, opportunities for learning and reflection are integrated into the structure of the program or course. Service-learning is explicitly designed to promote learning about the historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political contexts that underlie the needs or issues the students address. Different programs or courses emphasize different types and combinations of learning goals: intellectual, social, civic, ethical, moral, spiritual, intercultural, career, or personal. Additional learning outcomes can include, but are certainly not limited to, deepening understanding of academic content, applying theory to practice, increasing awareness of the strengths and limitations of using a discipline's knowledge base to address social issues, understanding human difference and commonality, exploring options for future individual and collective action to solve community problems, and developing a wide range of practical skills.

The other key element of service-learning is reciprocity. Reciprocity means that we, as service-learning educators, relate to the community in the spirit of

**partnership, viewing the institution and the community in terms of both assets and needs.** Participants in reciprocal service-learning relationships seek to avoid what Thea Hillman refers to as the “provider-recipient split” that is all too clear in volunteerism and community service (1999, p. 123). Robert Sigmon, one of the early leaders of service-learning, emphasized that “each participant is server and served, care giver and care acquirer, contributor and contributed to. Learning and teaching in a service-learning arrangement is also a task for each of the partners in the relationship . . . each of the parties views the other as contributor and beneficiary” (1996, p. 4). Reciprocity implies that the community is not a learning laboratory and that service-learning should be designed *with* the community to meet needs identified *by* the community. Service-learning activities can take place at or away from the community site and may or may not engage students in interacting with community organization leaders or clients.

The terms and concepts of service-learning and civic engagement are often confounded. Civic engagement is the broader term and can be defined as acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities through both political and non-political means (Jacoby, 2009a). It is often described as active citizenship or democratic participation. Civic engagement thus comprises a wider range of activities than has traditionally been associated with service-learning, such as enacting ways to alter public policy, ranging from petitioning to protest and engaging at various levels in the political process. I have often been asked whether the terms service-learning and civic engagement are interchangeable and whether civic engagement is the new term for service-learning. Some of the confusion regarding terminology arises because both service-learning and civic engagement share the desired outcomes of addressing the root causes of the issues that underlie the need for service as well as motivating students to engage in future civic and political action. Further, Peter Levine, the director of the Center for Research and Information on Civic Learning and Engagement, muses that civic engagement’s lack of definition may to some extent account for its current popularity: “It is a Rorschach blot within which anyone can find her own priorities” (2007, p. 1).

Another confounding definitional issue is that the term service-learning is used to name it as a program, a pedagogy, and a philosophy. As a program, service-learning is an initiative or set of initiatives that provides opportunities for students to accomplish tasks that meet human and community needs in combination with reflection structured to achieve desired learning outcomes.

In curricular programs, service-learning can enable students to achieve discipline-based outcomes or general learning goals, such as critical thinking, information literacy, and collaborative problem solving. Cocurricular programs may have different goals, such as leadership, spirituality, or intercultural competency.

As a pedagogy, service-learning is education that is grounded in experience as a basis for learning and on the centrality of critical reflection intentionally designed to enable learning to occur. As discussed in 4.1, faculty members select service experiences, as they would select texts or other learning activities, that they believe will be most effective in enabling students to learn and apply course content. Reflection in service-learning stimulates learners to integrate experience and observations with existing knowledge, to examine theory in practice, and to analyze and question their *a priori* assumptions and beliefs.

Service-learning is also a philosophy of “human growth and purpose, a social vision, an approach to community, and a way of knowing” (Kendall, 1990, p. 23). It is a philosophy of reciprocity, which is based on moving from charity to justice, from service to the elimination of need. Service-learning as philosophy is “an expression of values—service to others, community development and empowerment, reciprocal learning—which determines the purpose, nature, and process of social and educational exchange between learners (students) and the people they serve” (Stanton, 1990, p. 67).

## SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Campus Compact. (2003). Definitions and principles. *Introduction to Service-Learning Toolkit: Readings and Resources for Faculty* (2nd ed.). Providence, RI: Campus Compact.
- Ikeda, E.K., Sandy, M.G., & Donahue, D.M. (2010). Navigating the sea of definitions. In B. Jacoby & P. Mutascio (Eds.), *Looking In Reaching Out: A Reflective Guide for Community Service-Learning Professionals*. Boston, MA: Campus Compact.
- Kendall, J.C. (Ed.). (1990). *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service* (Vol. 1). Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (now National Society for Experiential Education).

## 1.2 WHAT ARE THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SERVICE-LEARNING?

Most service-learning scholars believe that the theoretical roots of service-learning are found in the work of John Dewey, particularly *Democracy and Education* (1916), *How We Think* (1933), and *Experience and Education*

(1938). Often viewed as the father of experiential education, Dewey sought to understand how experiences can be educative. He observed: "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" (1938, p. 25). Learning for Dewey was situational, and he proposed that learning from experience occurs through reflective thinking. Based on Dewey's proposition, reflection has become one of the core elements of service-learning.

Grounded in the work of Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin, David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model also serves as one of service-learning's theoretical foundations. The model consists of four elements: concrete experience, observation of and reflection on that experience, formation and synthesis of abstract concepts based upon the reflection, and active experimentation that tests the concepts in new situations. These four elements form a cycle, or spiral, of learning. Individuals can enter the cycle at any point, but service-learning and other forms of experiential education are often designed to begin with concrete experience. Learning occurs when the cycle is repeated as learners test their newly developed concepts in concrete experience and continue through the other elements (Kolb, 1984). Service-learning engages students in concrete experience followed by critical reflection on the service experiences and, in curricular service-learning, with academic content. Reflection is designed with the intention of leading to deeper understanding of the root causes of the need for service and the complexity of the salient social issues, as well as potential future actions within the context of the service-learning experience and beyond. The four learning styles that Kolb describes are discussed in 5.2.

The *Principles of Good Practice in Combining Service and Learning* (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990), commonly known as the Wingspread principles, have served as indispensable guides to the development of service-learning initiatives since the 1990s. The Wingspread principles were created through a process initiated and coordinated by the National Society for Experiential Education. It involved consultation with more than seventy organizations and the convening of a working group at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread conference center in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1989. The principles, which are reproduced in Exhibit 1.1, emphasize structured reflection, clear goals and responsibilities for all participants, careful program design, and sustainability. They provide the foundation for much of the advice offered in this book.