What is “Service-learning?”

As its name suggests, service-learning is a teaching method that integrates community service and classroom learning in such a way that the community service is more informed by theoretical and conceptual understandings and the classroom learning is more informed by the realities of the world.

Service-learning finds its roots in a tradition of voluntary service within higher education that seeks to provide support to communities with limited resources and, in some cases, to work toward broader goals of achieving social justice. However, service-learning differs from traditional community service programs in that the service-learning students’ work in the community is tied to clearly-defined curricular and educational goals.

Similarly, service-learning builds on experiential education approaches, including internships, lab work and other out-of-classroom instruction, yet it is uniquely focused on providing students with learning experiences that contribute to the “greater good.”

How might service-learning benefit my students?

When effectively implemented, service-learning is associated with several positive outcomes for students:

- Service-learning enhances students’ communication skills, leadership abilities and sense of self-efficacy (Astin & Sax, 1998; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).
- Service-learning promotes critical thinking skills and the ability of students to apply concepts and theories to the “real world” (Eyler & Giles, 1999)
- Service-learning challenges stereotyped thinking and facilitates interracial understanding (Astin & Sax, 1998; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).
- Service-learning strengthens students’ sense of civic duty and social responsibility (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999)

The key words here are “effectively implemented.” Simply sending students out into the community to serve without carefully structuring the experience is unlikely to achieve the kinds of outcomes described above. Here are a few key factors to consider as you develop a service-learning course:

Meaningful community service assignments, maintained over the course of the semester

- Research indicates that service-learning assignments that require a minimum of 20 hours of service per semester, spread out over the course of the semester, are more likely to have positive outcomes for students (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999).
- The community service assignment should closely correspond to the faculty member’s learning objectives for the course. For example, if in a child developmental psychology course the goal is to allow students to observe developmental principles “in action,” the service-learning assignment must be structured so that students are able to work with and observe children.
- The agency or school that agrees to host service-learning students should play an active part in defining community service assignments that are mutually beneficial to the students and the site.
2 Courses with Service-Learning

- Clarify for students and agency staff the differences between volunteer work (widely varying projects, not linked to specific educational goals), internships (time and labor-intensive projects, often loosely tied to educational goals), and service-learning (time-limited projects with distinct educational goals). Try to ensure that the service-learning projects are realistic given the limitations of the semester schedule and the time spent in the community each week (usually 1-4 hours).

- Stay in close contact with agency staff in order to resolve any problems with students’ schedules, service assignments, etc., early on. Maintain contact throughout the semester in order to stay abreast of students’ activities.

- **Note:** If you plan to allow students to choose their own service-learning sites, make clear the criteria they must use in selecting assignments that will fulfill the learning objectives of the course. Establish early deadlines by which they must submit their selection for your approval. Contact the site supervisor to discuss the course goals and the agency’s expectations for the student to make sure they are compatible.

**Pre-service training**

- Inform students about the work they will be performing in the community and provide them with any specialized training for this work, if necessary.

- Prepare students for their experiences in the community by helping them set realistic expectations. Providing information about the community, the site, the people with whom they will be working, etc., can empower students with information while reducing the fear and anxiety they may have about leaving the comfort zone of the campus.

- The learning objectives of the course should be clearly spelled out to students prior to the start of their service assignments. Letting students know what they are expected to learn through their experiences in the community -- and how they will be evaluated -- will help them to focus their observations in order to achieve these goals.

- Students need to know the logistics of their service-learning assignments in advance. Establish beginning and ending dates for the service assignment. Offer maps and bus routes to the site as well as the name and contact information for a staff member(s) who can assist the students if any problems should arise at the site. Clarify the attendance policy and whom to inform if students are going to be late or need to reschedule their assignment.

- Remind students that they act as representatives of the university when they work in the community and emphasize the importance of dressing and behaving responsibly.

**Opportunities for students to regularly reflect on their experiences**

- “Reflection” is the perhaps the most critical factor in helping students make the connection between “service” and “learning.” Provide students with ample opportunity to reflect on, write about, and discuss their experiences in- and outside of the classroom.

- Set aside class time for students to share and learn from one another’s experiences.

- Require students to keep journals or other regular writing assignments that ask them to connect what they are learning from the lectures, texts and in-class discussions with what they are observing in the community. Do not wait until an end-of-the-semester term paper to see if students were able to “get” this connection.
• Provide meaningful feedback to students over the course of the semester to facilitate their intellectual and personal development. Don’t assume that students will automatically be able to apply abstract concepts and theories to their experiences in the community. Facilitate this process by questioning students’ assumptions, validating attempts to apply theory to practice, and encouraging them to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of their experiences.

• Anticipate a developmental process in your students’ intellectual and personal growth over the course of the semester and develop reflective exercises that take this process into account. Students’ early impressions of the community are often characterized by “culture shock” and an acute awareness of the differences in their own experiences and those with whom they are working. As they spend more time in the community, students tend to become more aware of shared experience, as well as the particular social and historical contexts that shape individuals’ lives (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000). In addition, keep in mind that for many students, the ability to apply theories and concepts does not come automatically. Reflective exercises assigned early in the semester should draw primarily on students’ observations and impressions, while later assignments can require increasingly complex and abstract thinking (Cone & Harris, 1996).

10 Principles of Good Practice for Service-learning Pedagogy

Principle 1: Academic Credit is for Learning, Not for Service
Principle 2: Do Not Compromise Academic Rigor
Principle 3: Establish Learning Objectives
Principle 4: Establish Criteria for the Selection of Service Placements
Principle 5: Provide Educationally-Sound Learning Strategies to Harvest Community Learning and Realize Course Learning Objectives
Principle 6: Prepare Students for Learning from the Community
Principle 7: Minimize the Distinction between the Students’ Community Learning Role and Classroom Learning Role
Principle 8: Rethink the Faculty Instructional Role
Principle 9: Be Prepared for Variation in, and Some Loss of Control with, Student Learning Outcomes
Principle 10: Maximize the Community Responsibility Orientation of the Course


Service-learning resources at USC:

USC faculty are fortunate to have many resources on campus that provide technical assistance and support for service-learning courses. A few of these resources are listed below:

• The Joint Educational Project: Since 1972, the Joint Educational Project (JEP) has placed tens of thousands of service-learning students in the community surrounding USC. JEP students work primarily as mentors, teaching assistants, or “mini-course” teachers in local schools, and receive USC course credit for demonstrating their ability to apply what they have learned in class to what they are observing or teaching in the community. In recent years, JEP staff have worked with faculty to develop a variety of service-learning experiences for their students, ranging from community-based research projects to service-learning internships. JEP can offer faculty assistance with service-learning course development, the placement and monitoring of students, the development of reflective exercises, and the evaluation process. For more information about service-learning and the Joint Educational Project, please contact the JEP House (213-740-1837) or go to JEP’s website: www.usc.edu/jep.
The Office of Civic and Community Relations: The Office of Civic and Community Relations (CCR) serves as an important link between the campus and the community, often helping to connect faculty, agencies and schools interested in developing service-learning partnerships. CCR is an excellent resource for faculty interested in learning more about resources available in the nearby University Park neighborhood. For more information about CCR, please call 213-743-5480 or visit CCR’s website: http://www.usc.edu/CCR/

The Volunteer Center: The Volunteer Center maintains a database of agencies in the greater Los Angeles area which can be a great resource for faculty researching service-learning sites for their students. In addition, the Volunteer Center offers a few short-term, intensive service-learning experiences, such as several Alternative Spring Break programs and the Immersion Weekend program. For more information, please call the Volunteer Center (213-740-9116) or visit its website: http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/faculty_partnerships/volunteer_center.html

Other helpful service-learning resources:
- American Association for Higher Education: http://www.aahea.org/
- California Campus Compact: http://www.cacampuscompact.org/
- National Campus Compact: www.compact.org
- National Service-learning Clearinghouse: www.servicelearning.org
- National Society for Experiential Education: www.nsee.org

Sources


