Service-Learning and the Commuter Student

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Abstract

Service-learning is becoming an ever more popular teaching/learning strategy in higher education because of its ability to strengthen both academic and civic engagement. Furthermore, it is a strategy that works with a variety of student populations, including commuter students. While drawing upon commuter students' familiarity with the local community, it helps them develop campus relationships that facilitate their achieving academic success. Although faculty need to pay careful attention to the especially severe demands made on many commuters students' time, assignment flexibility will be rewarded with a degree of engagement difficult to achieve in traditional courses.

Over the past decade, service-learning has moved from the margins *toward*, if not *to*, the mainstream in American higher education. Although there are still plenty of administrators and faculty members who cannot say exactly what service-learning is, there are not many who claim never to have heard of it. Increasingly, one can find practitioners and proponents in every disciplinary area, from accounting to exercise science, from art to engineering. Campus Compact, the nation's only higher education organization dedicated primarily to facilitating civic engagement and campus-community partnerships, now numbers well over 900 member institutions, with affiliated compacts in 30 states including California, New York, Florida, and Texas.

In the following pages, we discuss why this educational approach is of special relevance to schools with large commuter populations. We explore this topic both by way of general observations and through a more detailed review of one institution's experiences. Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon, is not only a classic urban commuter school; it is also one of the country's premier service-learning institutions. However, before we launch this exploration it is important that we address a few prevalent misconceptions.

Service-Learning Defined

Service-learning scholars have often noted the many definitions it has inspired (see, for example, Jacoby 1996). However, for our purposes, what is most important is that one be able distinguish it both from voluntary community service and from pre-professional experiential learning. One frequently cited definition (Bringle and Hatcher 1996) helps make precisely these distinctions:

> We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. Unlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in a service learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education. (222)

Bringle and Hatcher begin by describing service-learning is a *credit-bearing* experience; i.e., as a part of the academic curriculum. Not all would agree this is essential. In *Service-Learning in Higher Education* (1996), Barbara Jacoby explores an approach that includes both curricular and co-curricular practices. However, even those who embrace this broader definition would agree that faculty support and participation make it easier to achieve the kind of multidimensional "learning" service-learning seeks to promote.

Another noteworthy feature of this definition lies encoded in the phrase "identified community needs." We say "encoded" because both "identified needs" and "community" require some comment. One of the most significant ways in which service-learning differs from most other campus-based service activities lies in its insistence that the community have a significant voice in defining what needs to be done. In other words, service-learning deliberately seeks to reverse the long-established academic practice of *using* the community for the academy's own ends. This, of course, does not mean the academy is expected simply to do the community's bidding. The watchword here is *reciprocity*: there must be an agreed-upon balance of benefits and responsibilities on both sides.

As for the word "community," it, like service-learning, is susceptible to many interpretations. Nevertheless, in a service-learning context "community" usually refers to (1) off-campus populations under-served by a market economy and (2) organizations whose primary purpose is the common good. To be sure, at institutions where many students themselves come from under-served populations, service activities sometimes include on-campus as well as off-campus activities. However, few programs provide assistance to for-profit enterprises—except in cases where those enterprises themselves can be regarded as serving more than proprietary interests.

How one understands community is closely related to a third key feature of the Bringle-Hatcher definition: namely, that service-learning implies reflection "on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." Indeed, service-learning practitioners tend to single out reflection as the key to making community-based activities yield educational results. To be sure, conscientious

experiential educators of all kinds have long recognized the importance of reflection as a complement to immediate experience. What is distinctive about reflection in a service-learning context is its multi-layered quality: what students reflect on results not just in greater technical mastery ("course content") but also in an expanded appreciation of the contextual/social significance of the discipline in question and, most broadly of all, in "an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." Thus, students in a chemistry course may be asked to connect testing for lead in housing projects with what they have learned both in the classroom and in the laboratory while also processing their personal reactions to the living conditions in the projects and their evolving sense of how science and scientists can contribute to the public's right to a safe environment.

Such a multi-layered understanding of reflection is critical to any attempt to differentiate service-learning not just from pre-professional field experiences such as internships and practica but also from volunteerism of the kind traditionally associated with student organizations. To the degree that a given service activity is deliberately tied to structured learning objectives, to that degree it can be said to approach the functional core of service-learning—whether or not the activity in question is formally sponsored by a course. However, the very significance of this demand that structured, in-depth reflection complement the service experience is what argues most convincingly for service-learning as a course-based undertaking. Absent a credit-bearing framework, it is difficult to process the multiple levels of learning "service-learning" facilitates. And without that processing, its ability to link intellectual development and the public good, to promote civic as well as more technical kinds of understanding, cannot be realized.

Reasons for Growth

Given the constituent features just identified, it is not hard to understand why service-learning has had such a powerful impact in so short a period of time. In promoting "civic engagement," it also leads to a greater awareness of diversity and facilitates both systems thinking and values clarification through engagement with the local community. Furthermore, as a form of "active learning," it promotes theory-practice connections, enhances student motivation and retention, utilizes cross-disciplinary perspectives, and develops workplace skills. Hence, insofar as educators have sought strategies to deal with any or all of these concerns, they have found this approach to be a very useful resource.

Indeed, recent research on contemporary educational needs and trends strongly suggests that only a teaching-learning approach that emphasizes practice will succeed in giving students the kind of preparation they will need to succeed in the twenty-first century. Here, for example, is John Abbott (1996), director of The Education 2000 Trust, in response to a question about essential competencies:

> ...today, people worldwide need a whole series of new competencies—the ability to conceptualize and solve problems that entails *abstraction* (the

> manipulation of thoughts and patterns), *systems thinking* (interrelated thinking), *experimentation*, and *collaboration*... I doubt such abilities can be taught solely in the classroom, or be developed solely by teachers. Higher order thinking and problem-solving skills grow out of direct experience, not simply teaching; they require more than a classroom activity. They develop through active involvement and real-life experiences in workplaces and the community. (3–4) [original emphasis]

If Abbott is correct—and the thrust of his remarks is echoed in numerous other studies (e.g., *Report of the AAHE, ACPA, and NASPA Joint Task Force on Student Learning* 1998; Ewell 1997; "What Research Says About Improving Undergraduate Education" 1996)—attempts to better prepare students to become "intentional" or lifelong learners (Francis, Mulder, and Stark 1995) will not succeed simply by rearranging the curriculum, introducing new classroom exercises, or even by expanding available technological resources. What is needed, above all, is that students literally get out of the classroom and begin learning to learn in unstructured, "real-world" situations.

Furthermore, it is precisely such a broader kind of engagement that many of today's students would seem to favor. According to Charles Schroeder (1993) "approximately 60 percent of entering students prefer [a] sensing mode of perceiving compared to 40 percent who prefer [an] intuitive mode." The sensing mode correlates with learning grounded in real-world experience while the intuitive favors learning through "concepts, ideas, and abstractions." As one might expect, this preference is not shared by most faculty, "over 75 percent of [whom] prefer the intuitive learning pattern."

In short, a need to renew our stock of what Robert Putnam (2000) calls "social capital" and a need to find more effective ways to help students become active, engaged learners have collaborated to make service-learning an important academic strategy. And contrary to popular misconceptions, its adoption has NOT been led by elite institutions or schools primarily focused on traditional aged students. Granted, much of the service-learning literature seems to suggest that the typical student is still a young adult needing to be introduced to his/her civic responsibilities (for critiques of this assumption, see O'Connell [2002] and Raimon and Hitchcock [2000]), but the fact of the matter is that service-learning has flourished most in regional and local institutions with relatively open admissions criteria. Such institutions include community colleges, comprehensive universities, and church-affiliated liberal arts colleges, and students attending schools in the first two of these categories are predominantly commuters.

Reports from the Field

What, then, are some of the more important general issues that attend the use of service-learning in commuter institutions? Clearly the fact that the home base for such students is not the campus but rather the community has many significant implications. For one, such students are not only more likely than their residential peers to have some familiarity with community issues; they are also more likely to have a long term stake in the local community. In other words, they bring to their service-learning work

some very real strengths—so long as the specific circumstances that define their participation are carefully factored in. As Cathy Ludlum Foos (2003), Associate Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University East, has noted, "One strength commuter students bring is their familiarity with the community, so sometimes projects can be fairly in-depth, or are more likely to continue beyond the semester's end." Robert Hogner (2003), Associate Professor of Management and Director of the Honors Program at Florida International University (FIU), implicitly concurs when he speaks of his commuter students' "feeling for the community"—a sensitivity he compares favorably to the more disengaged attitudes of some residential students.

Indeed, not only do commuter students have important local connections; they also represent a wide variety of communities—a circumstance that makes it possible for service-learning programs to "broaden their geographical service area" (Rubin 2003). They also bring access to a wide variety of local businesses—a potentially significant circumstance. As Hogner (2003), a professor of business, explains:

> [My students] usually are working, hence [service-learning] projects can be a useful way to integrate their workplaces or work colleagues into the efforts. We finished in May [2003] a class drive to replenish the stores of South Florida's Daily Bread Food Bank. Students (all commuting, Saturday classes only) networked through their workplaces to get "boxes and boxes of food...."
>
> In short, I see them as bringing to the SL table an awful lot. In a big class, especially a big business class, I can count on finding a few good examples of those who can underscore how much careers are enhanced by walking over to Human Resources at work and saying: "I am working on a service project at FIU and I was wondering...."

The service-learning literature is rich in examples of students whose service at a local organization has led to a job offer. Offers of this kind certainly are not limited to commuter students, but may, in many instances, be more important to them since acceptance does not entail a change of permanent residence.

Service-learning can, then, speak powerfully to the interests of commuter students, but can do so only if several key considerations are kept in mind. For example, for any of the above benefits to be realized, commuter students may well need a special degree of flexibility in choosing when and where they serve. Raimon and Hitchcock (2000) also caution against the assumption that such students, especially older students, need to be "introduced" to the community and the importance of community commitments. Instead, they should themselves be seen as a source of opportunities and insights: their already rich community experiences should be recognized, valued, and utilized whenever possible.

But as O'Connell (2002) points out, effective utilization of the prior experiences of commuter students requires that faculty make a deliberate effort to find out just what those experiences consist of:

> An effective first-year [service-learning] program [for adult learners] should engage students in a structured educational planning process. This process helps them identify the skills and knowledge they have already developed and those they want to further develop....
>
> This approach to individualized educational planning is as important when considering the goal of civic education as it is with other aspects of a liberal education. As noted above, some adult students come to higher education with a history of deep engagement in civic and community life.... [For these,] focused educational planning can help identify elements of civic knowledge that a student would like to—or, from a civic education perspective, "ought to" develop further. (55)

O'Connell's observations, with their emphasis on the further development of student "skills and knowledge" can serve as a transition from considering the relationship between commuter students and service-learning primarily from the "off-campus" side; i.e., how commuter students can benefit from working with local communities and community organizations, to that same relationship considered from the "on-campus" side; i.e., how service-learning can help students have the kinds of educational experiences that make for retention and academic success.

Noting that "over 60 percent of first-time freshmen do not complete their degrees," Maureen Rubin (2003), director of service-learning at California State University, Northridge, points out that, according to the research, factors contributing to failure to graduate include "sustained difficulty in passing college level courses, not being sure why [one is] in college, having no clear career path, and/or feeling as though [one is] alone and [has] no sense of community." Service-learning, she suggests, "can address all three of these obstacles for commuter students":

> Campus research demonstrates that service-learning students often score higher on exams than their counterparts in non-service learning sections of the same course. Service-learning gives undecided majors the opportunity to explore future careers through meaningful hands-on experience in the workplace. And perhaps most important, service-learning students feel they are part of a community comprised of their classmates, their instructors, and the people they meet at their assigned site. Many report that the first "connection" they ever had with a professor outside of class was with the person who taught their service-learning class.

At Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Julie Hatcher, Robert Bringle, and Richard Muthiah (2002) report similarly positive outcomes. Referring to the way in which service-learning links community-based work and academic study, they note that

> This aspect of service-learning is especially important for commuter students who have competing demands on their time and limited interest in co-

> curricular activities. They do, however, want to be part of the campus community, and for a sense of community to grow on a commuter campus requires nurturing first and foremost in the classroom.... The collaborative nature of service-learning contributes to community building. (82)

Rubin (2003) refers to this collaborative nature of service-learning when she explains that "service-learning students feel they are part of a community comprised of their classmates, their instructors, and the people they meet at their assigned site." Going through a semester without ever even learning one's classmates' names is far less likely in a service-learning class than in a more traditional one where there are few opportunities for collaborative learning and substantive shared experiences. At this point we turn directly to the experiences of faculty and students in one of the country's most successful service-learning programs—the program at Portland State University.

The Portland State Experience

Portland State University (PSU) is an urban institution with a student population of 23,000. Although the average age of PSU undergraduates is 25.6, the average age of first-year students is only 19. In other words, while the university does have returning students who begin at the freshman level, the majority at that level are of traditional college age. Of the total number of students, only 11 percent live on campus, making 89 percent of the student population commuters. Up until AY 2003–2004, the university's student housing has been under the management of a private, non-profit company, and the university was not able to create a dormitory-like program for students who reside in on-campus housing. In this sense, all PSU students have been commuter students. Perhaps equally important is the fact that a very high percentage of PSU students work either full or part time. On many urban campuses, this student profile is the norm, and it clearly has an impact on student class schedules and time management issues. Hence, the institution has to take these considerations very carefully into account when planning its curriculum, particularly its "service-learning" or, in PSU's preferred terminology, "community-based learning" (CBL) courses.

The PSU campus is located in the south end of Portland, and its mission *Let Knowledge Serve the City* is inscribed on a pedestrian bridge that spans a major downtown street. The university's focus on its connection with the larger community reveals itself throughout the curriculum, primarily in the form of community-based learning. The general education requirement for the majority of students, University Studies, is a four-level, interdisciplinary program designed as a series of learning communities, developmentally arranged as students move through the curriculum. Each course in the program addresses one or more of the institution's four general education goals: (1) inquiry and critical thinking; (2) communication (written, oral, visual, quantitative, technological, and group); (3) social responsibility and ethical issues; and (4) the diversity of human experience.

Freshman Inquiry is the required course for first year students. Approximately 1,400 students were enrolled in it during the 2002–2003 academic year. Each section consists

of a year-long learning community of no more than 36 students with a faculty member and a Peer Mentor—an upper-division undergraduate who serves as the faculty member's teaching partner. Each instructor belongs to an interdisciplinary team whose members work together to create an interdisciplinary theme for their course. Some of the current themes include Constructing the Self: Me, Us and Them; Forbidden Knowledge: The Sacred and the Profane; Pathways to Sustainability and Justice; The Columbia Basin: Watershed of the Great Northwest; and Entering the Cyborg Millennium: Transformations in Technology and Human Society. Classes meet twice a week as a complete group, and, in addition, each student attends twice each week a "mentor session" of no more than 13 students. Mentor sessions take place in specially designed computer labs with center tables for group discussion, peer review of writing, and group projects. Computers ring the periphery, and most of the technology instruction also takes place at this time.

Freshman Inquiry, first launched in 1994, represents a carefully designed general education program intended to enhance student learning and increase student retention as measures of faculty productivity. The program's design was deliberately based on research into strategies to improve undergraduate education (Boyer 1987; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Astin 1992). The first group of faculty teams used that research to create classes that integrated material from the classroom with work in real world settings as a way of strengthening student learning and making course material more relevant and engaging. Hence, from the very beginning, community-based learning (CBL) projects have been part of Freshman Inquiry. In AY 2002–2003, 80 percent of all Freshman Inquiry classes included some type of CBL project.

For the purposes of this essay, we asked faculty and CBL staff what issues, if any, they had discovered that related to the fact that most students were working commuters. The issues they identified fell into two general categories—opportunities and barriers. Opportunities included the following six items. Commuter students:

(1) can easily leave campus to do their service project because they often have transportation to and from school and are used to driving to different places as part of their daily lives;

(2) are able to do projects that are not in immediate proximity to the school;

(3) like to do projects that are in their own home neighborhoods;

(4) are already involved in the communities in which they live and can extend their community connections to their student colleagues;

(5) have community involvements that have not been connected to a course or other academic endeavor. Hence, the addition of community-based learning often deepens their understanding of what takes place in the community setting; and

(6) often continue to reside in the Portland area, thus establishing long-term relationships with local organizations. These relationships benefit them individually and as members of the community.

On the barrier side, three issues were singled out. Commuter students

(1) often work and have trouble fitting service projects into their schedules;

(2) want to do their service with an organization they are already affiliated with, regardless of the fit that that organization's focus has with class themes and content; and

(3) already know the community and sometimes take issue with the community organizations faculty choose to work with.

We have already encountered many of these opportunities and barriers in the previous section of this essay. What is important to stress here is the fact that, despite the barriers, faculty, staff, and students were in overwhelming agreement that the opportunities in community-based learning far outweigh the difficulties. In the following paragraphs we report on some of the faculty suggestions, course projects, and student reflections that characterize PSU's CBL experience.

In regular faculty development sessions focused on CBL, instructors share the results of their assessment of CBL experiences. The first lesson of import is the relation of the community-based learning to the course material. When students, particularly those with scheduling difficulties, understand that the CBL project is integrated into the curriculum because it allows their learning to be more complete and long-lasting, they are far less likely to resist the community work. In addition, one of the most important "lessons" that consistently emerges from these conversations is the importance of flexibility in structuring CBL projects—flexibility with regard to both the scheduling of community-based work and the actual activities to be undertaken. Hence, many classes offer students a selection of service sites and a variety of ways to be involved in projects.

For example, in the "Meaning and Madness" learning community, the CBL project asks students to choose a group that they feel has been marginalized (seniors, transvestites, gays and lesbians, etc.) and to go to different people in or associated with that group to gather information about how Oregon state budget cuts have impacted it. Students assemble themselves into small teams based on the marginalized community they have chosen. After doing some basic research on their group, they next make contact with individuals within the group as well as with those who provide services to it. The goal here is to become familiar with the daily life experiences of group members, to consider how and why the group is marginalized within the larger community, and to identify the impact of recent state funding cuts on that group. Hence, individual teams can schedule their work around their specific circumstances. The assignment is flexible enough to allow for diverse time and travel demands.

One student who recently participated in the "Meaning and Madness" project included the following reflection in his year-end portfolio:

> Communication is not even the area that Freshman Inquiry helped me the most. That area would be understanding my responsibilities as an informed person of a society. For our last project...we were assigned a community-based learning project. We were able to form groups and pick a community that we wanted to learn about. For me this was homeless youths. This was a group I thought needed help and would be interesting to research...I can easily say that I wasn't prepared for what I would find or what other groups would find. I come from a small community an hour outside of Portland and never was really confronted with stereotypes or prejudices. You learn about them in school but until you see them in action you just don't understand. For our project I chose to deal with people who were outside the community, they were homeless youths. I interviewed people, looked up statistics, and tried to find editorials dealing with the subject. What I found shocked me. I found that these youth's peers held some of the worst stereotypes imaginable. All I could think about is, these people could be your friends, classmates, sisters, or brothers, and you think they should get no help. I just wanted to scream at these people, "Did you know more than half of the kids on the street were escaping situations where they were being beat, sexually abused, or both?" ...This class taught me something: when you see someone with a stereotype or prejudice about another group, you need to call them on it. It is your responsibility.

Another student in the same course noted in the year-end portfolio reflection that
If there is one thing that the University Studies program has helped me understand this term, it would be the diversity of human experience. Through my class, particularly in this last term, we have explored various marginalized groups of people. I was never before aware of such a rich diversity among human beings. But even through this diversity, in reality, everyone wants the same things: food, shelter, love, and most importantly, to be understood. To realize such commonalities, I believe, is the key step in appreciating everyone's differences.

In addition to offering students some discretion in framing their projects, there are, of course, other ways to address the flexibility issue. In the "Metamorphosis" class, faculty assign a photo-journalism project designed to raise student awareness of class, race, and other social justice issues in the context of Portland's increasing gentrification. Students link themes in their texts to photos of neighborhoods, reflect on their experiences, and develop a website to disseminate what they have learned. They also assess how well their team has worked together, whether or not the workload has been evenly shared, and what each team member has learned about working with the group. In this course, students have great flexibility in deciding when to take photographs and conduct interviews as well as in deciding how to bring materials together for their final product.

At the sophomore level, faculty allow students to organize themselves around a selection of topics connected with a group of community agencies. Students then choose a community partner from among the pre-selected group. Part of the project calls for students to determine ways to divide tasks into their constituent parts and in the end bring the pieces back together in a single whole-group presentation. In this way, students can accommodate much of what needs to be done to their own schedules. Designing projects that allow students to choose different community agencies and to work on individual portions of an assignment avoids the many of the scheduling difficulties that can arise with commuter students.

With regard to the issue of students wanting to work with a community agency with which they are familiar but that does not fit in well with a course theme, faculty stress the importance of talking at length about suggested projects and making explicit the ways in which they are intended to complement course materials. Such clarity is, of course, important for any student, but even more so for a student who wants to work in a setting of his/her own choosing. Indeed, by focusing carefully on the course-community connection, faculty can sometimes find ways to accommodate unanticipated student preferences, but even when this is not the case, it is still important for them to validate a student's personal community connections and to encourage him/her to sustain them outside the academic project. After all, long-term community engagement is one of PSU's core educational goals.

As reflections like those cited above suggest, it is the power of student learning that drives PSU faculty to continue integrating CBL projects into their courses. Student activities in the community and student research about that community make their education especially real and vital. Such a grounding more than compensates for the extra time and effort such an approach can entail. One additional student reflection from the Cyborg course is worth quoting at length:

> The community-based learning project was a complement to [other course activities]. This was where we went out and met with a community partner who serves the community that we were reporting on. In this case, we met with a female representative from Self Enhancement Inc. (SEI), a center that provides programs and guidance for at-risk African American youth. This experience not only allowed us to go beyond the classroom scene to experience the implications of race and ethnicity first-hand but also gave us the opportunity to ask questions and obtain information directly from the source. As an addition to the visit to SEI, each group was required to put together a Zine. This is something that resembles a regular print journal or magazine. It is to be used as a tool for others to learn about our topic. Through this task, I was able to familiarize myself more with the community... I was researching.... So as you can see, the work and activities that we did within these last three terms has aided me in my development in all four areas of the University Studies goals; Critical Thinking and Inquiry, Communications, Social and Ethical Responsibility, and Diversity of Human Experience. It has also shaped me as a human being. I have grown from a person who prefers

working alone to someone who appreciates team unity and working in groups. This is, in part, due to the positive experiences that I have had. I am also less hesitant when expressing my own thoughts and ideas. Additionally, this course has provided me with a community which I wouldn't have known otherwise, friendships that go beyond nine months, and a memorable experience of my first year in college.

Conclusion

As a teaching/learning approach that is rooted both in academic goals and in social concerns, service-learning would seem to be tailor-made for commuter students. While drawing upon and capitalizing on their distinctive familiarity with the off-campus community, it helps them develop campus relationships that facilitate their achieving academic success. Although faculty need to pay careful attention to the especially severe demands made on many commuters students' time, assignment flexibility will be rewarded with a degree of engagement difficult to achieve in traditional courses. By giving commuter students an opportunity to explore and deepen their ties to their home communities while simultaneously developing new skills and sophistication in dealing with real-world issues, universities help those students turn their academic experience into a rich, multi-layered source of personal and intellectual growth. Although service-learning is only one of several new teaching/learning strategies schools with large non-residential student populations should employ, it is one they cannot afford to neglect.

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