Chapter 10

Service–Learning: Options for Student Involvement

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of service-learning (SL). It identifies the distinctions among SL, internship and volunteerism. A description of the key characteristics of service and learning is provided. In addition, three specific SL types (direct, indirect, advocacy) are delineated. Particular strengths and potential problems of each type are acknowledged. It should be noted that the types are not inherently exclusive. Across their time working with community partners, students can engage in multiple types simultaneously or sequentially. When SL is conducted successfully, it is a mutually beneficial experience for partners and students. Instructors can play a critical role in promoting such experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Service learning (SL) is one activity under the umbrella of community engagement. More specifically, it refers to course-based experiences in which students are involved in activities that address the specific needs or desires within communities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Chambers, 2009). Although some elements of SL work can be done in the classroom, a common goal is that students will move (literally and experientially) beyond the campus borders (Finley, 2015). It is an opportunity to become involved in an issue of importance to service providers and/or community members.

If students have questions as to why their field of study matters or how they would make use of their education, then SL can be one means to answer these questions (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gerholz & Losch, 2015; Wasburn-Moses, Fry, & Sanders, 2014). SL has been used in diverse disciplines such as biology (Larios-Sanz, Simmons, Bagnall, & Rosell, 2011), education (Root, 1994), engineering (Duffy, Tsang, & Lord, 2000), family studies (Fitzpatrick, 2017b), marketing (McIntyre, Webb, & Hite, 2005), music
(Siebenaler, 2005), political science (Hepburn, Niemi, & Chapman, 2000), and public health (Buckner, Ndjakani, Banks, & Blumenthal, 2010). The objectives of this chapter are to describe the differences among internships, SL and volunteerism; two components of SL; three SL types (direct, indirect, advocacy); plus instructors’ roles and responsibilities (selecting, planning, grading).

BACKGROUND

When the history of SL is addressed, it often focuses on John Dewey’s work in educational philosophy. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) addressed a fundamental debate between traditionalism and progressivism. Traditionalism emphasized that the purpose of education was the delivery of information to students. They were to learn extant facts and skills from faculty. College could also be an environment which guided young adults in moral growth and maturity. Students would carry the knowledge and maturity into adult endeavors. Thus, society would be improved by this critical mass of informed individuals. In contrast, progressivism emphasized that the purpose was to address (and perhaps eliminate) societal problems. Enlightenment was not sufficient; the proof of education’s value was in its positive impact on systems outside of academia. The emphasis on experiential education had its own risks of being too reactive to circumstances, unfocused and disorganized (Dewey, 1938, Eldeeb, 2013).

Dewey (1938) addressed this debate by arguing for an integrative approach. College should contribute to basic knowledge and understanding of humanity. Yet, knowledge (simply for its own sake) would likely be an incomplete education. Learning is intensified via engagement with the real world. Engaging interactions will broaden students’ horizons, challenge old assumptions and perhaps inspire new insights/actions (Hennes, 2002). However, interactions should not be conducted simply for evocative or entertaining value. Rather, experiences should have a direct relevance to students’ ethical and professional development. Dewey’s approach was succinctly summarized that learners “need concrete and experiential activities in order to create an awareness of how they can contribute to and change society for the better” (Lake, Winterbottom, Ethridge, & Kelly, 2015, p. 93). This approach became a foundation for the development of many service learning activities and courses (Giles & Eyler, 1994).

Dewey (1938) is credited with articulating the importance of blending traditional and experiential education. However, it should be emphasized that he did not invent this link. There were many educational leaders and institutions dedicated to community engagement who preceded him. For instance, the historically Black college and university (HBCU) system began developing in the 1860s. In the context of slavery, legalized segregation and egregious injustices, this system focused on educating individuals who were excluded from white society (Cantey, Bland, Mack & Joy-Davis, 2013). Some colleges focused on vocational skill development to enhance immediate employment options for young adults. Other colleges focused on training individuals to become clergy and teachers (who would build churches and schools in their local communities). The HBCU is credited with substantially contributing to the development of a Black/African-American middle class (Cantey et al., 2013). Throughout the decades, this system has been considered a crucial element in protecting communities and championing civil rights (Penn & Gabbidon, 2007). Many of these universities have a commitment to serving communities and empowering students as a foundation of their identity (e.g., Hale, 2006).

Another example is the partnership between Hull House and the University of Chicago (Gross, 2009). During the late 1880s, Hull House was created to serve the city’s low-income residents. Parallel to today’s social workers, the staffmembers went into local communities, worked with residents to