

“Service Learning”

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Service-learning is traditionally defined as a curricular-based activity that integrates community service into classroom instruction. Oftentimes linked to and grounded in John Dewey’s and David Kolb’s experiential education, the service-learning field is contemporaneous with the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the insistence that education be linked to democratic practices and social justice.

Service-learning has become an ever more accepted and institutionalized component of K-16 education. As of 2004, more than one-third of K-12 schools provided service-learning activities to five million students; approximately 1,000 colleges and universities were members of Campus Compact, a national organization committed to the civic purposes of higher education. Service-learning may be viewed as an extension of the federal mandate given to land grant institutions in the mid 1800s and eloquently articulated in the “Wisconsin Idea” that the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state.

While tutoring and one-day service projects are the most common service-learning models practiced both in K-12 and higher education, other formats include alternative spring breaks and community-based research. Service-learning in higher education is most commonly practiced in disciplines and fields such as Education, Social Work, English, and Sociology; an American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) series on service-learning and higher education, though, spans 23 disciplines ranging from Accounting to Economics to Women’s Studies.

Service-learning is grounded in four criteria: *respect* for the individuals, groups, and communities being served; *reciprocity* of services such that all stakeholders have a voice in the format and direction of the service-learning experience as well as gain from such engagement; direct *relevance* of the service-learning experience to the curricular content of the academic course, and; ongoing and systematic *reflection* upon the experience of the service. Service-learning is oftentimes viewed as a “text” that – like any other curricular artifact – may be read, analyzed, and questioned to better inform the pedagogical process and curricular content of the academic course.

This raises three fundamental tensions within contemporary service-learning theory and practice. The first tension revolves around goals: whether service-learning is a technical practice that improves the teaching of content knowledge, a cultural practice that improves participants’ notions of e.g., civic engagement and cultural diversity, or a political project meant to promote a justice-oriented perspective of and engagement with inequitable local and global conditions.

The second tension focuses on the appropriate methods for promoting meaningful and impactful service-learning. Service-learning is most often short-term and focused on immediate needs (e.g., a certain number of students are needed to tutor youth in an after-school program for a 14-week semester). This individualistic “charity” orientation is viewed by many as an inadequate model for fostering both systemic and systematic changes, but there are as yet few prominent examples where service-learning is embedded in the very mission and vision of the educational institution rather than an add-on to individual or departmental practices.

Finally, service-learning is all too often positioned as a co-curricular practice not “academic” or rigorous enough to be taken seriously in the traditional research and publication emphasis of tenure and promotion committees. This is exacerbated by service-learning’s predominant co-curricular institutional placement, such as under the Dean of Students. The prevalence of alternative monikers and emphases (e.g. “academic service-learning,” “community-based learning”) attests to this attempted legitimization.

Two distinct movements, though, suggest that service-learning will continue to develop across K-16 education (while still beset by the tensions described above). First, there is a longstanding and ongoing federal involvement in and financing of service-learning practices in K-16 education. Second, there is renewed interest in higher education with a “scholarship of engagement” – e.g., undergraduate research, the scholarship of teaching and learning, community-based research, experiential education, action research – that dovetails with service-learning’s emphasis on activity-based and real-world learning.

Cross-References:

Active Learning; Civic Education; Dewey, John; Experiential Learning; Morill Act; Place Based Education; Social Justice

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