Service-Learning: Charity-Based or Transformative?

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Abstract:

This article provides a comprehensive review of the literature on service-learning. Several definitions of service-learning are provided to highlight some common themes. Two main paradigms of service-learning are explored: the status-quo or charity-based paradigm, and the social justice or transformative paradigm. The charity-based model fosters civic participation in students with a focus on 'doing for' community through the transfer of resources. The transformative model fosters civic participation in 'doing with' community through challenging systemic inequities and actively working for social transformation. It is the type of citizenship or civic responsibility that educational institutions hope to foster that determines which paradigm of service-learning is developed.

Key Words:

service-learning; citizenship; civic responsibility; civic participation; charity; status-quo; social justice; transformative.

Introduction

The term 'service' primarily speaks to contributions in, and to, the community. Such contributions improve the quality of life for individuals, groups, neighbourhoods or communities. There are other terms also used to describe this work of service – public work, community development, social capital and community action (Howard, 2001). Post-secondary institutions are significantly expanding service-learning opportunities in the US (Kahne, Westheimer & Rogers, 2000; Kelly & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), and this movement is just catching on in Canada. The Canadian movement, termed community service-learning (or CSL) builds on the history of the American service-learning movement (Smith, 2010).

Members of the Southern Regional Education Board in Oak Ridge, Tennessee coined the term service-learning in 1969. The philosophy of service-learning, a form of experiential education, is informed by the works of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and David Kolb, with reinforcement from Paulo Freire, in combining action and reflection in the

work necessary to better the lives of all people through social change (O'Grady, 2000). Student participation in community service through service-learning programming in higher education is both a resource to enhance the quality of life in communities, as well as a resource to stimulate student's academic and civic learning, or citizenship, through education (Howard, 2001). According to Stoecker and Tryon (2009), the explosion of service-learning in the 1980's stemmed from higher education faculty and administrators who were distressed by the increasing self-centered conservatism of their students. They believed that finding ways to get students to experience issues such as poverty and homelessness might reverse this trend. Service-learning, therefore, began with a focus on changing students rather than enhancing communities.

Definitions of Service-Learning

There are many definitions of service-learning. Because of this, no one definition of service-learning satisfies everyone. For the purposes of this article, service-learning refers to post-secondary partnerships with community-based organizations. The US federally legislated National Service Act of 1993 (as quoted in O'Grady, 2000, p. 7; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2002; National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2010) includes the following key elements in their definition of service-learning:

1. Students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized service placements that meet actual community needs, and that are coordinated collaboratively by educational institutions and community.

2. Service-learning is integrated into the students' academic curriculum and provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity.

3. Service-learning provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities.

4. Service-learning enhances what is taught in education by extending students' learning beyond the curriculum and into the community, which helps foster the development of a sense of caring for others, specifically the disadvantaged.

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) 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 course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 222).

Eyler and Giles (1999) state that "service-learning should include a balance between service to the community and academic learning and that the hyphen in the phrase symbolizes the central role of reflection in the process of learning through community experience" (p. 4). The authors go on to state, "any program that attempts to link academic study with service can be characterized as service-learning; non course-based programs that include a reflective component and learning goals may also be included under this broad umbrella" (p. 5).

Gemmel and Clayton (2009) define community service-learning as a relationship between community and universities/colleges that "effectively mobilizes the intellectual and human resources of post-secondary educational institutions to address significant social, economic, environmental and health challenges at the community level" (p. 1). This definition of the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning underpins community in the service-learning relationship while at the same time invites universities and colleges to collaboratively address community issues while remaining consistent with their core academic mission and purpose.

According to O'Grady (2000), most definitions highlight four common themes often mentioned in service-learning – (a) institutional collaboration with community, (b) the importance of reflection, (c) active learning and (d) the development of a sense of caring. From a transformative or social justice perspective, the development of citizenship or civic responsibility involves the engagement of institutional partnerships with communities with a focus on community development and impact in ameliorating social problems or systemic inequities. However, service-learning must comply both with academic programs and with community-based agencies in defining what learning is relevant and important. As Howard (2001) suggests, "the service must be relevant to the community and to the content of the academic course, meaningful to the community and to the students, and developed and formulated with the community" (p. 23).

Service-learning is, therefore, seen as a marriage between academic learning and collaboration with community to meet identified community issues. This is different from volunteerism where the focus is on providing service to an agency or agencies, and includes any activity that the agency needs. Service-learning is also different from cooperative learning or internship. Such programs provide work experience for the student, usually skill-based, within the context of professional education, and is sometimes compensated with money. Generally, cooperative learning internships do not identify the development of civic learning as a learning outcome. These internships emphasize student goals more than community goals, while service-learning is equally attentive to both community and student agendas. Service-learning involves a reciprocal relationship between the attainment of academic knowledge and content, and community-based experiential learning. Educational institutions and non-profit agencies, private sector companies, non-governmental and governmental agencies usually organize such partnerships. Service reinforces and strengthens the learning, and learning subsequently strengthens the service through meeting identified community concerns (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Dubinsky, 2002; Howard, 2001; O'Grady, 2000; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Gemmel & Clayton, 2009). In this way service-learning can be a potent civic educator when it accompanies proper preparation and adequate academic reflection (Battistoni, 2002).

Academic service-learning (Howard, 2001) distinguishes itself from community-based service, student community service, co-curricular and other service-learning models, which are also experientially based programs. Student-community service is ordinarily accomplished by a student organization volunteering, such as at local schools, without an involvement in the learning agenda. Academic service-learning and co-curricular service-learning make intentional efforts to engage students in planned and purposeful learning related to their service experiences. Co-curricular service-

learning usually involves alternative spring-break programs, and has the goal of raising students' consciousness and providing familiarity with issues related to various communities. Academic service-learning, on the other hand, involves student community engagement, which integrates academic curriculum with service experiences for developing both academic and civic learning. This involves course-based learning, community service and reflection as part of the course goals (McGregor, 2002).

Relevancy and Effectiveness of Service-Learning

Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray (2001) summarize service-learning research over the past several years. This summary,[1] which includes an extensive bibliography, reports the following: (a) the effects of service-learning on students and the effects of particular program characteristics on students; (b) the impact of service-learning on faculty; (c) the impact of service-learning on colleges and universities; and (d) the impact of service-learning on communities. The summaries are reported below and are complemented with additional findings from the *Executive summary: How service learning affects students* (2000). This latter study collected data from 22,236 college undergraduates attending baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities in the US.

A) Impact of service-learning on students:

  1. Personal outcomes:
     • Positive effect on students' personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, moral development, and personal values.
     • Positive effect on interpersonal development and the ability to work well with others, enhancing leadership and communication skills.

  2. Social outcomes:
     • Positive effect on reducing prejudice and stereotypes, and facilitating cultural understanding, appreciation of diversity and getting along with others.
     • Positive effect on the students' sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills in wanting to help the disadvantaged, and an increased awareness of the world.

  3. Learning outcomes:
     • Positive impact on students' academic learning such as problem-solving, analysis and cognitive development, critical thinking skills, and, especially, writing skills.

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[1] At a Glance is a report supported by the National Service-Learning Clearing-house based in the US. This Clearing-house supports the development of service-learning from K-12 and higher education by assisting with materials, references, referrals and information.

- Impact on students' academic learning as measured by grades or GPA is mixed.
- Positive impact on students' degree of interest in the subject matter.
- Improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in the real world.

4. Career Development:
- Contributes to career development in a service field.
- Ongoing plans to participate in service to others after college/university.

5. Relationship with Institution:
- Reports of stronger student/faculty relationships than those who are not involved in service-learning.
- Improves student satisfaction with college/university.
- Students engaged in service-learning are more likely to graduate.

B) Impact of service-learning on faculty:

- Satisfaction with quality of student learning.
- Greater commitment to community-based research.
- Increasingly integrate service-learning into courses.
- Encourages faculty to be innovative and creative in their teaching.
- Lack of resources act as barriers to providing service-learning.

C) Impact of service-learning on the institution:

- Colleges and Universities report increasing institutional commitment to service-learning as pedagogy.
- Service-learning increases student retention.
- Institutions report enhanced community collaborations and partnerships.
- Contributes to an institution's outreach efforts to communities.
- Sharing of resources by contributing thousands of hours of service to non-profit agencies, private sector companies, non-governmental and governmental agencies.

D) Impact of service-learning on communities:

- Community satisfaction with student participation.
- Service-learning providing useful service in communities.
- Communities report enhanced university relations.
- Service-learning helps with community education.

Only a small amount of research has explored the impact of service-learning programs on communities (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). In addition, little attention has been paid to the role that communities play in enacting the goals of service-learning programs. If service-learning is to meet its goals of improving student learning and civic responsibility, addressing community issues and preparing students for civic involvement, it is critical for service-learning educators and developers to pay closer attention to the role of communities in this endeavour. In fact, Smith (2010) states that in Canada, granting agencies are very interested in community participation and community impact in the development of service-learning programs. And that the community service-learning movement in Canada "seeks to increase the capacity of community partners to welcome universities into CSL partnerships and to collaborate effectively with universities, as well as to transform universities by helping them to establish policies that value and sustain CSL partnerships." (p.9).

There is a growing popularity of service-learning in higher education. The growing value of this strategy holds much promise for renewing higher education and community development locally and globally. O'Grady (2000) and Stoecker and Tryon (2010) suggest that the key here is to maintain the focus on collaboration with community for the purposes of community development and sustainability, and social problem-solving through the identification of community issues, along with the other key components such as reflective activities and the integration of the service with curriculum.

Although much of the language describing service-learning appears politically neutral, O'Grady (2000) suggests that service-learning is as politically laden as any other educational approach. In much of the literature on service-learning there is an absence of an analysis of power which, in itself, indicates a particular ideology behind the notion of service in education, often reflecting a missionary philosophy to education. This philosophy promotes caring for others or doing something for the less advantaged, based on the concept of charity. As important as this is, that is, caring and helping the disadvantaged, these types of programs do little to promote active participation and civic responsibility in understanding and challenging social and systemic inequities (Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

Service-learning programs generally fall within two broad paradigms – the charity or status-quo paradigm, and the transformative or social justice paradigm (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Much of the efforts around service-learning are promoted on grounds that such programs will support civic learning in students who, in turn, will contribute to a solid foundation for democracy. The vast majority of service-learning initiatives in the US, and more recently in Canada, emphasize volunteerism and charity, but do not teach about social movements, do not analyze the political, social and economic structures that produce inequities, and do not engage students in actively promoting systemic change (Kahne, Westheimer & Rogers, 2000; Stoeker & Tryon, 2009).

Charity or Status-quo Paradigm

The focus of the majority of research on the effectiveness of service-learning projects has been on the growth of the student and student outcomes, with specific attention to their personal, social and learning outcomes (Kahne et al., 2000; Stoecker &

Tryon, 2009). It has been suggested that one of the greatest benefits of service-learning is that students have the opportunity to learn in ways that are parallel to the learning that they will do throughout their adult lives in the workplace and in their communities. Service-learning is known to contribute to greater self-knowledge, spiritual growth and other rewards. It also increases a sense of personal efficacy and self-confidence in students, and seems to result in an increased desire to include service to others in one's career plans (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Students involved in service-learning report that working in communities brings about an appreciation of different cultures, an increase in tolerance towards others and the reduction of stereotyping. Students also report a greater sense of civic responsibility and citizenship, and often identify a desire to help those who are disadvantaged.

The status-quo paradigm of service-learning embraces the charity model. This paradigm teaches students how to be responsible members of society by providing services to the community, and by caring for people by addressing the 'needs' or symptoms of systemic inequities. Stoecker and Tryon (2009) suggest that in many service-learning programs, educational institutions usually decide what is best for community or use community as a way of educating their students, rather than serving community development goals. Kelly and Wolf-Wendel (2000), Kahne et al. (2000) and others suggest that such programs aimed at 'doing for' and/or 'deciding for' community, are more aligned with charity than social change. Such charity-based programs are also the most supported form of service-learning in the US (Kahne & Westheimer, 2001; Wade, 2001). The assumption behind this paradigm is that students engaged in community projects help people 'in need,' and 'do for community' while enhancing their own learning as it relates to academic objectives, with an emphasis on the student as 'server' and community recipient as 'served.'

This model does have an effect on the development of citizenship and civic responsibility. Students generally experience a detached sense of beneficence for the community by helping alleviate some of the distress from inequities, or doing something for the less advantaged (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Sleeter, 2000) as well as learning to appreciate diversity. Even though this model does engage in identifying and meeting immediate community concerns, it reinforces the idea that a disadvantaged or subordinate group or culture requires 'fixing;' that such groups have something to learn; and that the academy can step in to help address identified problems. The emphasis on helping is a paternalistic one that maintains superiority and 'power over.' It does not address the systemic factors that create disadvantage, and therefore, the 'need for help' (Kahne & Westheimer, 2001).

The charity paradigm of service-learning, therefore, promotes a view of citizenship that involves the transfer or reallocation of resources such as money, food, shelter, knowledge, labor, time, etc. to individuals or groups who have fewer resources. Food is donated, shelters constructed, urban community gardens built, re-cycling programs developed, and neighbourhood playgrounds are designed for children living in poverty. Students also tutor, paint buildings, serve in soup kitchens, build databases and other such things, and much of the research on service-learning is focused on the impact these experiences have on student grades, attitudes and sensitivities (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Such activities allow students to make a difference as a part of learning in

the academy. They become better citizens by making a difference in the lives of others while they advance their academic and career goals (McGregor, 2002). Charity-based programs, however, are less likely to actively engage students in challenging and transforming the systems and practices that create the 'problem of poverty' (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Such charity approaches to education for citizenship are supported by neo-liberal notions of caring for and helping those disadvantaged, through service (Varlotta,1997). As important as these actions are, such ideologies do not aim to reduce systemic inequities, or the subordination and oppression of marginalized people.

If students, through this charity-based paradigm, serve the homeless and enjoy the rewards of volunteering, but do not study the various systems that create disadvantage, what lessons are they learning? Kahne and Westheimer (2001) suggest that charity and volunteerism will always be an important support for our society and for humanity. They argue that it is not sufficient, however, as it does little to shift the systems that maintain such power relationships. In doing so, the service-learning movement may become yet another anemic application of a potentially-powerful strategy for social transformation (Claus & Ogden, 2001). They state, "It [service-learning] also has the potential to become a transformative social movement, but this will only be realized if we view it as such" (p. 69). Ogden (2001) suggests that to focus on the act of service itself is to miss the point, because it does little to promote active participation in social and political change.

Eby (1998) suggests that educators, students, administrators, faculty and community agencies widely praise service-learning as they believe it is a strategy capable of reviving communities and restoring human relevance to the academy. Limitations to service-learning have surfaced, with criticism implied by such labels as McService, quick fix service, and happy-meal community service. Community agencies are beginning to raise significant questions about the benefits of service-learning to communities – particularly pointing to the need for a social justice framework which is missing in much of the work around service-learning (O'Grady, 2000). It is also crucial that service-learning educators and developers consider more closely the role that communities want to play in the development of programs to ensure that such programs actually identify and meet socially based issues.

Kelly and Wolf-Wendel (2000) conducted an extensive review of the literature and found a lack of attention to community perspectives on service-learning programs. Jones (2003) and Stoeker and Tryon (2009) also suggest that research on service-learning has largely focused on student-learning outcomes, with little attention given to community agency perspectives. Often the intent of service-learning is to meet the needs of students and the academy. The needs of community agencies often come last (Eby, 1998). This poses significant challenges from the community perspective (Gemmel & Clayton, 2009) with service-learning viewed as an imposition and insensitive to community needs. In addition, many programs look at service-learning as a way for higher education 'to do for' communities as opposed 'to do with' communities. Taking this first view of service-learning in itself renders invisible the possible contributions that communities could make to the development of such programs. If service-learning were to truly involve higher education in real-world problem-solving, then communities must be an integral and active partner in these efforts.

Transformational or Social Justice Paradigm

Few service-learning initiatives focus on the needs of community, and few build programs around a model of accountability and social justice. Fraser (1989) also suggests that 'needs' interpretation is politically contested in that it is usually people in the dominant groups that get to interpret such 'needs' in their own interests, which work to maintain 'power over,' and continue to reinforce societal inequities. Stoecker and Tyron (2009) suggest that there has been a growing dissatisfaction among many people both inside and outside the service-learning movement when it comes to the issue of whether communities are truly being served, and there are only a handful of studies that look at community impact and community perceptions of service-learning. So, while many service-learning programs meet institutional and student goals, such outcomes may limit service-learning's power to effect broad-based societal changes from the perspectives of communities themselves (Wade, 2001).

The transformative or social justice paradigm is one that embraces a service ethic emphasizing a scholarship of engagement and collaboration with communities to address both the symptoms as well as the root causes of inequities (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; O'Grady, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000; Sleeter, 2000). This paradigm, grounded in a critical pedagogy, teaches students how to responsibly investigate what the individuals in a community define their concerns to be (thus removing the provider/recipient role). Such programs foster 'doing with' community as opposed to 'doing for' community (Kahne et al., 2000; Kelly & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Students learn how to be involved in service in a mutually empowering and collaborative relationship, how to care with and about people, how to address and ameliorate the root causes of oppression, and how to actively participate in social and political transformation (Daigre, 2000; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Wade, 2001).

The transformative paradigm differs from a charity-based model focused only on addressing symptoms of oppression, which according to Freire (1970,1999), is oppressive in itself because this does little to substantially alter the structures that maintain oppressive conditions. Responding to human 'needs' is important, but if the social policies that create such 'needs' are not understood, addressed and challenged from the perspectives of the disadvantaged, the status quo remains, and little changes to transform the lives of the disadvantaged (Kahne & Westheimer, 2001; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; O'Grady, 2000). In addition, Wade (2001) suggests, "While meeting individual needs in the community is an important aspect of effective citizenship, democracy depends on citizens' willingness and ability to examine current social problems, evaluate how they have developed over time and consider new directions in creating a better society" (p. 1). Many proponents for the transformative paradigm, therefore, speak to the necessity of societal transformation.

This transformative vision is what Freire (1970, 1999) describes as 'true generosity;' fighting to destroy the causes that nourish 'false charity,' and dismantling structures and relationships that give rise to disadvantage. Freire (1970, 1999) describes false generosity as a pedagogy which serves the interests of those with power in maintaining oppression and the dehumanization of the disadvantaged. True generosity, he suggests, should address the symptoms as well as the root causes of oppression, and cannot be developed by people in power. To fully understand the root causes, the

voices of the individuals in the community must be heard and responded to, and partnerships formed through 'working with' in order to achieve collaborative social transformation (Daigre, 2000; Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

A transformative or social justice approach to service-learning conceptualized through a pedagogy of the oppressed is one that mutually collaborates with the oppressed in the struggle to regain the oppressed's humanity. This paradigm requires equal input from both partners, communities and educational institutions, with the communities playing a central role in planning how systemic inequities are to be challenged, and reduced (Daigre, 2000; Ogden, 2001). This transformative paradigm politicizes students to become active participants in a more just society (Kahne & Westheimer, 2001; Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

O'Grady (2000) states that the ability to coexist in community is at the heart of our survival as a democracy. She argues that we need to find ways for people with different perspectives to make collaborative decisions, form a sense of connectedness, and engage in a joint struggle for social justice. Few writers articulate service-learning from a social justice approach. Much service-learning discussion emphasizes reducing prejudice, appreciating diversity and getting along with others. Ogden (2001) emphasizes the importance of a transformative paradigm of service-learning:

> Service for the individual edification and self-esteem is shallow. To transcend this, service learning must move into considerations of the bigger picture, taking action in a world that is interconnected. This means not simply treating someone's hunger by feeding him or her but respecting his or her humanity and considering what we all share. It means considering the root of the hunger and always thinking about why we are engaged in service, what brought us here and where we hope to go. (p. 192)

Stoecker and Tryon (2009) suggest that community-based research would support a transformative paradigm in examining whether service-learning is in fact impacting inequality at the community level in ways that empower communities and build capacity in community organizations. Community-based action research engaging transformative paradigms of service-learning require an activist dimension and can achieve long-term and lasting social change. Such research leading to policy and programs foster civic participation that challenge systems and actively works for social transformation. Collaborations between academic institutions and community organizations may revolve around researching the social determinants of mental health for marginalized groups. Outcomes of participatory action research endeavours may lead to social and political action in addressing the structural and sociocultural bases of health and well-being, for example. According to Smith (2010), CSL in Canada holds much promise in taking more of a transformative approach in being more community-oriented which seeks to support community engagement and social innovation.

The transformative paradigm of service-learning is, therefore, both a method of inquiry and a mode of political action for social change (Williams, 2002). Such programs help identify root causes of social problems and promote collaborative efforts in 'doing with' communities, in order to ameliorate social disadvantage (Kahne et al., 2000). Charity-based programs view communities as having 'needs,' whereas transformative

based programs view communities as equal partners involved in addressing social problems and identifying solutions (Kelly & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). According to Stoecker and Tyron (2009), under this paradigm, the project of community development, led by communities themselves, is central to the design of service-learning partnerships with the aim of addressing, challenging and ameliorating systemic inequities.

Summary

Both charity- and transformative-based service-learning programs in education involve partnering with communities for the purpose of enhancing civic participation amongst students. It is the type of civic education that educational institutions hope to foster that determines which paradigm of service-learning is developed. Charity-based programs usually focus on the student, with specific attention to their personal, social and learning outcomes, promoting a view of citizenship that involves the transfer of resources and 'doing for' community. Justice-oriented or transformative programs focus on collaboration with communities or 'doing with', which underpins community as a partner in education in actively working for social transformation. Educational institutions must, therefore, explore what type of civic responsibility they wish to foster among students. The specific ideology of civic responsibility, whether charity or transformational, then becomes the basis for developing service-learning programming in higher education. The marriage of academic institutions to community organizations remains problematic, however, for the purposes of service-learning programming. The aim of service-learning may underpin personal and educational outcomes for students and/or community development goals. These conflicting and sometimes different purposes or interests may be difficult to reconcile. Service-learning, therefore, calls into question the aims and purposes of higher education, and its development seems to revolve around the issue of whose interests it serves? It is very rare, indeed, for the mission and purpose of universities and/or colleges to align with community development goals.

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