What are Service-Learning and Civic Engagement?

CHRISTINE M. CRESS

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Across the United States and around the world, students and their instructors are leaving the classroom and engaging with their communities in order to make learning come alive and to experience real-life connections between their education and everyday issues in their cities, towns, or states. If you are reading this book, you are probably one of these students. In some cases, you might even travel to a different part of the country or to another country to "serve and learn." Depending on the curriculum or program, the length of your experience can vary from a couple of hours to a few weeks or months, and occasionally to an entire year. (If you are traveling across the country or internationally to your service-learning site, make sure to read chapter 12, "Global and Immersive Service-Learning: What You Need to Know as You Go.")

In fact, this may not be your first volunteer, service, or service-learning experience. Today, many high schools require community service hours for graduation and many colleges require proof of previous civic engagement or community service as a part of the admission application.

These experiences are often referred to by multiple names: service-learning, community service, or community-based learning. Throughout this text we use these terms relatively interchangeably, but we also explore some important distinctions. The activities differ from volunteering or internships because you will intentionally use your intellectual capacities and

- **Volunteerism:** Students engage in activities where the emphasis is on service for the sake of the beneficiary or recipient (client, partner).
- **Internship:** Students engage in activities to enhance their own vocational or career development.
- **Practicum:** Students work in a discipline-based venue in place of an in-class course experience.
- **Community Service:** Students engage in activities to meet actual community needs as an integrated aspect of the curriculum.
- **Community-Based Learning:** Students engage in actively addressing mutually defined community needs (in a collaboration between community partners, faculty, and students) as a vehicle for achieving academic goals and course objectives.
- **Service-Learning:** Students engage in community service activities with intentional academic and learning goals and opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines.
How Is Service-Learning Different from Other Courses?

For clarity, we will most often use the term service-learning to characterize your community-based learning experience. Each faculty member may structure the experience slightly differently depending on the goals and objectives of the course and the needs of the community partner. What is most important for you to know is that service-learning is truly a different way of learning—quite the opposite of "service" and "learning." These two facets are interdependent and dynamic and vary from other forms of traditional learning in that the focus is placed upon connecting course content with actual experience (see figure 1.1).

Instead of passively hearing a lecture, students involved in service-learning are active participants in creating knowledge. The role of teacher and learner are more fluid and less rigid. While the instructor guides the course, students share control for determining class outcomes. At first, this new kind of pedagogy (that is, teaching methods) can seem quite strange to students. As you and your classmates get more practical working with each other in groups and connecting with your community, though, you may find it far more interesting than "regular" classes.

In many traditional learning environments, the instructor delivers the content of the course through lectures, assignments, and tests. In some cases, students may also complete a practicum or other hands-on experience to further their learning. In contrast, learning through reflecting on experience is at the center of service-learning courses, and faculty guide students as they integrate intellectual knowledge with community interactions through the process of reflection.

One of the aspects of service-learning that may also make the experience enjoyable for you is that the experiential component connects to a wide range of learning styles. You may find that when you enter your service site, the needs of the community are quite different from what you expected. Say, for instance, that your service-learning involves teaching résumé writing to women staying at a "safe house" for survivors of domestic violence. In working with the women, you may discover that they also need professional clothing for job interviews. While they may still need your help in preparing résumés, their confidence in an interview may be undermined unless they feel appropriately dressed. As a service learner, you might find yourself asking, "Now what do I do?"

You have probably succeeded thus far in your education because you have a certain level of ability to listen to lectures, take notes, do research, and write papers. However, for some students (including, perhaps, yourself) this does not come naturally. Instead, your skills may best emerge when interviewing community members or providing counseling assistance. Alternatively, you may excel at organizing tasks and developing project timelines, or you may be visually creative. In the previous example, you may be the best person to provide résumé assistance for the women, or it might make more sense for a classmate to assist with résumé writing while you call local agencies to inquire about clothing donations. Individuals have different talents and strengths, and these differences contribute to the opportunity to build from and contribute their strengths to the service-learning projects using different skill sets.

Along the way, your instructor and the course readings will further develop your range and repertoire of skills, knowledge, and insights, because service-learning courses invariably challenge students to consider where "truth" and wisdom reside. Moving more deeply into the previous scenario, for example, you might begin to wonder why domestic violence exists in your community. What role might the media play in portraying healthy and unhealthy domestic relationships? Do economic factors such as unemployment make any difference? What about substance abuse issues?

Stop for a moment and think about how you would answer the following questions as you ponder your own education and the relationship you see between in-classroom learning and the outside world:

- What is the relative value of solutions drawn from scholarly literature compared to ideas presented by students, faculty, and community partners?
- How can we move beyond stereotypes, preconceived ideas, misinformation, and biases to understand real people and real issues?
- How can we be solution centered?
- How can we examine external norms and societal structures?
- What community values should we reinforce, which are open to question, and how should a community decide this?
- How can we develop and act from an ethical base while engaging as citizens in our communities?

As a student in a community-based learning course, you will be asked to be highly reflective about your learning experiences. Often, you will keep a journal or write reflective papers that emphasize various aspects of your learning. You may also be asked to post service-learning blogs or respond to online discussion questions. The goal is to help you cognitively and affectively process your thoughts and feelings about your experience, while using academic content to derive broader insights.

Here's an example of one way to reflect on your experience. In a senior-level course that provided after-school activities for at-risk students in an urban environment, the learners were asked to examine their experiences from a variety of viewpoints in their reflective journals:

- Describe what you did today.
- What did you see or observe at the site?
- How did you feel about the experience?
- What connections do you find between the experience and course readings?
- What new ideas or insights did you gain?
- What skills can you use and strengthen?

Exercise 1.1: Comparing Classrooms

Think back to traditional classrooms in which you have been a student/learner. What responsibilities did you have in this kind of class, and what responsibilities did the instructor have? How do you imagine your role as a student will be different in this community-based experience? What kinds of responsibilities do you imagine that you will have in this class? How about your instructor? The others in your classroom learning community? The community outside your classroom?

Make a list of the activities you did in a traditional classroom and compare those with any of your nontraditional learning experiences. What factors in each environment best facilitated your learning? What factors made it more challenging for you to learn?
What Is a Citizen and Why Must I Learn to Be One?

Being a citizen in the United States implies that you were either born here or naturalized as one (meaning, you passed the citizenship exam and took the citizenship oath). Generally, U.S. citizens do not tend to reflect on what citizenship entails. In the wake of significant national or global events, such as the attacks on September 11, 2001, or the war against terrorism, citizenship may be associated with American patriotism. Those in the armed services may frequently consider what it means to be a citizen, since they are charged with defending and protecting our country and its democratic values.

Certainly, citizens of the United States hold a variety of views about what precisely that means. If you are an international student or if you immigrated to this country, your ideas about citizenship may be different from those of many Americans. As you engage in your service-learning course, you will have many opportunities to explore what it means to be a citizen, an active participant in the life of American communities. What are the duties, as well as the rights, for participation in this democracy?

A college student originally from Bosnia wrote the following during her service-learning course:

I came to the United States five years ago as a refugee because of the war. Before, in my country, I hoped for freedom. To be free to make my own decisions and free to go where I wanted without any limitations. Back then, I didn’t link it with democracy. Now, in the United States, I think about terms like freedom, democracy, and citizenship as interdependent. They can’t exist without each other. If we live in a democratic society we have certain freedoms. But we must also be a good and responsible citizen to protect those freedoms for everyone.

More than five decades ago, President John F. Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” This statement most succinctly and aptly describes the fundamental concept behind service-learning and community service. As citizens, it is our obligation to contribute to the improvement of our nation. Moreover, many would argue that as citizens of the wealthiest nation in the world, it is our responsibility to be good global citizens.

We are all aware of the multiple issues that face our communities: homelessness, poverty, drug addiction, violence, pollution, racism, sexism, homophobia, lack of health care, poorly performing schools, urban blight—and the list goes on. Other difficulties face us as well: corporate fraud, dishonest politicians, and biased judicial systems. In light of such concerns, it is natural to feel overwhelmed, hopeless, and helpless. After all, what could we possibly do to change any of it? And while we might care about the issues (and maybe even donate a few dollars each year to charitable organizations), the guilty conscience that is prodding us to get involved may be overtaken by our own apathy. In the end, we feel bad but often go on with our day. We just do not know how to respond to President Kennedy’s challenge. The problem seems too big.

Yet most of us have done “good” in our communities at one time or another. We might have served Thanksgiving dinner at a shelter; answered calls at a crisis center; helped to raise money for new playground equipment in a park; taught religious education to kids in churches, synagogues, or mosques; registered voters or gathered signatures for ballot measures; donated blood; picked up litter on the beach; or tutored someone to learn to read. All of these efforts are a part of what makes our communities stronger. Still, the question remains: Why must I be “required” to participate in service-learning? If I want to make a positive difference in my neighborhood, why shouldn’t I be left alone to decide for myself when and where I want to volunteer? Why should I be “forced” to serve in the community as a part of my education? Isn’t this denying me freedom of choice? And isn’t this even more problematic if I have to work at an organization or with others with whom I have differing political, religious, or ethical views?

The Role of Education in a Democracy

Some have described American democracy as a great experiment. Others have suggested that it is a work of art in progress. But unlike a laboratory experiment or a painting on the wall, democracy is the function of human interaction. Democracy is the attempt to balance differences in individual values, beliefs, and experiences with collective ideals of justice, equity, and security. Being a citizen in a democracy means that you possess both the rights of freedom and a responsibility to uphold democratic ideals such as fairness. In
Understanding the Learning-Through-Serving Proposition

We stand in a turmoil of contradictions without having the faintest idea how to handle them. Law! Freedom! Rich/Poor; Right/Left; Love/Hate—the list seems endless. Paradox lives and moves in this realm; it is the balancing of opposites in such a way that they do not cancel each other but throw sparks of light across their points of polarity. It looks at our desperate either/or and tells us that they are really both/and—that life is larger than any of our concepts and can, if we let it, embrace our contradictions. (Morrison, 1983)

Institutions of education in U.S. democracy have attempted to bridge these complementary but competing forces of Modernism and society, freedom and responsibility. Colleges and universities encourage us to live up to the “American dream” by working hard and increasing our intellectual capacities. The hope is that we will make use of our new insights to get good jobs and be good neighbors.

This is not a simple proposition. Our society, and our world for that matter, is plagued by incredibly complex problems. Pollution will not be stopped through curbside recycling alone, hunger will not be reduced by building larger food banks, and women will not be made safer merely by adding more streetlights.

Educational leaders have come to realize that the critical issues facing our nation can be solved only through the creation of educated citizens. Indeed, John Dewey (1916), in Democracy and Education, argued that students must be engaged not just in thought, but in action, and that this mode of education is crucial to the formation of responsible citizens. Two key elements—knowledge and skill—are the cornerstones for developing civically engaged students and graduates.

Being civic-minded is more than just what you know. It is what you do with what you know. Institutions of higher education risk producing graduates who know without doing—and are increasingly incorporating service-learning to address this concern. Equally detrimental to our communities are those who do without knowing. What our country needs is more than either abstract visions or “blind” actions. We need mindful individuals who choose to “do good” for their country. In essence, community-based educational experiences increase our capacity for how to apply our knowledge and skills to civic issues. This is known as enhancing our civic capacity.

I knew that helping an underprivileged kid learn to read would be challenging and fun. But I never realized that as a class we could have an impact on the whole community. Because of the after-school program we started, parental involvement has increased and juvenile crime the last six months has decreased. I hope this trend continues.

Developing Civic Capacity: Charity versus Solidarity

Developing civic capacity—meaning knowing how to apply our knowledge and skills to community challenges—is also dependent upon our attitudes for performing service in the first place. Certainly, if service is required in the course then perhaps our only motivation for doing the service activities is to pass the class. Additionally, we may feel that serving others is simply part of our “duty,” either because of religious values or because of our national obligations as citizens. However, when service is conducted from this mindset (or heartset) it is likely to be performed as “charity” work. With charity work, volunteers conceive of themselves as being above the person or group they are assisting. Charity workers believe that their volunteer work makes them “good people” and they see their assistance as one-sided (e.g., what I am doing for them). Charity workers don’t see what benefits they get in exchange, such as learning from the people they are helping (Heldman, 2011).

In contrast, “solidarity” work shifts the focus from the volunteer to the community in identifying strengths, assets, and resources that can lift and sustain individuals and groups over the long term. With service as solidarity work, the volunteers see themselves as equal to the people they are serving, see a part of themselves in the person they are working with, and recognize that they are working together for the betterment of everyone (McClure, 2006).

Therefore, enhancing our civic capacity does not just mean cognitive enlightenment, it means viewing situations, people, and places from new perspectives. As we reach out our hand, we also imagine being in

Exercise 1.3: Making a Difference

If you are working on your own, divide a sheet of paper into four columns. At the top of each column write one of the following words: Location, Action, Skill, and Knowledge.

Next, make a list of the places you have helped out in the community and put them under the Location column. This does not have to be formal volunteerism. Maybe you planted trees in a park as part of your Girl Scout troop or maybe you walked in a fundraiser for juvenile diabetes. Everything counts.

Beside each Location, briefly describe what you did. What was the Action?

As you consider what you did, note the Skill (the concrete abilities) and Knowledge (the base of information) you used to accomplish the Action.

Read what you have written. What do you notice about the ways you have worked to make a difference in your community? What does this say to you about your own civic capacity? What might our community mean for you as a service-learner in this new experience? What knowledge and skills, in particular, would you like to expand in this new experience?
The experience benefited me in improving my communication skills and leadership abilities. It also helped me to further my conflict resolution skills. Most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to have an experience in a real environment.

I learned how to talk effectively with others and how to resolve professional differences without anger.

Students further noted how the course brought them insights and understanding to their own stereotypes, biases, and prejudices while expanding their appreciation for diverse others.

The most important aspect I learned in this experience was dealing with a sector of the community I might never have worked with otherwise, gaining insight into the juvenile justice system and the needs of the Southeast Asian immigrant community.

I learned to understand myself and to overcome a lot of biases I had toward the poor.

Service-learning courses should not be viewed as an educational utopia. Personality conflicts can arise, students may lack the ability to deal with others who are different from themselves, community partners may not follow through on their commitments, and group members may not meet their responsibilities. In addition, many community service projects are in neighborhoods or parts of the community unfamiliar to students. It's quite likely that you may experience a variety of emotions and reactions while performing your service, including fear, guilt, or outrage. Because service-learning experiences are grounded in relationships—the relationship of student to community, to other students, to the instructor, and to the self—the thoughts and feelings you have about your service experience may be quite intense at times. We address these issues of understanding, managing, and processing your feelings and reactions in later chapters in this book.

Also, there may be aspects about you, your life, or your classmates that make the service-learning fit expe-
to act deliberately in a pluralistic world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others, all involve skills that must be acquired. (p. 4)

The following chapters are designed to help you become a civically engaged individual and community member as you participate in and make meaning of your service-learning experience.

**Key Concepts**

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**Key Issues**

- How is community-based learning different from traditional forms of learning?
- Why do colleges require community service and service-learning?
- What is the role of freedom and responsibility in a democracy?
- What knowledge and skills are involved in developing civic capacity?
- What does the community gain as a result of student engagement?

**ADDITIONAL EXERCISE**

**Exercise 1.4: Reflection Questions**

- What should be the role of education in preparing students to become citizens?
- What does an effective citizen do? Can you identify some behaviors and actions associated with being a "good" citizen?
- What is a global citizen?
- What, in your view, are the pros and cons of requiring community-based learning courses?
- What specific knowledge or skills have you learned in your courses that you can apply to this community site?
- How might you be able to use your academic major and its associated knowledge base to address community issues?
- Is the "American Dream" possible? If so, how and for whom?
- What connection do you see between societal issues and individual responsibility?
- How do issues of discrimination and prejudice inhibit societal change?
- What community issues concern you the most?

**Building and Maintaining Community Partnerships**

VICKI L. REITENAUER, AMY SPRING, KEVIN KECSKES, SEANNA M. KERRIGAN, CHRISTINE M. CRESS, AND PETER J. COLLIER

On a beautiful Tuesday morning in early July, several student grant writers and their instructor from a service-learning course gathered during their class time at a huge warehouse in an industrial section of their city. The space they were about to tour—the former administrative and manufacturing headquarters of a local sportswear company—had been donated to their community partner, whose vision was to create an inclusive space for both emerging and established artists to come together outside of the competitive world of commercial galleries and conservative museums. This prospective artistic community center, which was to include spaces for exhibitions and performances and a resource center for working artists, now sat in front of them, behind a massive (and locked) front door. Those assembled waited 5, 10, 15 minutes. A few more students showed up. They all waited a bit longer. Now the community partner was really late. So were about half of the students from the class.

Though perhaps seemingly minor, the apparent breakdown in communication described previously is no trivial matter in a community partnership, but it is quite a common one. In this chapter, we explore the process of creating successful partnerships (those that serve not only the community, but also the students who are working on behalf of community change) and the outcomes that result from such partnerships. We will return to the previous scenario and examine others to investigate how these students might actively approach this opportunity to build their own knowledge and skills through effective collaboration with the world outside their college campus.

Orienting the Self toward Serving and Learning

Before we talk about the hallmarks of a successful partnership, let's think about "service" itself. In chapter 1, you learned why colleges and universities are increasingly focused on engaging with their communities. This commitment allows the expertise of those who make up the higher education community (students, faculty, and staff) to impact the surrounding community positively, in order to address societal and political challenges and to create positive change both for individuals and within systems.

That's not the only reason colleges and universities partner with the community, however. In addition to the social change possible from these partnerships, students may receive extraordinary benefits not accessed through traditional lecture-style courses. Because community-based learning environments energize, enhance, and make real the course curricula, students typically report significant growth in their abilities to communicate with diverse audiences in multiple ways, enhancement of leadership and project management skills, and development of their capacities for understanding themselves in relation to others who are both similar to and different from themselves. Participating