A Community Development Approach to Service Learning
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What is a community development approach to service learning?
Service learning has historically been defined as a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) 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” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

In theory, the dual goals of student learning and community impact should complement and enhance each other. However, in practice, it is very difficult to achieve both goals. Note that the definition above emphasizes student outcome goals, with only token mention of community needs. A recent study of organizations which have hosted service learning students found that they had mixed feelings about service learning and revealed a number of problems and frustrations faced by host organizations in the service learning process (Stoecker, Tryon & Hilgendorf, 2009).

Consequently, we need a new model of service learning that focuses on achieving high quality community development impacts. A community development perspective emphasizes a process whereby community residents are engaged in a process of defining community issues, and then organizing to address those issues, including engaging higher education resources such as service learning.

Problems in service learning
Service learning too often focuses more heavily on student learning at the expense of meeting community needs. This is manifested in a number of specific problems in service learning projects (Martin, SeBlonka & Tryon, 2009).

Time Commitment
Many service learning projects are structured as semester-long courses (Tryon et al., 2008), which limits the projects to a maximum of less than four months and often as few as 15-20 total hours of service. This leads to a number of difficulties:
Host organizations are expected to invest in training students who will only serve in the organization for a short time, an inefficient use of the organization’s scarce resources.

Students who are assigned to provide direct service, such as tutoring children, often leave the organization before or shortly after they have established trust with clients.

Students participating in short-term service learning are sometimes less committed to serving the organization and see service merely as a course requirement they must fulfill.

The academic calendar is often incompatible with program timelines, making it difficult for organizations to depend on students for programs that run during school holidays when many students leave town.

Faculty Involvement

Instructors are often minimally involved in the service aspect of service learning courses and have little contact with the host organization. The community must bend to structure its intended outcomes to fit a predefined course, rather than the instructor developing the course collaboratively with community actors. As a result, students are expected to negotiate the placement by themselves, and attempt to meet course expectations and community expectations that may not coincide. The expectations, roles and responsibilities of the instructor, students and host organization are neither jointly decided nor clearly communicated.

Inadequate Training

Students are not always adequately trained in the services they are expected to provide during service learning. Thus, the host organization has to bear the responsibility of training and supervising students. Organization staff members feel as if they are the ones providing an educational service to the students, rather than receiving service from the institution.

Disconnect between service and community needs

Students, and even faculty, engaged in service-learning are often unfamiliar with the community they hope to serve. Their service actions may miss the mark of true community needs, or even have unintended negative consequences for the community.

An alternative approach to service learning

The community development approach

Community impact focus is crucial to community development service learning. Instead of deciding on service actions primarily based on its relevance to the curriculum, service learning projects should engage community organizations in identifying goals for community impact. Then, they work backwards from these goals to strategically plan service actions that would best meet them.

Project-based research is a process for planning, action and reflection based on community impact goals. This process is a way for faculty and students to do service learning that truly supports community development. The four steps of this process are:

- Diagnosis: Participants identify and understand the scope, dynamics, causes and effects of an issue, and determine goals for problem solving.
- Prescription: Participants devise a problem solving action plan.
- Implementation: The plan is put into action.
- Evaluation: Evaluation is an ongoing process which begins when implementation begins. It could result in the discovery of new problems and lead back to a new diagnosis.

As community groups or organizations attempt to improve their circumstances, they need to carefully target issues and develop strategies. A project-based model can assist them in that task. The stages of the project-based process are often served by two variations on the general service learning model. Diagnosis requires gathering data on what causes an issue, who is affected by it, and how those effects vary. A prescription requires collecting information on various options for tackling a particular issue, and developing criteria to determine which option has the best chances of success. These first two stages can be supported by an adaptation of the service-learning model called community-based research (CBR). In CBR students and faculty work with the community to conduct research focused around community-identified questions.

The third stage of the project-based model, implementation, involves putting into motion the strategy developed through the first two stages. A more traditional form of service-
learning can support this stage, as students can provide some of the labor required to make the strategy happen. At the same time that the implementation begins, however, there is more community-based research to do. This time the CBR is in the form of evaluation – making sure that the strategy is being implemented according to plan, and looking for early outcomes or unintended consequences.

There are several advantages in using the project-based model to guide CBR and service learning. First and foremost, it ensures that service learning and CBR are centered on real community impact rather than only on student learning objectives. Furthermore, this model can help community organizations clarify or reflect on program goals, strategies and effectiveness. This requires diagnostic, prescriptive and evaluative research, which students can provide when community organizations lack the time or maybe skill to do so by themselves. Additionally, the model breaks projects into several steps. The same instructors can maintain a partnership with a community over a long period of time, engaging students from different courses to conduct the CBR or service at each step of the model. This allows for students to enter and leave the project without disrupting its overall flow. Finally, the project-based process offers a framework for community organizations to hold faculty and students more accountable, since they know what they need to achieve from each of the four stages.

Organizations can then decide whether to agree to a longer-term relationship with the higher education institution based on whether the institution is able to provide, in advance, commitments from faculty and courses for each of the four steps in the project-based process. Alternatively, organizations can also seek out faculty members who offer courses or conduct research that is relevant to the organization's goals, and propose ways for service learning collaboration at particular stages of the project-based process. Below is an example of how this project-based model plays out.

A case study of community development service learning

**TechShop**

The following case study describes an effort to focus service learning on creating impact in the community, led by Katherine Loving and Randy Stoecker from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and Eric Howland of DANEnet (a nonprofit ICT support provider). The goal of this project was to build the capacity of community organizations to use information and communication technologies (ICT) (Stoecker et al., 2010). While reading the case study, note how this service learning project reflects the community development approach, focuses on community impact, and follows the project-based process.

**Semester 1 – Diagnosis**

In the fall of 2007, the project team organized a group of organizations interested in nonprofits and ICT. They designed and implemented a survey of 500 local nonprofit organizations asking them about their ICT needs and their interest in a service learning program aiming to meet these needs.

**Semester 2 – Further diagnosis and prescription**

Randy, Katherine and Eric co-taught a student seminar that conducted further research with the organizations that had responded to the survey. Fifteen students enrolled in the course. After training in research methods, some students conducted more in-depth diagnostic research by interviewing 30 organizations. Other students conducted prescriptive research by studying two computer support programs: the university program serving the university community, and the DANEnet program which serves nonprofit organizations. Students presented their findings to the organizations at a community event, and together, they began a planning process to design the actual program.

**Semester 3 – Implementation and evaluation**

The process led to a service learning course called TechShop. Community organizations had identified web development as the highest priority, and requested one-on-one service from students. In response, TechShop instructors recruited five students with web development expertise and paired each of them with one organization. The students' task was not only to develop websites, but also build organizational capacity in maintaining the websites. Although the students received relevant training and support from instructors, evaluation of Techshop revealed many problems. Web development projects were difficult to complete in one semester, students built websites that were too complex for organizations' servers to handle,
and there was lack of coordination between students and organizations about the design of the websites.

Semester 4 – Refined implementation and evaluation
Based on the evaluation of the efforts of the previous semester, the TechShop team shifted the focus from web development to social media applications, which were also identified as a need by many organizations and were more feasible for semester-long projects. Once again, students received relevant training and were paired with partner organizations that had submitted social media project proposals. An evaluation of the project indicated that, this time, partner organizations felt more confident in their ability to manage and maintain the tools beyond the semester, demonstrating that the refined TechShop model was more successful at capacity building. However, as in previous semesters, some students lacked the ability to assess the appropriateness of various technological solutions. This ability requires a broad set of technology and consulting skills that are difficult to develop within one semester. Furthermore, nearly half of the partner organizations asked students to work on projects that strayed from the proposed plan which focused on social media applications. Negotiating the scope of the project became a challenge for students.

From this case study, we can see how the CBR process helped instructors and students to discover and target community needs through service learning. Although problems arose even in the final semester, the continuous reflection that was embedded through the process helped the team to move closer and close to their goal.

Community standards for service learning
The community development model sets a high bar for all those engaged in service learning. Making service learning beneficial not only for students, but also the community, requires a higher level of engagement and collaboration from students, instructors and host organizations. The following guidelines for building better service learning relationships are based on a community-based research process with a University of Wisconsin–Madison seminar and over 30 Madison community organizations. In this digest, we will focus on guidelines for community organizations, while keeping in mind that effective service learning requires the effort of all parties involved. For a more complete list that includes guidelines for university partners, please see the Community Standards for Service Learning brochure (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

1. Communication
• Provide welcome packets and guidelines to students to clarify commitments.
• Ensure there is staff capacity to mentor service learning students.
• Work with the course instructor to familiarize students with the organization’s programs and mission. Give a class presentation
• Reach an agreement with the instructor on how to communicate (phone, email, or the preferred face-to-face meeting) and how often.
• Sign a contract with the instructor and students.

What to expect from the course instructor
The instructor should provide the host organization with information about the course and learning goals for students, invite an organization representative to present to the class, and reach an agreement with the organization about the timeline for students’ service.

2. Developing positive relationships
• Think about how service learning projects can develop into long term collaborations.
• Create opportunities and support for students to meet learning goals.
• Communicate concerns or recommendations for the collaboration openly to the instructor.

What to expect from the course instructor
The instructor should try to make a multi-year commitment, encourage students to commit for at least one semester, clearly define the nature and requirements of students’ service, contribute to mentoring students, invite the organization to design projects collaboratively and encourage the organization to select students who are a good fit for the organization.
3. Managing service learners

In collaboration with the instructor, 
• Determine the organization’s role in evaluation;  
• Agree on the criteria and process that will be used to evaluate students;  
• Evaluate midway and at end of the course, and use the evaluations to improve the course;  
• Limit paperwork: perhaps use a phone call interview or email response instead of forms;  
• Determine who grades or checks that hours and duties have been completed; and  
• Communicate challenges regarding students in a timely fashion.

What to expect from students
Students should commit to the organization’s cause and adapt to the organization’s scheduling, program framework and professional etiquette. They should be self-directed and take responsibility for meeting course requirements. They should communicate openly with the instructor and the organization.

4. Promoting diversity

Collaborate with the instructor to:  
• Create goals and processes for developing students’ cultural competency;  
• Help students understand and reflect on social status and self-identity;  
• Provide feedback on student cultural competency, including student reflection writing; and  
• Work with students to handle cultural conflicts if they occur.

Further Resources and Reading on Service Learning

• The Community Standards for Service Learning brochure provides guidelines for all partners to facilitate effective service learning. [http://comm-org.wisc.edu/sl/files/cy4slbrochure.pdf](http://comm-org.wisc.edu/sl/files/cy4slbrochure.pdf)

• The book *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* (2009, Temple University Press) edited by Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth Tryon with Amy Hilgendorf reflects on common challenges in service learning and possibilities for improvement.

• The Morgridge Center for Public Service at the University of Wisconsin–Madison offers resources and can help Madison area organizations connect with community-based research efforts and service learning courses at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. [www.morgridge.wisc.edu](http://www.morgridge.wisc.edu)

• Learn and Serve America’s national clearinghouse provides a service learning library, tools for various aspects of service learning, case studies and more. [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)
Works Cited


