

Introduction

The Educational Promise of Service-Learning Communities

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1.

“Service-Learning” and “Learning Communities” have garnered widespread attention in recent years as two important innovations in undergraduate education. Service-learning calls for students to become engaged in community-based work as a path to deeper understanding of subject matter topics and engaging in civic life. The curricular structures and learning environments of learning communities provide a platform that encourages intellectual collaboration and social engagement for faculty members and students across disciplinary and social boundaries.

A growing number of college campuses are now linking these two initiatives by creating learning communities that integrate service-learning¹. The chapters in this monograph describe the work of several successful service-learning communities. They explore some of the conceptual and practical benefits of integrating these two pedagogical strategies as well highlighting some of the challenges faced by each campus.

These case studies also illustrate the range of practice in our institutions, from first-year programs to senior capstones, from residential learning communities to those on commuter campuses, from those in professional and occupational programs to those in liberal arts. The institutions and their histories with both learning communities and service-learning vary quite widely; yet taken collectively they represent a snapshot of what may be possible when these strategies intersect.

Together, service-learning and learning communities offer administrators, faculty, and students in higher education a unique opportunity to reflect upon core purposes of our scholarly institutions as they relate to a democratic society. While service-learning and learning communities are not always connected to larger civic issues, many of the programs featured in this volume also have begun to explore how the exponential, synergistic power of combining the two may enhance not only student learning but also democratic engagement. The best practices of learning communities demand intentional “community making” and offer students the opportunity to develop empathy with others and respect for diverse perspectives. Whether a service-learning experience takes the form of individual service to human or ecological communities, or is done in a more systemic context, the experiential nature of service-learning programs aims to foster democratic sensibilities and the “habits of the heart” essential to becoming an engaged citizen in a democratic society.

The Shared Intentions of Learning Communities and Service-Learning

As the case stories in this monograph illustrate, the synergy of building upon and integrating the best of both practices has powerful promise. In the space where they intersect, there is a rich kind of ecotone², an environment that can

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enhance the work of each. Some practices shared between these two initiatives are enriched by joining them, others unique to one or the other can open doors to a different kind of learning in each. Connecting the overlapping intentions of learning communities and service-learning can strengthen both, and bring possibilities for institutional transformation.

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Both learning communities and service-learning restructure teaching and learning. Both initiatives significantly restructure teaching and learning environments with the explicit intention of deepening students' learning and creating connections between theory and practice. Learning communities restructure smaller curricular units (conventional discrete classes) into a more coherent whole. These connected packages of coursework attempt to create larger and more meaningful spaces for learning and for community building. Ideally, the courses in learning communities are scheduled back-to-back, making the classes not only connected academically, but also connected in time and space.

Service-learning restructures teaching and learning environments so that the community becomes a classroom and venue for practice. The experiential nature of learning through service aims to ground the formal intellectual content in application, which lectures and reading alone may not achieve. The hands-on experience of working in the community asks students to develop a broader perspective through linking their classroom work to real-world problems and real-world needs. A substantial body of research demonstrates that when service is integrated with the academic endeavor, students gain a deeper and more lasting understanding of intellectual topics (AAHE Series; Jacoby 1996; Eyler and Giles 1999; *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning* 2000).

At Chandler-Gilbert Community College (chap. 2), a freshman learning community connected freshman composition, film and literature, and various computer skills courses to explore a yearlong theme, "Creating Community in a Changing World." This learning community met for two intensive mornings each week, allowing for collaborative learning, flexible projects and computer lab workshops. In addition, the students engaged in a yearlong service-learning relationship with the House of Refuge East, a transitional housing program for homeless families. This firsthand exploration of the issues of homelessness enlarged and expanded students' understanding of community and raised important questions about their surrounding community's relationship to and responsibility for homeless families.

Both learning communities and service-learning reconsider who learns from whom. Many learning communities and service-learning efforts take quite seriously the idea that all participants can learn from each other. Learning communities, especially those involving teaching teams of faculty members and student affairs professionals (and, sometimes, teaching assistants, librarians, community partners, and student peers) strive to create a climate of reciprocity in the exchange of ideas and the sharing of expertise. Because these programs often address complex problems to which there are no simple answers, multiple perspectives are seen as critical. These perspectives can emerge through the lenses of multiple disciplines, but also can surface through the stories of practitioners, from the position of stakeholder groups and from the experiences of students themselves in field settings.

In New Century College’s Urban Alternative Program (chap. 7) faculty members, community partners, and students have been engaged in ongoing dialogue and negotiation toward mutually productive avenues of learning. Through these conversations, participants are developing a deeper understanding of the varied, yet equally important, contributions that each group—faculty members, students, and community members—makes toward a more complete understanding of identity and community in local neighborhoods.

Both learning communities and service-learning think about community intentionally. Both learning communities and service-learning ask students and teachers to think not only about the content of their coursework, but also about building community, both inside and out of the classroom. In learning communities, because students take multiple classes together, they become a “knowable” group to each other, almost within the first week of the term. Of course, a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and productive collaborative work are not givens, but learning community programs explicitly aspire to and work toward these outcomes.

Many teaching teams take these goals seriously, and intentionally create opportunities for community development as the class comes together to make decisions about class syllabi, discussions, presentations, study groups, and assignments. They work to foster hospitality, inclusion, collaborative skills, and places for each student’s voice to be heard, and in so doing, can model deliberations about the meaning of community and notions of democratic practice. In curricular learning communities, students and teachers might address issues of leadership, resources, roles, hierarchies, and responsibilities among the participants. In residential learning communities, students practice interpersonal communication and conflict management skills as they negotiate roommate relationships, standards for behavioral norms and discipline, inter-group conflicts, and dialogue about contentious topics (Schoem and Hurtado 2001).

Service-learning asks faculty and student to connect their intellectual work with the problems and issues in the social and ecological communities that surround our campuses, to make real contributions relative to those problems and to reflect on and draw meaning from these experiences. Service-learning in learning communities also may foster a stronger classroom community as relationships develop among students working together intensively outside the classroom.

Both learning communities and service-learning prepare students for a diverse democracy. Students attending college today often come to their campuses with little if any experience with peers outside their own social identity group. Ideally, an undergraduate education should help students encounter alternative perspectives, listen across boundaries of difference, and understand the experiences that have shaped the identities of others. Working together on service-learning projects may help students move beyond their isolated “comfort” zones as they study and work with students from different backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, geographic region, etc. (Tatum 1997). As a student at Chandler-Gilbert Community College observed, “People of completely different backgrounds and experiences were coming together to learn and serve. When we worked together outside the classroom at

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Learning communities use multiple lenses to examine issues. Most community issues are complex. They have multiple dimensions—historic, social, economic, political, cultural, and scientific. Usually, a service-learning experience is situated in a single course, using a single disciplinary frame. Learning communities provide the opportunity to bring multiple disciplinary lenses to bear on an issue or service-learning arena. Thinking about problems from multiple perspectives can help students develop a more complex understanding.

the House of Refuge East, we left on a mission to serve the community rather than ourselves and returned with a stronger sense of community among us.”

Learning communities also are seen as promising venues for doing this work. In learning community programs, the skills of collaborative learning and the practices of community building are taken seriously. Moreover, in both learning communities and service-learning, classroom reflections on encounters with diversity can connect their classroom or service experiences to their civic responsibilities in their work places, neighborhoods, and an emerging global society.

In Fairhaven College’s Law and Diversity Program (chap. 8), a two-year upper-division learning community, the integrative seminar component provides the venue for students to build a much more complex and nuanced understanding of diversity in America. Through their community building work in the classroom, they struggle with discourse across differences and begin to imagine ways they can contribute to a more just and humane society. The seminar becomes a laboratory to practice the skills they need in their internships as they encounter people from many diverse cultures and perspectives.

How Learning Communities Can Enhance Service-learning

Joining these two practices not only reinforces the places of intersection, but builds new spaces for synergy. We believe learning communities can enhance service-learning experiences in a number of ways.

Learning communities can provide more time and space. Most service-learning experiences are extensions of discrete courses. The risk is that these service activities remain in the shallows. At times they feel uneasily grafted onto the important intellectual work of the classroom, and they often compete with other commitments. Because students and faculty members’ lives are already over-busy, the service experience is often quite limited—an hour or two a week of tutoring in an elementary school or a Saturday service event, such as a river clean-up project. Building relationships with community partners, crucial to effective service-learning programs, requires time and can not easily be packed into a box of an hour a week. As most learning communities involve six or more quarter or semester credit hours, space is created for community-based work to become a larger and more significant component of the learning experience.

The University of Michigan’s Michigan Community Scholars Program (chap. 3) for example, joins a residential living-learning experience with both coursework and service projects, focusing on questions of community and making a difference. Students not only spend four to six hours a week in their community placements, but also are encouraged to practice the skills of living in a diverse democracy in their residential hall life. Collin County Community College (chap. 6) typically offers team-taught learning communities of two courses (six semester credits) allowing for substantial service components.

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Wagner College's first year learning communities (chap. 4) link two courses with a reflective tutorial that includes a significant service-learning experience and intensive writing. For example, a learning community linking courses in ethnic studies, politics, and literature grounds conceptual and historical learning about the American immigrant experience by using field study and service in neighborhood community centers serving immigrants in New York City. All three classes are seen as crucial to developing students' understanding of social forces that shape the immigrant experience in New York City.

How Service-learning Can Enhance Learning Communities

Similarly, service components can enrich and deepen learning communities.

Service-learning can add a component of experiential learning. Service-learning can strengthen learning communities by building in experiential components, which actively move students between the classroom and lived reality. Many learning communities address compelling questions or contemporary issues in an interdisciplinary manner, and often are very engaging for students as a result. Many learning communities also enhance the understanding of these issues through guest speakers from or field trips into the community. Adding a community-based research and/or service component can move this learning one step further by testing theory and text against day-to-day reality.

At The Evergreen State College (chap. 5), students in a program entitled "Local Knowledge" focused on the complexity and richness of conducting community-based research. They also explored the ethical dilemmas created when the lines between academia and local community are blurred through collaboratively developed projects and when students seriously examine their role and privilege as college-student researchers. In the "Creating Community in a Changing World" program at Chandler-Gilbert, students not only studied meanings of community among diverse cultures in class—through their continuing service work with the homeless shelter, students also began to reflect more deeply on community and what happens when families find themselves without a community to turn to.

Service-learning can focus on real problems and issues. While some programs create opportunities for students to make needed service contributions, other community-based activities involve students in research or action projects related to pressing community or regional issues. As John O'Connor describes in his chapter on New Century College's programs, "Our strongest learning communities are built around complex, unstructured, real problems, rather than rote knowledge or fictional case studies."

New Century College (chap. 7) has worked over a number of years with the Staniard Creek settlement on Andros Island in the Bahamas, undertaking a variety of community development projects and researching the island's environment and resource use. This project asks that students and teachers bridge

academic culture and community action to grapple with the broader issues of the nature of expertise, authority, and the messy reality of on-the-ground problem solving. Wagner College's Tom's River Project (chap. 4) involved students in freshman learning communities, over a number of consecutive years, in collecting data and interviewing stakeholders in an action research project relating to the incidence of cancer in a Superfund site in New Jersey.

In addition, service-learning communities students are not the only ones developing wider perspectives. Faculty members also may discover new ways to frame their disciplines and practices as a result of their experiences outside the academy. These interactions may enlarge the space for a new engaged scholarship.

Service-learning can place the learning community in a wider community context. The community settings in which learning community programs engage in service and community-based research are also themselves "learning communities." That is, they also have a collective sense of purpose and history and a set of needs related to strengthening their own capacity to do their work. Public institutions and community agencies also have unique perspectives, grounded in a wealth of experience, to bring to theoretical classroom discussions. It is a widely accepted practice in service-learning that the projects students engage in are mutually designed through collaborative conversations between the college and community. When service-learning efforts achieve this kind of reciprocity, not only are the students affected, but the community agency also can learn from the experience. Community partners can become both legitimate guides for developing student learning goals and recipients of much needed assistance and new ideas.

Building Partnerships

For these kinds of relationships to unfold, colleges and universities must make a commitment to developing and sustaining relationships with community organizations willing to involve undergraduate students who may come to them as novices. Community partnerships are most successful when they are based on equity and mutual respect for the rich benefits of collaboration and cooperation to be realized, and the very nature of learning communities make them ideal locations to center this work. Ideally, at the end of the day, the academy will have moved beyond ". . . seeing the community as a learning lab, and toward viewing it as a partner in an effort to increase each other's capacity and power." (Mintz and Hesser, quoted in chap. 7).

The Tom's River project (chap. 4) demonstrates the challenges and rewards of building community relationships that sustain over time, underscoring the value of community relationships that last beyond the semester.

University of Michigan's Michigan Community Scholars Program (chap. 3) invites community partners to assist faculty teaching first-year seminars. The faculty members and community partners meet regularly in their own seminar to discuss strategies for teaching about community, working in the community, building a reflection component not only for the students but for the faculty and community partners as well.

The Importance of Reflection

Reflective work is critical in service-learning communities, both to help students and faculty make deeper meaning out of their work in these programs. Reflection creates explicit opportunities for the whole public body to synthesize their experience, place it into the context of coursework, and make judgments about its meaning. Reflection is so crucial to this enterprise that we have devoted a chapter of this monograph to explore its purposes and practices (chap. 9).

Critical reflection connected to service-learning helps students examine how their field experiences resonate or conflict with their own previous assumptions or life experiences. Often students don't examine these tensions; when faced by a different way of doing things, they just assume "I'm right, you're wrong," or "I must have been wrong." Reflective work may help them discover how others might have come to different ideas or practices.

Self-reflection is also necessary to avoid situations in which college students come away feeling a disproportionate sense of self-importance for having helped less privileged community members. Otherwise, community service may become a mechanism to reify structures of privilege. Finally, reflection also can ask students to place their service-learning experiences into larger frames about democratic engagement, in keeping with what Richard Guarasci (2001) refers to as the "democratic arts."

The Hard Work of Reform Initiatives

A reform effort combining service-learning and learning communities represents a different view of higher education. If taken seriously, and if implemented comprehensively as the foundational core of a college, the intersection of these two approaches represents a structure and pedagogy that has the power to transform our institutions. All the institutions featured in this volume have attempted to integrate the experiences of service-learning deeply into learning community courses to enrich their overlapping intentions of building critical thinking, reflective practice, democratic engagement, and citizenship. As these examples demonstrate, both can be enriched by the connections—learning communities with civic dimensions and service-learning with multiple disciplines—and the effect of this intersection opens possibilities for enhanced learning for both students and faculty and the promise of institutional transformation.

To be sure, developing service-learning communities requires commitments of energy, time, and resources to build conversations and momentum within an institution and to forge working relationships with community service sites. In the final chapter of this monograph (chap. 10), Richard Guarasci raises some prompting questions about planning for these kinds of initiatives. Guarasci discusses the challenges and rewards of changing our course structures to work with colleagues, students, and the community, and acknowledges the complexities created when multiple teachers and multiple disciplines are connected with community partners. He also addresses the challenges of developing and sustain-

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ing institution-wide programs over time. Institutions that choose to build on the synergy of learning communities and service-learning campus-wide must attend to problems of both scale and sustainability. To ensure success, new structures may need to be created and faculty development time and dollars must be redirected.

The work is worth doing, however. Long-term rewards for students, faculty, and institutions can be significant. Student learning and civic engagement can be enhanced and faculty renewal may be meaningful, even transformative. We may see the benefits, not only at the end of each quarter or semester's work, but also in our students and our campuses' subsequent commitments to civic participation and to solving the difficult problems of society and the world.

Endnotes

1. More than 40 of the 140 learning community programs registered in the Learning Community Directory on the National Learning Community Project's website report integrating service-learning with learning communities.
2. An ecological term for the rich transitional zone between adjacent communities. An ecotone usually embodies some of the ecological features of the two communities but also has a characteristic structure of its own.

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