

## What Is *Service-Learning*?

CHRISTINE M. CRESS

### What Is *Service-Learning*?

**A**CROSS THE COUNTRY, 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 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.

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 named above differ from volunteering or internships because you will intentionally use your intellectual capacities and skills to address community problems. While you will have an opportunity to put your knowledge and skills into direct practice, you will also learn how to reflect on those experiences in making your community a better place in which to live and work.

For example, volunteering to tutor at-risk middle-school students is certainly valuable to the community. Similarly, working as an intern writing news copy for a locally owned and operated radio station is great job experience. *Service-learning*, however, is different.

- **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 (as 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.

In service-learning you will work with your classmates and instructor to use your academic discipline and course content in understanding the underlying social, political, and economic issues that contribute to community difficulties. In essence, you will learn how to become an educated community member and problem solver through serving the community and reflecting on the meaning of that service.

### 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—thus the hyphen between “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 practice 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 tests, 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 example above, 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. Ideally, all students will find the opportunity to build from and contribute their strengths to the service-learning projects using different skill sets.

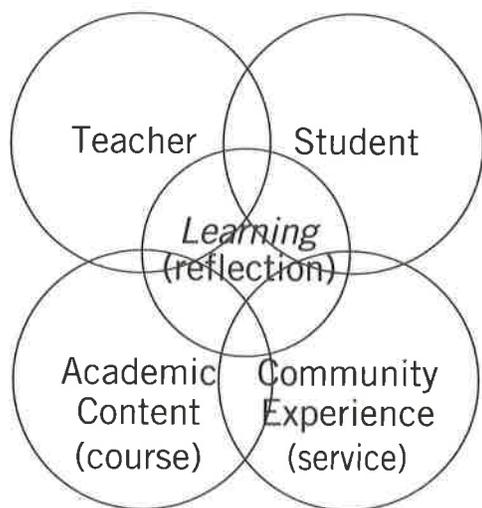


Figure 1.1. The Learning-through-Serving Model

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 scenario above, 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?
- Which 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. 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?
- What will you *apply* from this experience in *future* work with the community?

Reflecting on our experiences lends new significance to what we are learning. It also allows us to compare initial goals and objectives with eventual outcomes—to assess what we have accomplished. We will cover more about reflection and assessment of our community-based learning experiences in later chapters. For now, let’s turn our thoughts to why colleges and universities offer service-learning courses.

### 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?

### Why Is Service-Learning Required at Some Colleges?

Colleges and universities are increasingly including in their educational mission the preparation of graduates as future *citizens*. What, really, does this mean? Are colleges merely hoping that you will vote and pay your taxes as contributing members of society? What about job training and preparing you for the workforce? Aren't you, in fact, spending a lot of time and money on school? If so, why should you be required to perform volunteer service in the community? Isn't obligatory volunteerism like being an indentured servant? In other words, *Are you being forced to work for free?*

Perhaps the greatest single resistance voiced in service-learning classes is the argument that service is volunteerism and, by definition, cannot be required. However, in service-learning classes, the good that you will do in your community necessarily includes the learning you will gain as a result of your efforts. The whole point of service-learning is for you to grow in skills and knowledge precisely because you are bringing your capabilities to real-world problems. While you do this, your community benefits as well.

Colleges and universities do not want or intend to be social-service providers. A myriad of governmental offices, nonprofit agencies, and religiously affiliated organizations serve community needs. Instead, institutions of higher education want to be good neighbors in connecting with their communities. Colleges are most concerned about preparing citizens for the future, graduates who are well prepared to enter the job market and contribute to society. Institutions that require service-learning courses believe that such courses offer a fundamental way to develop and graduate involved citizens.

### 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* means. 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 wherever 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 four 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

### ★ Exercise 1.2: What Is Citizenship?

If you are working on your own, list these words at the top of a large sheet of paper: *Citizenship, Democracy, Freedom, Community, Service, Volunteerism*. Below each of these keywords, brainstorm additional words and phrases that come to mind. You might add, across the top of the sheet, words that pertain directly to your community-based project as you currently understand it: *Homeless, Refugee, Elderly, Literacy*.

After you've completed your brainstorming, look at the lists of words you've created. Spend at least ten minutes responding to these questions in writing: What patterns do you see among the lists? What connections? What disconnections? Are the words you chose "positive" or "negative" in meaning, or both, and how does that impact the insights you draw from the lists? What meaning do these lists have for you personally? What might be some implications of this word association for your work with your community partner?

If you are working with others, tape big sheets of newsprint or chart paper around the room, placing large pens or markers next to each sheet. In silence, walk around the room, adding words and phrases to the headers on each sheet.

After everyone has finished, take turns reading what you all have written, and then discuss as a group the questions listed above.

to feel overwhelmed, hopeless, and helpless. After all, what could you 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 problems seem 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 the 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 a way, it is a kind of double consciousness. We are accountable for ourselves *and* for the welfare of others.

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 shoot sparks of light across their points of polarity. It looks at our desperate either/ors and tells us that they are really both/ands—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—*individualism* 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 catalysts 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.*

---

### How Is Civic Capacity Developed in Service-Learning Courses?

The development of civic capacity occurs when we explore the connection between academic knowledge and experience-derived insight into the breadth and depth of societal and political issues. Having a surface understanding of deforestation, for instance, is not enough to address all the associated environmental and economic questions. Knowing that our schools need additional resources is not enough to ensure that children learn mathematics. We can no longer afford to take a singular or microscopic view of our world. Instead, through your service-learning course readings, discussion, research, lecture, and community experiences, you might come to understand how the purchase of your new running shoes or morning coffee makes you an interdependent part of the global community, whether you examine it through the disciplinary lens of history, biology, psychology, architecture, computer science, English, political science, or urban studies. If we do not see how our individual lives are a part of the whole, we will lack the ability to identify leverage points for creative change. In other words, being an engaged citizen involves more than “thinking globally and acting locally”; it means deliberately applying our academic knowledge and skills to positively transform ourselves, others, and organizations.

---

*Meeting homeless families personally allowed me to get to know the faces behind the statistics. It also helped me to see how social issues and political issues are connected. While I was taking my service-learning course we were electing a mayor in my hometown. One of the candidates wanted to institute a policy to charge parents with a misdemeanor if they failed to get their kids to school. Many of the homeless families I met struggled to enroll their children in schools when they were*

*moving around so much. Never before did I understand how much my vote in local elections matters. How could I vote for something that would hurt these people?*

Understanding problems and recognizing opportunities for improvement is a great starting point. From there, your service-learning course will help you develop the capacity to apply your skills. You will have frequent occasions to test your talents and abilities on real community issues. How, for example, do you best organize volunteers for a legislative rally to support public schools? How might you identify and provide health care services to people without insurance? How do you promote tolerance in a racially segregated community? How do you teach a refugee to surf the Internet?

Each day, our workforce and neighborhoods become more diverse. We need the knowledge and skills of mathematicians, anthropologists, chemists, writers, engineers, musicians, sociologists, and every other discipline, in order to learn to work and live together. Just as importantly, we must practice patience and tolerance in understanding each other. In the end, **empathy** will be the glue that effectively binds our knowledge and skills into a source for community growth.

### What Else Will I Gain from a Service-Learning Course?

Many studies indicate that students who participate in community-based learning realize greater educational and learning gains than their peers. Their academic and social self-concept is higher, they tend to be more moral and ethical in their decision making, their tolerance and empathy for others is improved, their understanding of societal and community issues is broadened, their cognitive and problem-solving skills are more advanced, and their interest in influencing positive social and political change is increased.

After participating in service-learning courses, students stated the following:

*The empowerment given to students created a sense of responsibility and commitment.*

*Reflective journals helped to organize my thoughts and experiences.*

Students also commented on their communication and critical-thinking skills:

#### 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 *Skills* (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 that 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 new 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.

The fundamental principle underlying service-learning and community-based learning courses is that you as a student have knowledge and skills that can improve society. You just need a chance to practice them. Working with community partners compels us to assess and reevaluate our abstract ideas about societal and political problems. As a result, we will see that the community is more than just a place with “needs.” Through working with the community, we will learn of the knowledge, skills, and expertise of our community partners. We will also learn from the individuals we are there to “serve.” Ultimately, community-based experiences are a reciprocal learning process between the educational community (students, faculty, administration) and the community partners (organizations and individuals).

---

### What We All Gain

---

Colleges and universities would be educationally remiss if they did not teach students how to connect themselves to their communities. A central premise of the U.S. Constitution is that, in order to form a more perfect union (of communities), we must work actively to establish justice and ensure liberty. Service-learning courses are an important tool for learning how to take a thoughtfully informed and rational approach to living and working in community that is tempered by active empathy, respect, and care.

---

*Before I came to the United States from Chengdu, China, I thought that everyone here would be treated equally. Supposedly, everyone is born equal but that is not the case. Some people are treated badly because of their race, age, sexual orientation, physical situation, and gender. I did not expect this discrimination. We must learn about social problems, use the knowledge to solve social issues, help others, and strengthen social responsibility.*

---

While individuals may choose to volunteer for a variety of reasons, and learning from that experience naturally takes place, service-learning allows for deeper individual and collaborative reflection on how to create positive societal transformation. We have the

capacity, individually and collectively, to transform our communities to include those who have been disenfranchised due to race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, disability, religion, or political view. As such, service-learning courses teach us how to address the issues of today and tomorrow.

In the beginning, you may find it a struggle to define the concept of civic responsibility and civic engagement in articulating the connections between your service-learning and broader community involvement. At times, even faculty are uncertain about how to differentiate between service, “doing good,” and the enrichment of their own civic capacities through encounters with community organizations, community issues, and community members. By being patient and practicing reflection throughout the

process, you *will* “learn through serving.” As Benjamin Barber (1992) states:

[t]he fundamental task of education in a democracy is the apprenticeship of liberty—learning to be free . . . [T]he literacy required to live in a civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability 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 through the apprenticeship of becoming a civically engaged individual and community member as you participate in your service-learning experience.

Key Concepts		
citizen	democracy	reflection
citizenship	empathy	responsibility
civic capacity	freedom	service-learning
community service	global citizen	society
community-based learning	individualism	volunteerism
	pedagogy	

Key Issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is community-based learning different from traditional forms of learning?</li> <li>• Why do colleges require community service and service-learning?</li> <li>• What is the role of freedom and responsibility in a democracy?</li> <li>• What knowledge and skills are involved in developing civic capacity?</li> <li>• What does the community gain as a result of student engagement?</li> </ul>

## 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?

# LEARNING

## THROUGH

# SERVING



A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning  
Across the Disciplines

Christine M. Cress, Peter J. Collier, Vicki L. Reitenauer and Associates