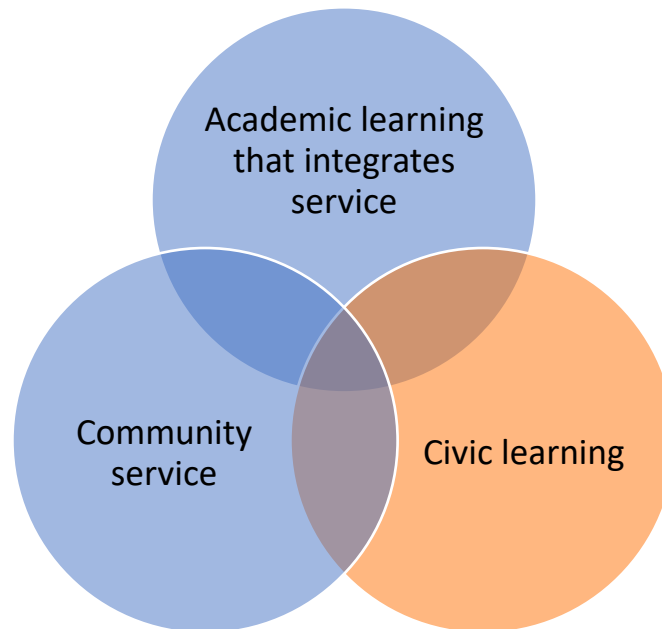


# Conceptualizing Civic Learning

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## Introduction:

Though scholars and practitioners differ regarding the precise definition of service learning, service learning is often described as a pedagogy that includes the following three features:

1. Service in the community.
2. Academic learning that integrates this service with discipline-based academic content, for example, by treating the service experience as a “text.”
3. A component of civic learning that is related, but not reducible, to either the service activity or the academic learning content of the course.

The *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning's* “Service-Learning Course Design Handbook” (2001) includes civic learning as a crucial element of service learning. The authors of the Handbook advocate a “strict interpretation” of civic learning over “looser” ideas about the civic value of education, and a “robust interpretation” of civic participation over more “familiar” manifestations of civic activity, such as voting:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, Jeffrey (ed.) *Service-Learning Course Design Handbook*, Michigan Journal of Community Service learning, 2001, pg. 38.

### A Strict Interpretation of Civic Learning

We conceive of “civic learning” as any learning that contributes to student preparation for community or public involvement in a diverse democratic society. A loose interpretation of civic learning would lead one to believe that education in general prepares one for citizenship in our democracy. And it certainly does. However, we have in mind here a strict interpretation of civic learning - knowledge, skills, and values that make an *explicitly direct and purposeful contribution* to the preparation of students for active civic participation.

### A Robust Interpretation of Civic Participation

In addition to efforts that make an explicitly direct and purposeful contribution to a student’s civic development, we also have in mind a *robust conceptualization* of civic participation, one that involves more than activities such as voting and obeying the law. A deeper conceptualization not only encompasses familiar manifestations of civic participation, but also aspiring to and realizing concrete contributions to one’s local community and beyond.

Other scholars, such as John Saltmarsh, draw on the language of “knowledge, skills and values,” in describing the components of civic learning:

Civic learning includes knowledge--historical, political, and civic knowledge that arises from both academic and community sources; skills--critical thinking, communication, public problem solving, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, coalition building, organizational analysis; and values--justice, inclusion, and participation.<sup>2</sup>

### Service learning at California State University

California State University’s Center for Community Engagement includes civic learning in its definition of service learning:

#### *Service learning*

A teaching method that promotes student learning through active participation in meaningful and planned service experiences in the community that are substantively related to course content. Through reflective activities, students enhance their understanding of course content, general knowledge, *sense of civic responsibility, self-awareness and commitment to the community.* [emphasis added].<sup>3</sup>

In CSU’s “Service Learning Definition and Taxonomy,” which outlines the characteristics of service-learning courses across its 23 campuses, “Explicit Civic Learning Goals” is given as one of six service-learning attributes:

#### *Explicit Civic Learning Goals:*

Civic learning goals are explicitly articulated and develop students’ capacities to address critical social issues.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Saltmarsh, “The Civic Promise of Service learning,” *Liberal Education*, Spring 2005, Vol. 91, No. 2.

<sup>3</sup> California State University, *A Resource Guide for Managing Risk in Service learning*, p.4.  
[https://www.calstate.edu/cce/resource\\_center/documents/CCE\\_ResGuide\\_2011\\_webvs\\_Final.pdf](https://www.calstate.edu/cce/resource_center/documents/CCE_ResGuide_2011_webvs_Final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> California State University Service Learning Definition and Taxonomy (Working Draft: 4/5/2016)  
[http://www.calstate.edu/cce/resource\\_center/documents/2016-04-05-CSU-SLCourse-Taxonomy-DRAFT.pdf](http://www.calstate.edu/cce/resource_center/documents/2016-04-05-CSU-SLCourse-Taxonomy-DRAFT.pdf)

## A Developmental Model of Civic Learning

While civic learning is an essential component of service learning, it is not always clear how to conceptualize civic learning in relation to the other components of service learning: academic learning and community service. Furthermore, beyond its general definition or description, civic learning is often presented as a list of “types” or “examples.” For instance, the *Service-Learning Course Design Handbook* lists eight types of civic learning: Academic Learning, Democratic Citizenship Learning, Diversity Learning, Political Learning, Leadership Learning, Ethical Learning, Inter- and Intra-personal Learning, and Social Responsibility Learning.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, civic learning is described in terms of a range of knowledges, values, and skills. A difficulty with these presentations of civic learning is that it is not always clear how these “types” of civic learning, or various knowledges, values, and skills, relate to one another, and whether civic learning that includes more than one of these types is more than the sum of its parts.

A way to think about civic learning that attempts to integrate these different elements is to view it as a developmental process with three levels:

1. Foundational Civic Learning [emphasis: listening and understanding]
2. Critical Civic Learning [emphasis: analyzing, interpreting, and debating]
3. Engaged Civic Learning [emphasis: acting]

**1. Foundational Civic Learning** aims to move students beyond their own perspective and experience, broadening their understanding of their social, cultural, and political context and their role as citizens and community members. Foundational Civic Learning draws on both the academic content and service experience of the class to foster students’ awareness of their membership in, or relation to, particular communities, such as their neighborhood, city, country, or the global community, or a social grouping or collective, such as a professional, cultural, religious, socio-economic, demographic, or political group. Through classroom learning, community service, active listening to classmates and community partners, and through formal and informal reflection, such as journaling, Foundational Civic Learning develops students’ ability to view society from a range of perspectives, and to integrate their particular understanding with the understanding of others.

### **Example**

#### *Foundational Civic Learning Goal:*

Students will gain greater understanding of how affected communities experience and respond to environmental pollution and contamination.

#### *Foundational Civic Learning Assignment:*

In a well-constructed reflection of 1-2 pages, discuss what you have learned during service-learning about the impact of environmental pollution on X community. In your reflection, you should spend some time reflecting on each of the following questions:

- What environmental pollution do you encounter or are you aware of in the neighborhood where you currently live?

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<sup>5</sup> Howard, Jeffrey (ed.) *Service-Learning Course Design Handbook*, Michigan Journal of Community Service learning, 2001, p. 40.

- Since beginning service-learning, what have you learned about environmental pollution in X community?
- In speaking to community members, what have you learned about X community's concerns about, and efforts to address environmental pollution and contamination in their neighborhood?
- In what ways are the environmental problems you face in your neighborhood connected to those of community X? In what ways are they different? How would you explain these connections and differences? How does this impact your understanding of environmental issues generally?

*Foundational Civic Learning Assessment:*

A rubric for this assignment could include the following items:

- listening and observation skills – evidence from reflection that student listened to community members and observed community actions and site conditions.
- Situational and positional awareness - student able to describe their experience and life conditions in relation to the experience and life conditions of others.
- Analytical skills – student can synthesize classroom learning and service-learning to explain observed similarities and differences between the environmental situations of different communities.

**2. Critical Civic Learning** builds on Foundational Civic learning by going further than expanding a student's knowledge and widening their perspectives. It also involves the student in a robust discussion of civic issues by exploring the causes of social, economic, political, or environmental conditions; debating relevant questions of personal and interpersonal ethics, justice, and responsibility; and considering possible solutions from a multi-perspectival and holistic point of view. Students draw on their academic learning and service activity as resources for this deeper level of civic learning. They develop the capacity to draw together knowledge and experience to hypothesize causal factors contributing to phenomena and test these hypotheses in a robust, rational way. Furthermore, they should practice developing and testing alternative hypotheses and before drawing causal conclusions, and consider the ethical, political, and practical implications of the solutions they propose. In Critical Civic Learning, more structured forms of reflection, including group reflection, are essential for analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing different elements and perspectives, including personal experience and experience of others; academic theory and practical experience; and factual knowledge and ethical judgement.

***Example***

*Critical Civic Learning Goal:*

Students will develop skills in debating alternative solutions to civic problems.

*Critical Civic Learning Activity:*

Students will participate in a classroom debate where teams propose and defend alternative approaches to addressing environmental problems in Community X.

*Critical Civic Learning Assessment:*

A rubric for assessment this assignment could include the following items:

- evidence-based argumentation – teams offer relevant and convincing evidence in support of their ideas.
- stakeholder input – teams incorporate information and ideas learned from community-members during service learning.
- contextual and pragmatic thinking – teams consider the specific needs, character, and capacities of community X in their proposals.
- Reflexivity and self-criticism – students show ability to incorporate and address criticism of their argument and ideas.

**3. Engaged Civic Learning** builds on the previous two levels to foster civic action and participation in a well-informed and ethically responsible manner by building practical, problem-solving, interpersonal, decision-making and leadership skills. Civic action is the ultimate goal of civic learning, and can refer to many things, such as actions that support more sustainable living, a change in vocational or educational focus to further civic engagement, volunteering in the community, democratic participation such as voting or political campaigning, or advocacy and social activism.

### ***Example***

#### *Engaged Civic Learning Goal:*

Students will develop teamworking skills in community advocacy / activism

#### *Engaged Civic Learning Activity:*

The class, in consultation with community members, will develop a campaign to publicize and /or advocate action on environmental justice in community X. This campaign could include advocating for state or local legislation; a media campaign directed at local press and television; or helping to build community capacity and resources. The class will divide into groups and groups will coordinate their part of the campaign.

#### *Engaged Civic Learning Assessment:*

A rubric for assessing this assignment could include the following items:

- empathic and careful listening to community needs and direction
- responsiveness to suggestions and criticisms in campaign planning meetings
- skills of leadership, delegation, and coordination during campaign development
- evidence of teamwork in final campaign materials
- consideration of ethical questions arising in the campaign, such as sustainability, anonymity, privacy, etc.

### **The Developmental Approach to Civic Learning: Features and Best Practices**

1. The Developmental Approach to Civic Learning reinforces the view that civic learning is not one of three essential - but separate - attributes of any service-learning class, but rather relates to, and draws upon, the academic and service components of the class as both text and context for civic learning. At each level

of civic learning, the academic content and service-experience of the class play a part in defining civic-learning goals, tasks, and reflection activities.

2. Though the ultimate outcome of civic learning is civic action, a service-learning class does not need to include all three levels of civic learning. For example, a service learning class that deepens students' understanding of a civic issue, for example, the health needs of a local community, and widens their perspective to include the perspective of people in that community (Foundational Civic Learning) forms a valid and valuable contribution to a student's overall civic education.

3. The developmental approach to civic learning entails that more advanced levels of civic learning are built on previous levels. So, a broader and more inclusive understanding of a civic issue informed by a range of community voices and perspectives (level 1) is a requirement for ethical deliberation and critical analysis (level 2); and this level of informed and critical reflection is necessary for responsible and effective civic action (level 3). This scaffolded approach implies that civic learning is also about learning how to learn. Moving between these levels entails helping students develop skills such as listening, communicating, perspective-taking, critical analysis, integrating knowledge and experience, and different kinds of knowledge, ethical judgement, and practical organization, that are necessary for effective civic learning at each level.

4. Goals pertaining to different levels of civic learning are not always easy or practical to keep entirely separate, and it is possible that a service-learning class may include goals or activities of two or more levels of civic learning. Nonetheless, in developing course goals and activities, it is useful for instructors to be reflective about these levels of civic learning, and consider whether the course (or other courses in the curriculum) provides appropriate preparation and scaffolding for the course's more advanced civic learning goals and activities.

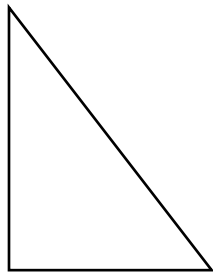
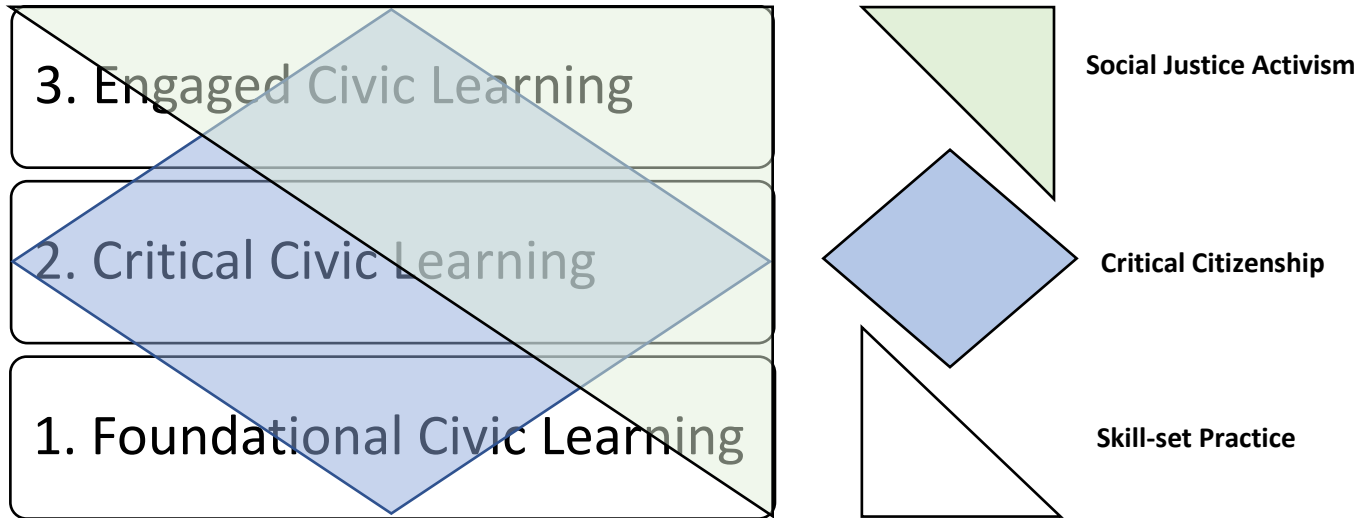
5. The Developmental Approach to Civic Learning, encompassing all three levels, can be built into a single service-learning class or into the larger curricular structure of a department or program. For example, a program in Environmental Studies could include a series of linked classes: an introductory class that broadens student understanding of environmental conditions in their community through academic study, service, and community listening (Foundational Civic Learning); an upper division class that engages students in deeper critical reflection on the causes, solutions, and ethical and political stakes of these environmental conditions (Critical Civic Learning); and a capstone class focused on active collaboration with the community to implement solutions (Engaged Civic Learning).

6. The Developmental Approach to Civic Learning recognizes that while civic learning is an essential part of any service-learning class, there are different kinds of service-learning classes. For example, Lori Britt proposes a typology of three kinds of service-learning class: a) Skill-set Practice and Reflexivity; b) Civic Values / Critical Citizenship; c) Social Justice Activism.<sup>6</sup> Though not intended to be prescriptive, a Developmental Approach to Civic Learning is helpful in aligning appropriate civic learning levels with types of service-learning classes. For example, while any of the three levels of civic learning could, theoretically, align with any of these types of service-learning class, the following graphic suggests more likely alignments between civic learning levels and Britt's service-learning types:

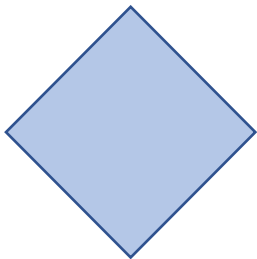
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<sup>6</sup> Lori L. Britt (2012) Why We Use Service-Learning: A Report Outlining a Typology of Three Approaches to This Form of Communication Pedagogy, *Communication Education*, 61:1, 80-88, DOI: 10.1080/03634523.2011.632017

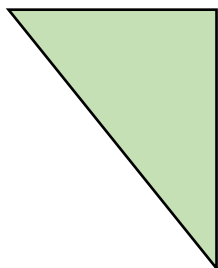
## Levels of Civic Learning aligned with Britt's 3 Types of Service Learning



*S-L Type: Skill-set Practice and Reflexivity.* Service-learning classes that focus on vocational skill-set practice and reflexivity align well with Foundational Civic Learning (level 1). In such classes, the development of professional skills is complemented by civic learning that aims to broaden and deepen students understanding of the civic context in which their skills will be utilized. Though such classes may include elements of Critical and Engaged Civic Learning, the course focus on developing vocational and professional skills may leave little time for these more advanced levels of civic learning.



*S-L Type: Civic Values and Critical Citizenship.* Service-learning classes that focus on civic values and critical citizenship align well with Critical Civic Learning (level 2). In such classes, academic and service-learning goals are oriented toward critical thinking about social, political, and ecological problems and students' choices and responsibilities as members of society. Though such classes depend on skills developed in Foundational Civic Learning, and may include elements of Engaged Civic Learning, the emphasis on developing civic values and an understanding of citizenship provides a strong framework for Critical Civic Learning, which aims at causal analysis, rigorous debate, and ethical reflection on social and political questions.



*S-L Type: Social Justice Activism.* Service-Learning classes that focus on social justice activism align well with Engaged Civic Learning (level 3). While these classes depend on the listening, analytical, and critical thinking and ethical reflection skills developed in civic learning levels 1 and 2, their specific focus on helping students act to address human needs related to societal inequities and power imbalances makes them suitable classes for fostering civic action and participation through building practical, problem-solving, interpersonal, decision-making, and leadership skills oriented to civic engagement.