



## Why We Use Service-Learning: A Report Outlining a Typology of Three Approaches to This Form of Communication Pedagogy

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# Why We Use Service-Learning: A Report Outlining a Typology of Three Approaches to This Form of Communication Pedagogy

Lori L. Britt

*This report offers a framework that acknowledges that not all service-learning shares the same rationales or goals for student development, or engages students in the same way in communities. Key differences are explicated in approaches to service-learning pedagogy that focus on (a) skill-set practice and reflexivity, (b) civic values and critical citizenship, and (c) social justice activism. This typology seeks to broaden the operational definition of service-learning pedagogy to acknowledge and promote multiple approaches to linking service and learning and communicate that service-learning is full of complexity and possibility.*

*Keywords:* Service-Learning; Typology; Communication Pedagogy

Devotees, converts, and those tenuously creeping toward embracing service-learning pedagogy arrive at service-learning via many different routes, but they arrive nonetheless. But where is it they arrive? The practical reality is different impulses lead to an instructor employing service-learning and those impulses lead to very different ideas of what service-learning is or should be. Service-learning is not a singular pedagogical approach, but rather several rather distinctive approaches that share some commonality but also have very varied assumptions about the role of service, the reasons for linking service and learning, and the goals and desired outcomes for students, communities, and social issues.

Conceptually, service-learning is a form of pedagogy that engages students in community service and regular guided reflection on the service in order to deepen

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learning and enrich communities. The rich literature about service-learning practice supports that engaging in service-learning is a choice many educators make for a variety of reasons. As a form of pedagogy, service-learning is heralded for developing students' critical-reflection skills; breaching the bifurcation of lofty academics and lived reality (Butin, 2005); increasing students' understanding of social issues, human differences, and commonalities, as well as promoting collaboration (Jacoby, 1996); developing an other-oriented ethic (Battistoni, 1997); and promoting mutual interdependence (Karlberg, 2005). A review by J.C. Kendall and Associates (1990) highlights several themes related to the rationales for combining service and learning: linking community and classroom, educating students to make them ready for social and civic responsibilities, and promoting students' development described in terms of intellectual development, cross-cultural learning, leadership development, moral and ethical development, and career development. However, an operational definition of how we "do" service-learning, how we combine service and learning to gain these outcomes, is still contested.

Current research does little to adequately acknowledge, investigate, or reflect that not all service-learning is developed with the same end goals in mind. Knowing an instructor is employing service-learning pedagogy does not tell the whole story about why service-learning is being employed, what constitutes a community service-experience, or how community service offers additional outcomes for students not easily gained through traditional classroom-only learning. In order to tell the whole story about the range of ways service-learning is used today, scholars need to look back and consider from whence service-learning emerged.

This history is usefully studied by the communication discipline due to the discipline's focus on the symbolic shaping and sharing of meaning, in this case, what it means to do service-learning. Attention to service-learning has grown in the communication discipline, however primarily from the practical perspective of employing service-learning in communication classes; there has been less reciprocal influence of scholars using communication theories and perspectives to investigate and inform service-learning practice. According to Applegate and Morreale (1999), research by communication scholars should focus both on how service-learning "deepens understanding of communication practice (why and how communication occurs and with what effect) . . . [and how the] study of communication practice informs the process of service learning (why it succeeds or does not)" (p. xii). What the communication discipline can also add to the conversation is a critical focus on how communication shapes how students make sense of the experience of service-learning.

Taking seriously the charge for communication scholars, this report outlines a framework of three rather distinctive, if not pure forms of service-learning that emerged from a careful study of the historical roots of service-learning and some of the social and philosophical influences shaping its practice. The research drew on encyclopedic sources and original texts that documented initiatives both within education and in civic settings to pair experience with learning. Some critical differences in the approaches identified are highlighted before discussion is offered

regarding how the framework might be useful in clarifying our pedagogical intents and broadening the scholarly conversations about the practice of service-learning.

### **A Typology of Three Service-Learning Pedagogies**

Service-learning is not a new invention, but rather a pedagogical influence that has appeared through time in many forms. The impulse to use community service as a way to enhance learning has a long and complex history with roots sprouting amidst many social, institutional, and historical forces. As a result of these forces, differing forms of service-learning represent particular educational, philosophical, and democratic philosophies.

The current field of service-learning represents the confluence of several streams of pedagogical and institutional approaches to increasing student and community capacity and strengthening connections between universities and communities. As these streams have converged, what have become obscured are differences in the varying approaches to using service-learning. Differences in both the means and ends of service-learning have been so muddled there is no sense of “how its varied models and purposes intersect or collide” (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p. xvi). Teasing out these nuanced differences reveals underlying foundational influences and assumptions of the role that service plays in the learning experience. Exploration of these historically and socially influenced variations resulted in the classification of three approaches to service-learning pedagogy, each of which positions learners and service differently with regard to its primary emphasis: (a) skill-set practice and reflexivity, (b) civic values and critical citizenship, and (c) social justice activism (Britt, 2010, in press; see Table 1).

Each approach engages students in service as a way to extend the classroom, but the service component serves different goals in each instantiation. The three approaches converge on their attention to the development of students’ identities, but they diverge on which particular facet of identity is nurtured and called forth—learner, citizen, or social activist—and what type of engagement within the community is needed to develop these student identities.

#### *The Practice of Doing: Skill-Set Practice and Reflexivity Service-Learning*

Instructors who engage in service-learning in the classroom as a way for students to learn by doing, and more specifically, doing for and with others in the community, are influenced consciously or unconsciously by the ideas of John Dewey regarding experiential education (see Duckenfield & Madden, 2000). Dewey (1938) saw experience as an important teacher because students could reflect on it, think critically about how knowledge and skills are used to address problems in the world, and apply the knowledge learned from such experience to new contexts. In a skill-set approach to service-learning, direct experience is in the form of community service that involves students practicing and reflecting on some set of disciplinary skills and investigating how those skills can be used in the world. The learning happens not simply through the *doing* or the practicing of skills but through guided reflection and

**Table 1** Typology of Service-Learning Pedagogical Frames

Label	Skill-set practice and reflexivity	Civic values and critical citizenship	Social justice activism
Rationale/ goals/ definition	Developing competence and self-efficacy Used to breathe life into often disciplinary specific academic material by emphasizing doing as a way to enhance learning. Reflection about experience aids in critical thinking about subject matter.	Exploring what it means to exist in relation to others in community Used to raise awareness of and critical thinking about social issues and students' values and moral choices/responsibilities as societal members	Working with others to transform systems of oppression Used to help students take action to address human needs often related to societal injustices/power imbalances. Seeks to develop critical consciousness of the complexity of social issues.
Foundation	Dewey and the progressive education movement	Democratic tradition of citizenship/civic education	Social justice initiatives and critical pedagogy
Focus <sup>a</sup>	Content Intellectual Domain	Values Moral Domain	Systemic change Political Domain
Outcomes/ level of change	Active learner with understanding of reflexive relationship between theory, skills, and practices "Internalize" knowledge by connecting theory and skills	Personal development as a person in relation to others in society. Reflection on relationships of self and community	Social change and continued efforts to right social injustice Document changes, develop activist orientation
Role of Service	COGNITIVE "Petri Dish" to concretize abstract theories, and encourage critical thinking	RELATIONAL A touchstone for considering and shaping one's values	BEHAVIORAL Opportunity to engage in efforts that begin to correct systemic social disparities
Development of student	As a Learner, by encouraging individual content competence	As a Citizen, by providing experience of being an individual in relation to collective community	As a Change agent, through encouraging critical consciousness of structural inequalities and marginalization

<sup>a</sup>Similar to the concept of "domain" addressed by Kahne and Westheimer (1996).

analysis of practice which Kolb (1984) claims allows learners to transform the experience into knowledge.

What is central in this approach to service-learning is the focus on experience as a tool for meaningful learning by students and opportunities to develop efficacy, "a combination of increased confidence and competence, greater self-direction, and acceptance of self-responsibility through active engagement in tasks of meaning and relevance to the individual" (Land & Gilbert, 1994, p. 1980). This efficacy comes from students' abilities to intentionally process raw experience and transform it into "working, useable knowledge" (National Society for Experiential Education, 1998, p. 3). Knowledge becomes useful when students view themselves as being competent,

see knowledge as relevant to real-world issues, and sense both a responsibility and an ability to act in the world.

With its foundations in Dewey, the progressive education movement, and experiential education, service-learning, according to this approach, offers students opportunities to practice and reflect on a set of disciplinary skills. Such courses provide space for the development of learners who have empowered themselves by recognizing their competence and ability to use knowledge and skills in the world to address human needs.

*The Practice of Becoming: Civic Values and Critical Citizenship Service-Learning Pedagogy*

A second approach to service-learning pedagogy is embraced by those who view community service as a means to strengthen civic values and citizenship. By “extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community,” this approach seeks to foster “a sense of caring for others” (National and Community Service Act of 1990, p. 2). This approach grows out of an Aristotelian notion of educating citizens for participation in the *demos*, which has spawned a long history of civic education.

Traditionally an important part of a liberal education, *civic education* “is broadly concerned with the development of citizenship or civic competence by conveying the unique meaning, obligation, and virtue of citizenship in a particular society or the acquisition of values, dispositions, and skills appropriate to that society” (Hursch, 1994, p. 767). The civic values service-learning approach engages students in communities to instill a range of values that enable them to be informed and committed citizens in a democratic system (Hursch, 1994). Engaging in community service, consequently, according to this approach, becomes a vehicle “through which students investigate their own civic identities” (Campbell, 2008, p. 2) and come to grips with the dialectic of the individual and society (Applegate & Morreale, 1999). To promote the development of students as citizens in relation to others and to communities, the immersion in community service serves as

a Petri dish of personal growth, a hotbed for holistic development toward ethical, engaged citizenship ... as one way to connect personal action to interpersonal relationships, individual growth to inclusive cultures—while taking into account the needs and goals of everyone involved. (Campbell, 2008, p. 2)

Service, in the civic values approach, provides a way for learning to happen in community “at the point where democracy and education intersect” (Barber, 1998, p. 184). Learning then, is a social activity, an exploration into how knowledge contributes to the strengths of democracy.

A civic values approach to service-learning focuses on developing students as citizens in relation to others in their communities. This approach positions service as a way to consider values and commitments not in the abstract but in real interactions in communities and in focused reflection on the negotiation of self, society, and values.

*The Practice of Engaging in Social Change: Social Justice Activism Service-Learning*

Those who feel classrooms are a place where social inequities need to be raised, explored, and directly challenged use a form of service-learning pedagogy focused on social justice activism. This approach which merges influences of critical pedagogy (see Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2004), social movements (e.g., civil rights), and community organizing (Stevens, 2003; Titlebaum, Williamson, Daprano, Baer, & Brahler, 2004), focuses “directly and indirectly on politically empowering the powerless” (Morton, 1995, p. 23). In this approach to service-learning students build collaborative relationships with those who are economically, politically, socially and/or culturally marginalized (see Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996; Frey, 1998). Students learn to look beyond the symptoms and to explore and address root causes of social problems creating those needs.

A social justice approach entails correcting power imbalances and advocating for marginalized and oppressed groups (Butin, 2005), as well as collectively engaging participants in solving social problems at a systemic level (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). This approach challenges the idea that education should provide students with skills and a knowledge base necessary to fit into existing social structures and, instead, sees the goal as preparing students to engage in social transformation (Pollack, 1999).

Students are encouraged to see themselves as potential change agents who, supported by a critical pedagogical structure, begin to uncover systemic causes and pressures that lead to disparities in resources, rights, and dignity. Generally, the best outcomes are achieved when students both recognize systemic influences on important social issues and have some success intervening to change the dominant system. Although this approach to service-learning is limited with respect to accomplishing long-term goals in a short-term time frame, because of the time line of an individual college course, the desire is for students to gain insight into how structural and systemic forces shape and reproduce social issues, and for students to begin to assume an activist orientation to addressing those issues.

This conceptual typology leads to a recognition of three broad approaches to employing service-learning each with a distinct focus on developing students (a) as learners practicing and reflecting on skills, (b) as critical citizens simultaneously existing in and investigating relationships between people, values, and social issues in their communities, or (c) as informed change agents focused on exposing and alleviating systemic disparity.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Certainly, any single service-learning course might blur the boundaries of these approaches, but these distinctions and labels may help proponents of service-learning to better situate themselves within this pedagogical conversation. This framework encourages an appreciation of the rich diversity of service-learning pedagogy. It encourages a broader operational definition of service-learning pedagogy that acknowledges multiple approaches to linking service and learning; service-learning

engages students in community service to promote critical sensibility, relations of equity and justice, and the adaptation of knowledge for use in addressing community concerns.

Identifying specific approaches to service-learning guards against the inclination to treat service-learning as a panacea for higher education. Even proponents of service-learning must accept its limitations and acknowledge it is “not education’s miracle drug” (Schine, 1999, p. 13), as no service-learning course can accomplish all of the many positive changes heralded by proponents of this pedagogical practice. We need to carefully articulate our goals for the practice of service-learning, a pedagogy that finds its full potential in local, specific contexts.

This framework of pedagogical approaches raises issues regarding how we assess service-learning. If there are different approaches to and goals for service-learning, assessment tools should acknowledge these differences and not expect all service-learning to produce the same outcomes for students in terms of personal and academic growth, or for communities in terms of short-term versus long-term, sustainable change. More targeted assessment instruments would likely show not all service-learning is created equally, nor need it be to help link institutions with communities or to strengthen communities and deepen learning.

Practically, this typology, as a sensitizing concept, can be employed by faculty engaging in service-learning as a map of the territory in general and a hermeneutic device by which they can hone their approaches to focus on certain goals for student development and for community impact. The distinctions and labels may prove useful as scaffolding to help instructors make informed choices about the goals, purposes and practices of service-learning. As Morton (1995) pointed out, acknowledging different approaches to service-learning requires structuring course practices such that the type of service done, for and with whom, and for what reasons aligns with goals for students’ academic and personal development. For instance, an instructor may engage students in developing printed materials for area nonprofit agencies to practice written communication skills (skillset/doing), or an instructor may require students to explore the social construction of aging by collecting personal narratives from a community’s senior citizens (critical citizenship/becoming), or an instructor may involve students in developing a documentary to encourage a community to recognize and correct the injustices suffered by its migrant farming population (social justice activism/engaging). Morton argued that teachers need to “recognize these differences and teach accordingly” (p. 29), which can happen only if teachers “describe and analyze the intentions and actions that inform our work” (p. 31). This conceptual typology offers a way for those engaged in service-learning to reflect both individually and collectively on their goals for service-learning and tailor practices to meet these goals.

By acknowledging the contributions of each type of service-learning pedagogy, the practice of service-learning becomes full of complexity and possibility. In any discipline employing service-learning, this conceptual clarity can help instructors better communicate the value and purpose of service-learning to students. In the communication discipline, it reinforces the need for communication scholars to be



more active in suggesting how those who employ service-learning can symbolically shape the experience for students as one of adapting knowledge for use in the world, or critically considering human interrelationships and lived experiences of social issues, or promoting sustainable social change. Communication scholars can and should be investigating how the meaning of service-learning pedagogy is shaped not only by individual instructors and particular institutions, but also by social and cultural discourses about the purpose of higher education.

Finally, this typology may encourage scholars to look at how each type of service-learning contributes to the long-term development of their students in personal, civic, and critical ways as they prepare them to find their places and address issues in the world. This type of thinking may also lead scholars to consider, more carefully, how they communicate with the communities they seek to serve. This long-term approach may have implications for integrating varying types of service-learning experiences into our disciplinary curriculum and for focusing on particular local or regional social issues across courses and across time.

Overall, this typology posits that, no matter what impulse leads to the use of service-learning, these impulses should be communicated to students in the form of rationales and goals as a means of better understanding and improving the practice of service-learning.

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