An Introduction To Service-Learning Pedagogy

The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and many discipline-specific associations embrace service-learning as a way to join campuses (and specifically, academic departments across the curriculum) with their communities to positively respond to community challenges and opportunities for collaboration. Hundreds of definitions of service-learning exist nationally, many of which are informed by definitions used by national organizations such as Campus Compact, the Corporation for National and Community Service or the National Society for Experiential Education. Service-learning can be defined as both an educational philosophy and a pedagogical technique for combining community service with academic objectives. Academic Service-Learning is a teaching methodology which utilizes a community involvement component as a means for students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary course objectives and to gain a deeper understanding of civic life and participation through structured reflection.

Academic service-learning provides a way to unite the tripartite mission of the University: teaching, research and public service. Several University of Minnesota faculty members have reported that students doing community work as part of their coursework become more engaged and active learners because they see how their studies apply to actual community issues while they are positively contributing to an organization. For faculty, service-learning can mean engaging your students with existing community organizations or in a community-based research project with you and the community. For the community, service-learning can translate into identifying what they want done that could not otherwise be done without assistance from outside help or it can extend their reach in the community farther than otherwise possible with existing staff. By giving thoughtful attention to how students can work in community organizations, learn from that experience, and develop respectful communication with community organizations, the full potential of service-learning pedagogy can be achieved.

Service-learning is a pedagogy grounded in the belief that students learn by doing. As a teaching strategy, it builds on experiential learning theory. It is shaped by education reform principles that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. It is inspired by the belief that the academy has a fundamental responsibility to prepare students for lives of active citizenship.

Under a variety of labels, including “community-based learning” and “theory-practice learning,” service-learning has gained ground rapidly in educational institutions at all levels. Its practitioners cite numerous benefits: faculty members gain new insight about their teaching goals and methods as they examine the ways in which students learn. Students participating in the “lived text” of a community through community service or a community-based research project come to approach learning with newly awakened enthusiasm and insight. Also because the pedagogy addresses divergent learning styles, students often achieve greater mastery of the subject matter.

No less important, service-learning connects the university with the community in relationships that are reciprocal and mutually rewarding. As universities are increasingly asked to justify themselves and their costs to a variety of constituencies, the partnerships forged by campuses and community organizations to address issues together take on added significance.

Service-learning is a demanding pedagogy for both teachers and learners. Faculty members use it not because it is easy, but because they value the transformation it brings to their teaching. Implementing it for the first time requires the instructor to be flexible with the syllabus to allow for the unexpected. Appropriately enough, when integrating service-learning, faculty might find it most useful to follow the learning cycle: conceptualize, experiment, reflect, and revise.