
Beyond the Classroom: Implementing Academic Service-Learning

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Businesses struggle with complicated issues that were not discussed and/or did not exist 25 years ago, and “higher education has not adequately responded to the need to prepare students for this complex environment” (Dallimore, 2002:86). Experiential teaching methods, including academic service-learning, address some of these challenges in higher education. The purpose of this paper is to assist management educators and practitioners in understanding the academic service-learning pedagogy and its worth and applicability to management education.

Key Words: Service-Learning, Teaching and learning, Reflection, Participatory learning

Introduction

Experiential teaching methods, including academic service-learning, address current challenges in higher education to provide students with a realistic preview of actual job functions in a chosen field. Students are prepared more fully by the practical experience gained through the academic service-learning pedagogy instead of only by the traditional lecture/bookwork/test educational model. Academic service learners are prepared through practice to handle uncertainties that arise in a professional environment. Brown (2000) postulated that in-class simulations, although experiential in nature, do not provide contact with a real client or the uncertainties that accompany the dimension of project work found in academic service-learning. McGoldrick, Battle and Gallagher (2000) agreed, claiming that real life experiences cannot be accurately simulated within the classroom.

To illustrate this point, consider this example. Imagine that, after watching a program on television, a student decides he would like to become a gymnast despite the fact that he has never had any related athletic experience. To learn gymnastic skills he enrolls in a series of classes where the sport is taught through a series of lectures, reading assignments, and written tests. He examines diagrams, studies related theory, reads about gymnastics, and does well on the

written exams. He may even watch gymnastic performances. No matter how thorough the lectures are, when he finishes the classes and is on his own to begin doing gymnastics for the first time, he is likely to flounder. As he enters the gym for the first time he may even discover, after all the time and study that he doesn't actually *like* participating in gymnastics. The same is true, at some level, for many college graduates. It is difficult for students to get a realistic idea of what a profession involves if only traditional teaching pedagogies are used because it may be difficult to make the connections between academic knowledge and the *real-world* application.

Technology, economic issues, government regulations, outsourcing, and other various issues require more flexibility and adaptability than was expected of employees in previous eras but higher education struggles to adequately respond in preparing students to cope with this complex environment (Dallimore, 2002). Business educators have found it challenging to incorporate assignments and activities, within the classroom, that assist students in developing competencies and skills essential for this success in today's workplace. These problematic skills include critical thinking, writing, presentation, interpersonal communication, decision-making, strategic planning, citizenship, teamwork,

leadership, self-confidence, cultural awareness, and the use of technology. To some degree, academic service-learning alleviates this disconnect.

The purpose of this paper is to assist management educators and practitioners in understanding the service-learning pedagogy and its worth and applicability to management education. This will be done by defining academic service-learning, reviewing related theory and literature, sharing ideas and examples of projects that can be implemented in various business classes, discussing educator challenges, and providing a list of resources that may be helpful in implementing this pedagogy.

Definition and Description

While the basic principles of academic service-learning are consistent, there is no dominant definition. Easterling (1997) suggested that it is a teaching method that integrates community service with academic study:

Service-learning has the potential to enhance students' learning by increasing their involvement and empowering them as future business leaders. Students also gain practical experience that may help them determine career choices and give them a competitive advantage in the job market through enhancing their resumes. (p. 54)

The academic service-learning pedagogy allows students to practice *doing* some of what is taught in the classroom. Importantly, these are the same kinds of activities that graduates are likely to end up doing once they enter the workforce. For example, business communications students might be assigned to rewrite parts of an instruction manual for workers in a non-profit organization (Bush-Bacelis, 1998), which is exactly the kind of assignment a business communications graduate is likely encounter.

Academic service-learning links *doing* and *thinking* (Arnold and Kiosoglous, 2003): students get the most out of the service-learning experience when they actively engage themselves and critically reflect on their encounter rather than taking it for granted. Arnold and Kiosoglous (2003) further propose that experience should be designed to be personally relevant or meaningful to the learner. Godfrey (2000)

suggests that “Ideally, service-learning courses seamlessly integrate students’ community service experiences with the academic knowledge being considered...” Godfrey (2000:23) claims that academic service-learning does not “merely append community service onto the curriculum, but instead integrates community service-within the curriculum”. Not all service constitutes academic service-learning: Academic service-learning must be directly related to the curriculum.

The practice of academic service-learning has evolved over the years since its inception in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, many misconceptions based on old standards of practice remain.

Table 1
Academic Service-Learning

| What Academic Service Learning is: | What it is not: |
|---|--|
| Definition | |
| A course relevant class project often completed with a small group of peers in a non-profit environment, involving active and serious reflection throughout | An internship |
| | Service completed by a student or group of students enrolled in the same course but unrelated to coursework and which does not further student's understanding of academically relevant concepts |
| Examples | |
| Creating web pages using the programming language learned in a programming course for an animal shelter | Selling candy bars as a fund raiser for a local needy organization to earn a grade (or part of a grade) in a programming course |
| Evaluating the economic projections to help a hospital decide how many full or part-time nurses to hire and train | Preparing economic projections for an existing organization that will not be seen or used by the organization |
| Formulating a marketing plan to spread the use and availability of quality Open Source software especially to students, and poorer communities | An in-class case study formulating a marketing plan and doing a SWOT analysis for a fictional organization |
| Writing grant proposals for a non-profit whose mission provides a valuable service to the community | Picking up trash along the side of a freeway for a business communications class |
| Preparing and presenting materials to local high school students about the time value of money and about how to appropriately manage credit and savings vehicles to reach long-term goals | A self selected service project by a student which is good for the community, but is not academic rigorous or relevant |

The difference between academic service-learning and internship merits discussion. Service-learning is not the same as an internship. The first deviation is that academic service-learning pedagogies operate on

the principle of reciprocity—both the server and the served must profit from the experience (Godfrey, 1999). The second deviation is that of conscious and purposeful reflection, which is missing from most internships (Godfrey 2000). McCarthy and Tucker (2002) also confirm that the active reflection component of academic service-learning is critical and is enabled by a real-life context in which students practice what they learn”. Munter (2002) concluded that academic service-learning intensifies the learning experience for all participants.

Theoretical Framework

There are numerous theoretical frameworks that are foundational to the academic service-learning pedagogy, but an adult learning framework will be utilized as a foundation for this paper. Perhaps the most relevant theoretical framework is based on “andragogy,” which is the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). This framework is based on five assumptions about the adult learner that can assist in explaining the differences in learning between adults and children, including the following:

1. An individual’s self-concept moves from that of a dependency toward a self-efficacy as they mature.
2. An adult has accumulated a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning.
3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the tasks of his or her social role.
4. Individuals change their time perspective as they mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application.
5. Adults are motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

These assumptions support the use of an academic service-learning pedagogy with adult learners. Adults learn best when they can direct their own learning, use their past experiences to assist them, see direct application of the concepts learned, and are motivated and care about internal factors such as doing well and helping others (Knowles et al.,1998). Instructors should therefore attempt to establish a climate of mutual respect, be clear about the expectations of the learners, involve them in planning the objectives of the service-learning project, and

acknowledge the value of their prior experiences (Kramlinger and Huberty,1990).

Student Benefits

Brown (2000) provided a short explanation of what academic service-learning *should* be for students:

Students are faced with the challenge of structuring and prioritizing a very loosely defined problem and carrying it forward to completion on a short-time horizon, all carefully choreographed in cooperation with each other, volunteer workers, material donors, technical experts, and the client. Some students enter the course with little knowledge of project management tools, and others may have relatively strong expertise. The mixture proves to be one of the great strengths of the course because the experiential teaching vehicle allows each person to learn at his or her level of need. Additionally, cooperation among those with varying levels of knowledge creates a fertile environment for mentoring. (p. 54)

Students may initially shirk at the challenge of their service-learning experience if it is new or unfamiliar to them, but the benefits of academic service-learning seem to outweigh the challenges students face. For example, effectively designed academic service-learning projects appear to assist students in the understanding, application, and retention of course concepts and skills (e.g., Kenworthy-U’Ren, 2000; Rama Ravenscroft, Walcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000). Godfrey (1999:364) claims that “service-learning pedagogies...combine rigorous classroom instruction with field experiences in such a way that students gain skills in business management and in moral imagination”. Examples include skills related to citizenship (Godfrey, 1999), leadership and conflict resolution (Thomas & Landua, 2002), teamwork, interaction, time management, and networking (Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998), cultural awareness and diversity (Vernon & Foster, 2000), and written and verbal communication (Tucker et al., 1998).

Academic service-learners may also increase motivation to perform well which results in higher levels of learning. Madsen (2004), through interviews

with students, concluded that students were more motivated to do better on academic service-learning assignments than other assignments. One student reflected in his journal, “I have no problem doing a second rate job on school assignments and trying to pass them off as 'A' work but, for a real company, I felt more of an obligation to perform my best.” Another stated in her interview, “We worked really hard. We wanted it to be a professional looking thing... If it was just for us, that’s one thing, but because it was for a real organization we wanted it to be our best work. It had our names on it and our names are important to us. We didn’t want to let people down”. Kenworthy-U’Ren (2000) also asserted:

The responsibilities inherent in such real-world accountability to people and organizations in genuine need of one’s services clearly separate academic service-learning from other forms of experiential education even from traditional internships, where student contributions can often be more accurately described as ‘useful’ rather than ‘needed.’ Genuine need creates a ‘personal emotional intensity’ for students—one that is not often found in traditional classroom situations. (p. 58)

Academic Service-Learning in Practice— Ideas for Implementation in Management Courses

Service-learning can be implemented in almost any course, but coming up with ideas of what can be done or how to get started in specific courses may sometimes be a challenge for practitioners. Faculty may also worry about employing the pedagogy, especially because it is relatively new to mainstream academia as a tool for teaching and reinforcing course-related concepts. Additionally, course preparation and management time may increase—particularly for faculty who become involved in cultivating a relationship with community partners prior to the project start. Table 2 lists management courses and possible projects which could be implemented in them and is designed provide a few ideas and to supply resources for more in-depth information to interested educators and practitioners.

Table 2
Academic Service-Learning Project Ideas

| Course Name | Project Ideas for Course |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Accounting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesign billing procedures • Teach accounting skills to elementary or secondary students • Provide accounting services to low-income community members |
| Business Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write or revise instruction, training, or operational manuals • Design brochures • Design websites • Write volunteer recruitment letters • Write funding solicitation letters for various audiences • Design and draft follow-up letters to donors and volunteers • Write thank you letters • Create database files for mailing newsletters • Create informational brochures on various issues/topics • Analyze positions and write job descriptions • Write public service announcements • Write newspaper articles • Create outreach materials for agencies |
| Business Policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help a local food bank systematize its policies for food collection and distribution • Analyze a company’s business strategies and provide recommendations for improvement • Help an organization write a business plan or strategic planning document |
| Finance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and present workshops on establishing credit and managing personal finances • Help individuals or local agencies with budget planning materials and training • Teach elementary or secondary students about personal finance principles and applications |
| Human Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise a company’s performance evaluation form and give general suggestions about performance appraisals • Make suggestions for improving communication between managing directors and employees • Create a realistic job preview video to be shown to job candidates • Develop a training program (including a demonstration video and an illustrated handbook) for new employees • Provide suggestions for the improvement of a company’s interview process • Create job descriptions for volunteer positions in nonprofit organizations • Survey local businesses about awareness of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related policies • Help agencies develop and implement a training program for volunteers |
| Marketing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and disseminate agency programs and messages • Promote special events • Conduct related marketing research • Develop a marketing plan |
| Operations Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop distribution systems for clients • Analyze an operation or system and recommend improvements |
| Organization Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze a problem within an agency and design an appropriate solution • Organize a change campaign for a project such as constructing a traffic light • Redesign a job so it is more effective and efficient • Analyze an ineffective process and recommend improvements • Develop an evaluation system to provide feedback to the agency |
| Organization and Management Theory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct organizational analyses and survey feedback programs • Facilitate organizational planning sessions • Develop business plans for projects to benefit low-income communities |
| Statistics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine the prospects for local or state government of improving school funding through programs such as a state lottery |

Many of these academic service-learning projects are performed for non-profit organizations or community members who do not have the resources to do these functions on their own. As an example, human resource students revised the employee manual for a state government agency. The students reviewed current laws and checked the manual for compliance. This was a semester-long project and done as a group of two students. This project taught the practical application of human resource law, and emphasized for the academic service-learners the legal implication of failure to follow regulations. In another example, students in a graduate managerial communications course created outreach materials for an agency on economic development opportunities for the homeless. This proposal was later used as a model for economic development programs in Boston (Kenworthy, 1996). Again, the project was course relevant, giving students the opportunity to prepare materials similar to those they may be expected to produce professionally.

Faculty Challenges

Although academic service-learning is a powerful and effective pedagogy, scholars and educators have identified a number of challenges that faculty face in its design and implementation. Instructors may fear introducing topics when they lack educational background or technical expertise in the project's task. Managing service-learning projects may also be challenging because of feelings of uncertainty as to how one can effectively monitor and evaluate community-based assignments, a sense of the difficulty or even the irrelevance of working with non-profit organizations, and a strict commitment to the priority of traditional research (Zlotkowski, 1996).

Konwerski and Nashman, (2002) describe a *role change* which they claim takes place in an academic service-learning environment. In this pedagogy, they write:

Faculty have been forced to learn from the student, being open to the information. Teachers have been moving to review how they teach, as they both encounter being teachers of life and learners of life. They no longer are solely responsible to transmit information, but more likely can use a constructivist approach . . . and become activated learners. (p. 170)

This role change can be difficult for faculty and students alike. Robinson (1999, 2000) warns that service-learning programs are rarely immediately successful, and some degree of failure or discouragement should be expected in initial projects. Robinson explains several of the challenges associated with combining practice and teaching. Robinson explained:

[A service-learning course] need not be frivolous or less rigorous than any existing course, and service-learners' academic products need not be evaluated differently from those of other students. The key is to retain the same course competencies and learning objectives, but provide options for students to meet those objectives. Rather than spending 15 hours in the library researching and then writing about a topic, service-learners can spend 15 hours in the community and then relate their experiences in writing, while reflecting on what they have seen and learned about their topic. (p. 11)

Robinson also includes adversarial relationships, student time, quality vs. quantity, and changing program models as potential challenges. Incorporating active learning can be difficult for instructors accustomed to lecture classes (Root and Thorne: 330) even though students are often more engaged and willing to examine nuances and difficulties that may seem less important in a traditional textbook/lecture presentation (Root and Thorne, 2001).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the literature as well as primary research and experience, management educators should consider the use of academic service-learning to enhance their curriculum and courses. Educators should expect students to express concern and uncertainty before and during the projects. Continuous efforts in helping the students to reflect on their experiences and linking the project experience to course content enhances student learning. Challenging projects may be daunting but students learn the most when they go outside of their comfort zone and struggle in some ways. It is important for instructors to provide continued support so that students can move forward and learn some of

the life-skills necessary to succeed in business and life. Dewey (1938) explained:

Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moved toward and into... It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. (p. 38)

If the educator carefully designs a meaningful academic service-learning project with direction and focus, business students should be able to substantially benefit from the opportunities provided from interaction within the classroom, with the community, and through real-world experiences. For many students, academic service-learning can make a true difference in their own lives, the quality of life in their community, and the quality of their education.

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