

1996

## A Service-Learning Contract: Clarity, Commitment, and Completion

Darroll Bussler  
*Mankato State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bussler, Darroll, "A Service-Learning Contract: Clarity, Commitment, and Completion" (1996). *Special Topics, General*. 5.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Topics, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

Reprinted with permission from the author.

## A SERVICE-LEARNING CONTRACT: CLARITY, COMMITMENT, AND COMPLETION

BY DARROLL BUSSLER

A STUDENT WAS REPORTING her service-learning experience to her classmates during a reflection session. She was hesitant to begin...and then explained why. Everyone in the class seemed to be having fun and fulfillment in their experiences. She said, "My experience isn't fun. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing; I don't even think they know I'm there, and I don't think I want to finish my service." She then said, "I think we need something like... a learning contract."

The student was a member of the first service-learning class at our university. Other students in the same class expressed similar concerns. It was clear a problem existed, and the development of a student-agency contract was the solution. The contract has been tested for four quarters and modified through a university retreat of students, faculty, and cooperating community agencies. The results have been nothing short of miraculous! There have been no complaints from community agencies or students regarding clarity of service or learning, and service to agencies has been completed. During the first quarter in which service-learning was integrated into a course curriculum with a contract, seventy-percent of the stu-

- Schools may not be clear about what it is they are requiring students to do; or
- Schools may be using incorrect language to identify what it is they are requiring students to do.

The former circumstance is often a result of the latter. Schools are unclear about what it is they are requiring students to do because the schools have not developed an understanding of the language which identifies activities that are related but have very different purposes.

There are four concepts, related but different, that must be analyzed and understood. Understanding the four concepts can aid school personnel in being clear about what it is they are requiring and how the requirement is communicated to the students and the community. The four concepts are:

- Volunteerism
- Community service
- Service
- Service-learning

All four concepts have a primary common component, but service-learning has one component which distinguishes it from the other three. It is the common component that is often the cause of confusion in carrying out well-intended programs, activities, and academic study: the desire to do good. The chart in Figure 1 defines the concepts with the aim of clarifying similarities and differences of service-learning; this may help to avoid legal problems.

The commonality in volunteerism, community service and service is that all seek to carry out beneficial acts. This commonality is also present in service-learning. However, there is one aspect in service-learning that distinguishes it from the other three concepts, and it is this distinguishing characteristic that can aid in communicating clearly what is intended and can aid in avoiding lawsuits. That aspect involves planned and unexpected educational ends.

The term *service-learning*, rather than volunteerism, community service, or service, clearly communicates the idea that the action that is being required is directly related to achievement of academic ends. Using the terms volunteerism, community service, or service does not communicate anything about learning or academic ends, even if the teacher, school or student intend such meaning.

### THE COMMONALITY IN VOLUNTEERISM, COMMUNITY SERVICE AND SERVICE IS THAT ALL SEEK TO CARRY OUT BENEFICIAL ACTS.

dents reported that they were continuing their service to the agency after the course was completed.

This article discusses components of a student-agency contract and the process used in completing the contract. The components are designed to serve as a means for the agency and the student to gain clarity about their mutual work, to develop commitment, and to work toward completion. Before examining the clarity components, our attention turns to an issue related to clarity—language and law—which appears to be basic information in developing a service-learning contract.

#### LANGUAGE AND THE LAW

During the past several years, some schools have found themselves in court cases in spite of doing what they thought was right. The legal situations are a result of two circumstances:

Clarity in communicating what is meant by service-learning is basic. Additional clarity can be achieved through the use of a service-learning contract, and our discussion turns to the components of the learning contract. The contract is a means for the student and the agency representative, usually the student's on-site supervisor, to have face-to-face communication regarding their working together. The contract design has the student and agency personnel go through contract components together, each checking their half of the agreement.

**CLARITY**

Three components in the contract—agency mission, student educational ends to be achieved, and identification of student skills/talents/interests—are designed to support the student

and agency in gaining clarity in planning.

First, the contract is a tool for the agency representative to explain the agency's mission which can help students to understand how the agency serves the community and may help students to see themselves as a more integral part of the community. We have found that this contract has, at times, challenged agencies to become clearer in defining their mission. Thus, the contract has served as an educational tool for the agency.

The second component—student educational ends—challenges students to explain the academic and personal educational ends they hope to achieve. This component also communicates the academic nature of service-learning to the agency; agencies realize that they are not "getting a volunteer" or "getting free help." This discussion is the first step in deter-

**FIGURE 1: VOLUNTEERISM, COMMUNITY SERVICE, SERVICE, AND SERVICE-LEARNING**

<b>*VOLUNTEERISM:</b>	Freely chosen beneficial act no monetary compensation for an individual, group, or community	<i>Examples:</i> Shovel snow for shut-in Sell tickets for the school carnival Serve on a community reunion committee
<b>*COMMUNITY SERVICE:</b>		
<b>Traditional:</b>	Freely chosen beneficial act without compensation for community	<i>Example:</i> 4-H club plants tree in a park
<b>Court:</b>	Required beneficial act no compensation—pays debt to community	<i>Example:</i> Offender works with parks department in cleaning park
<b>*SERVICE:</b>	Beneficial act may or may not be freely chosen, may or may not be compensated	<i>Example:</i> Military, national service Completing a religious mission
<b>*SERVICE-LEARNING</b>		
<b>Service component:</b>	A beneficial act with an individual, group, or community	
<b>Learning component:</b>	Planned and unexpected educational ends	
<b>Service-learning is...</b>	Experiential learning through a beneficial act with an individual, group, or community (service) To achieve planned and unexpected educational ends (learning).	
	<i>Example:</i> Learning confrontational and supportive communication skills by working with men who have abused their partners	
	<i>Example:</i> Learning to identify and respond to behaviors of a child with attention deficit disorder by working with a Little Sister	
	<i>Example:</i> Learning group process skills by working with a youth advisory council to a board of education	

mining whether the student's needs and the agency's needs are compatible. It should be noted that the concept of educational ends has been selected rather than concepts such as goals, objectives, and outcomes which carry a variety of meanings and, thus, create a greater chance for misinterpretation and legal problems. It should also be noted that the educational ends begin with planned ends; that is, teacher and students are clear about what it is they seek to learn. These

planned ends may be both academic and personal. For example, an academic end may be "to identify communication disorders in primary school students," while a personal end may be "to improve my self-confidence in working with children." In addition, we have discovered the importance of the unexpected and include unexpected ends as part of our service-learning contract. Students consistently report that the unexpected ends are often of greater value to them than the

FIGURE 2: SERVICE-LEARNING CONTRACT

---

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Agency: \_\_\_\_\_ Hours to be completed: \_\_\_\_\_

**Student:**

- I understand the mission of the organization.
- I will seek to achieve the following academic and personal educational ends:
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_
 and unexpected:

- I have communicated skills, talents, interests to the organization/agency through a resume', narrative, and/or an interview.
- I will provide a minimum of \_\_\_\_\_ hours of service.
- I will maintain consistent communication with the organization/agency as agreed upon.

**Our communication plan:**

- If a problem arises, I will discuss it with my supervisor.
- I will obtain the supervisor evaluation at the conclusion of my service.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Student signature Date

Submit to course professor.

**Organization/agency:**

- Our organization mission is: \_\_\_\_\_
- I am prepared to provide the opportunity for the service-learning student to achieve his/her educational ends, planned and unexpected.

- I am aware of the student's skills, talents, and interests and will seek to utilize those appropriate through service in our organization/agency.
- I will provide supervision for a minimum of \_\_\_\_\_ hours of service.
- I will maintain consistent communication with the student as agreed upon.

- If a problem arises I will discuss it with the student.
- I have read and agree to the expectations as printed on the Organization Information sheet.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Supervisor signature Date

planned ends. For example, one student discovered that after providing twelve hours of service in a retirement home, he wanted to make it a point to visit his grandfather more often, realizing that his grandfather was probably very lonely. Thus, our learning contract helps the student and agency become aware of and welcome the unexpected.

In order for the agency to determine if the student can serve the agency, the third component has the student communicate their skills/talents/interests. We suggest to the students that they prepare either a short narrative or develop a resumé. (For many of our students, this is their first attempt at developing a resumé.) A matching process then takes place.

### COMMITMENT

Agencies have repeatedly reported to us that for planning purposes it is important for them to know exactly how many hours of service they can expect the student to provide. The fourth component—the number of hours of service—has the student and agency make a commitment that ensures service on the part of the student and supervision on the part of the agency. Prior to our using the service-learning contract, we experienced some problems in agencies providing supervision. Since our use of the contract, there has been no incidence of lack of supervision.

We have learned that the number of service hours provided by students to agencies can be varied, ranging from twelve to eighty per quarter. Generally, we are finding that agencies tend to prefer a minimum of ten hours of service per quarter in order to make their commitment productive for the agency. We have found agencies very accommodating in providing service opportunities to fit the hourly needs of students. The key is that the educational institution be specific in the number of hours required.

On evaluations, nearly all of our students have indicated that the number of hours required per course has been satisfactory. What we did not plan for and are changing as a result of student feedback is that students want to know if service-learning is a part of a course prior to their registering for it. Students who have heavy work and family responsibilities need to design their plan of study to make sure that courses including service-learning are taken when it best fits their schedules. Communicating a specific number of hours to students and to agencies supports both students and agencies in their commitment.

### COMPLETION

We have found that several additional components of the service-learning contract are crucial in supporting students in completing their service: development of a communication plan, expectations regarding how problems are resolved, and

the supervisor evaluation.

Prior to our use of the contract, some students reported that there was little or no communication with personnel in the agency. The student quoted at the beginning of this article is an example when she reported, "I don't even think they know I'm here!" Having the student and agency personnel agree on how they will communicate has solved such problems. Examples of communication plans include leaving notes, a weekly check-in with the director, or a beginning check-in with a supervisor.

This component for increasing commitment has proven to be a time-saver for faculty. Prior to use of the contract, agency personnel or students would come to faculty for help in solving problems at the service site between the agency and the student. With the contract, both the student and the agency personnel realize that attempts at solving problems must first be made at the service site. Since our use of the contract, I have not received one call requesting help in solving a problem between an agency and a student. In addition to being a time saver for faculty, the shift in problem solving to the site increases the opportunity for student learning.

The final component—a supervisor evaluation—not only gives students a message that they are accountable to the agency but also is a means for the university to recognize agency personnel as professional partners in training and developing future professionals. This component is in alignment with the African proverb, "It takes a community to raise a child." Service-learning is a means for the community, the university, and the student to work together to support learning.

The contract (Figure 2) directs the student to obtain the evaluation from the supervisor rather than having the supervisor mail the evaluation to faculty. This requirement encourages open communication between the supervisor and the student, which has proven to be successful. In only one instance have I had a supervisor mail the evaluation directly to me. Even in this instance, the supervisor had a direct communication with the student at the conclusion of the service period.

The philosophies of pragmatism and educational reconstruction stress the importance of the school-community link. Voices in the educational reform movement are stressing the same. Service-learning is one means to support such efforts, but will only do so if we are clear about our intent and if we provide tools, such as a service-learning contract, to support our students and community agencies in the process. ❖

DARROLL BUSSLER is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations, Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota.