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Service-Learning in Economics: A Detailed Application

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Over the past decade, a significant push has been made toward the adoption or development of alternative methods of disseminating economic concepts to students. Much of this work is grounded in the belief that we, as educators, must recognize who our students are as well as how they process information. Siegfried and colleagues (1991) have suggested that more needs to be done to teach students to think like economists. They outlined a number of approaches and changes that have the potential for improving undergraduate economic education by providing opportunities for students to practice thinking like economists.

Service-learning is a method of experiential learning that links the classroom with the local community. It requires students to spend time in volunteer service and relate their experiences to the educational theories they learn in the classroom. Service-learning is unique because it allows for the incorporation of many of the changes suggested by Siegfried et al., such as the use of problem solving and creative skills to teach students to think like economists (p. 199). During the service-learning project, students are expected to identify economic issues, explore economic theories, and provide evidence relating their experiences to these economic theories. Thus, service-learning suggests an active approach to learning economic theory.

Economic education research has also focused on integrating issues of diversity into economics' curriculums (Bartlett and Feiner 1992), considering alternative pedagogy (Shackelford 1992), and developing assessment techniques (McCoy, Chamberlain, and Seay 1994). In this article, I draw upon each of these categories in outlining an alternative educational tool. Although the specific

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application was developed for a class about women in the economy, it may readily be adapted to fit other courses in economics.

OVERVIEW

Service-learning is a more specific form of experiential learning. Experiential learning recognizes the link between experience and learning. This is best shown by the Kolb learning cycle, developed by David Kolb (1976, 1984), which illustrates a learning sequence that begins with a Concrete Experience (stage one) and moves through stages of Observation and Reflection (stage two), Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations (stage three), and Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations (stage four). It then begins again by reinforcing what has been learned through a new Concrete Experience.

Traditional lecture/discussion formats generally begin at stage three. Many economics instructors spend a significant amount of class time in the Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations stage. Examples include developing the Keynesian equilibrium model, showing monetary policy effects on the output in an economy, or developing the short- and long-run equilibrium within a perfectly competitive market. Moving to step four, applying these mastered principles, is clearly the goal of many homework assignments and examinations.

Researchers and teachers familiar with experimental economics would agree that following up these theoretical presentations with hands-on experiences moves the students toward step one in the cycle. Concrete experiences, as suggested by the Kolb model, are based on interactions with our environment. They can range from classroom simulations such as those mimicking Federal Reserve Board meetings to working with welfare recipients in the community. Each experience requires participatory action on the part of the student. For example, simulated pit trading allows students to participate in a market to discover the efficiency by which perfect competition models outline market outcomes (Holt 1996). These experiences are used to motivate students in discovering economics via the real world. Finally, discussions and reflections based on these experiences move the students to step two, Observation and Reflection. Although reflections may occur throughout the cycle of learning, it is in stage two that these are formalized in terms of economic content.

Research on learning styles indicates that "European-American females, Hispanics, and African-American students tend to be concrete, active experimenters" (Bartlett 1996, 148), thus suggesting that a passive lecture classroom format will not engage many members of these groups. Attracting more of these students to the economics major would entail developing more active teaching methods. Experiential learning reaches a broader base of students by providing an active, participatory environment that begins with a concrete experience such as role play, experiments, problem-solving exercises, and so forth. For example, Denison University has economics laboratory sessions during which "students use real-world data to develop, explore and test economics theories" (Siegfried et al. 1991, 209). Based on these experiences, students analyze the process and outcomes through a guided discussion. This second step allows students to discover/learn from the activity. Economic theories related to these experiences are presented during a follow-up lecture by the instructor. Finally, students have the task of applying these principles and theories to other circumstances or areas of their education. In this way, experiential learning actively involves students in the educational process.

Service-learning builds on this process by moving it outside the classroom. This solves some of the problems associated with experimental applications that take significant amounts of class or lab time and often result in less content being covered. The learning cycle still begins with a concrete experience but now occurs in the community. Students volunteer to provide services for a community organization and through these experiences they discover economic principles at work in the real world. Examples of the economic issues that may be developed in this way include externalities, price ceilings and floors, unemployment, poverty, and many other policy issues. Writing assignments and class discussions promote the sharing of observations and reflections, which students are then responsible for linking with the theories presented over the course of the semester. Finally, students are asked to share these experiences with their peers through group or individual presentations. This step allows students to recognize the applications of these theories and principles to various situations, completing the cycle of learning.

Service-learning is a pedagogy that reaches far back into the development of educational philosophy for its root. The works of John Dewey (1938) provide a philosophical link for integrating service-learning into education. He suggested that individuals learn best from observing the environment in which they exist. Dewey argued that the lessons learned when students tended to the welfare of others provided not only an educational stimulus but also an expansion of their horizons and encouragement to take responsibility for their fellow humans.

Dewey's work and related research forms the basis for the widespread incorporation of service-learning across the disciplines. Service-learning projects may be found in biology, English, environmental studies, political science, psychology, theater and drama, urban studies, and women's studies, for example. These projects include students cofacilitating theater workshops, developing and implementing environmental action programs, and using community service to reflect upon and learn about politics through practical experiences. Despite the wide range of service activities incorporated in these classes, each project is consistent in its goal to link academic education and practice in a manner that provides an active learning experience.[1]

Examples of economic field work can be found as early as the 1930s and 1940s at institutions such as Sarah Lawrence College. Field work at Sarah Lawrence was based in the belief that "a valid education also required that students learn not only how to observe but also to participate in the world in which they lived and to use this knowledge to develop their own abilities and interests, something best achieved through fully integrating field work into the curriculum" (Lewis 1994, 3). As an economist at Sarah Lawrence, Trepp (1939) was dedicated to this practice. She outlined educational objectives that suggest a transformation of economic theory and practice toward one that is consistent with the ideals of field work. In other words, economics that is practical and participatory.

The motivation for reintroducing this type of experiential learning in economics is threefold. The first two motivations are student based; the third encompasses the entire discipline. Students consistently complain that economics provides very few links to the real world. The community-based learning process has the potential to fill this void. Second, many students already perform community service. Not only do a number of high schools require community service as a component of graduation, but many college organizations such as honor societies, religious-based student unions, and even sororities and fraternities provide a significant number of community-service hours as well. Depending on the applicability of their current service to course content, students may combine or expand their service interests as well as promote the link between economics and the real world.

Finally, incorporating this type of experiential learning technique in economics may be more broadly motivated by the current composition of undergraduate students and the recent decline in undergraduate economics degrees. Women and people of color have been historically underrepresented in economics undergraduate programs (Albelda 1995; Siegfried 1995). It has been suggested that current pedagogical techniques are not attracting these underrepresented groups (Jackstadt and Grootaert 1980). If we are to combat the recent declines in the number of economic degrees awarded, we may wish to focus on these underrepresented groups.

A view of the current state of the discipline, considering the disciplinary curriculum based on a continuum of economics methodology, content and pedagogy provides a path that may be followed to attract and retain women and people of color to the discipline.[2] The current curriculum minimizes attention to theories outside the mainstream, presents standard theories using elaborate abstract assumptions, and presents these in a style that is limited to knowledge translation by the expert instructor. As suggested by Becker and Watts (1996), 83 percent of course content is neoclassical, and 83 percent of course content is presented via the lecture. Thus the classroom is one in which a professor lectures about economic theory based on the assumption of homo economic man using abstract mathematical modeling.

A format such as that found by Becker and Watts will not engage the underrepresented European American female, Hispanic, and African-American students (Bartlett 1996). These students might be targeted by a method that is participatory and inclusive. Service-learning is a participatory, active learning technique that allows for contextual presentation and subsequent learning of economic theory through concrete experiences and provides a forum for the integration of diversity (such as race and gender issues). It has the potential of moving the economics discipline out of the margins to the center, a balanced curriculum in methodology, context, and pedagogy.

THE APPLICATION

The choice to incorporate service-learning into the Women and Gender Issues in Economics course was based on a number of factors. First, the significant number of easily identifiable organizations that have an economic impact on women in the community allows freedom of choice by students. Second, the time commitment for this form of service-learning suggests the use of an upper-division elective course. Finally, the elective nature of the course implies an inherent interest in the subject material. Whereas none of these factors are necessary for the implementation of service-learning, their existence lessens the hurdles that may be associated with this unique educational tool. Much less time and coordination are necessary to provide a successful learning experience under these conditions.[3]

Women and Gender Issues in Economics is an upper-division elective course requiring both micro- and macroeconomic principles. It is designed to point out differences in economic circumstances between men and women. Various theories are provided in order to explain these differences, and students are expected to understand as well as contrast neoclassical, Marxist, institutionalist, and feminist perspectives on each topic covered.

Students were given three project options for earning 15 percent of their grade: participating in the service project, doing a traditional research paper, or writing a biography of a female economist. Both the traditional research paper and the biography were expected to be 10 to 15 pages in length and structured in a format with which students would be familiar. Seventeen of the 19 students chose the service project; each of the other options was chosen by a single student.

The community-service project required each student to identify an organization that has an economic impact on women in the local community.[4] Fifteen hours of community service were required. Some may question the depth of experience that may be obtained with only 15 hours of required service. Training time, for instance, may cut into the hours of actual service. The organizations identified for this application were chosen with these constraints in mind. Each organization identified practical tasks that required little training yet gave students the opportunity to interact and make an impact on program participants. In addition, much of the information students needed for the written component of their project was provided in the organizational brochures and records. Thus, 15 hours of community service provided a minimal but sufficient experience for students to draw upon. Students were expected to complete outside research about the economic issues identified to supplement their service experiences.

To ensure the completion of these hours and hold each student responsible for the assistance or task promised to the organization, the organization staff, the student, and the instructor signed a contract detailing their service commitments.[5] The formality of a contract was designed to ensure a level of accountability for the promised involvement of each student. In addition, the contract made clear to the organization that students would be asking for information as well as providing their services.

The role of students in these organizations did not have to result in a direct economic impact on women in the community. Students could recognize their more indirect effect as supporters of the organization through the second component of this project, the term paper. This 7- to 10-page report required an introduction of the organization, details of its goals and programs, and proof of at least two economic impacts on women in the community. At least one of these impacts had to be quantitative in nature, to balance anecdotal analysis, and students were encouraged to link their work with the theories discussed during the semester. Ideally, the quantitative component would measure the impact of these programs on the local economy. Given the considerable difficulty in obtaining such a measure, students were required to use other quantifiable measurements to make an assessment of this impact. The number of community members served by agency programs, the number of individuals able to find independent housing and jobs as a result of agency programs, and the budgetary records kept by the agency provided insight into the economic impact. This quantifiable component was supplemented by the qualitative component, such as descriptions, verbatim quotations, and so forth. In this way, students could include alternative sources of evidence in support of their identified economic impacts.

Additional steps were taken during the semester to ensure that students were meeting their obligations and to correct any problems that might have arisen. A strict timetable was provided that included deadlines associated with choosing an organization, completing the contract and service hours, and turning in a final paper. A midsemester interview was scheduled with each student to ascertain progress and to provide additional guidance for the research paper. Finally, a formal presentation (via a poster session) was required at the end of the semester.

RESULTS

To provide details of the learning process associated with community service, I focus on the experiences of six students who volunteered at the Emergency Shelter. This organization was chosen to provide an example of how one community organization can be used within the confines of this assignment and to illustrate the students' progression through the Kolb learning cycle. The remainder of this section is organized to follow the Kolb learning cycle. The experiences of these six students as well as excerpts from their journals, papers, presentations, and exit interviews are provided as evidence of their movement through the learning cycle.

Concrete Experience

The Emergency Shelter provides temporary shelter to homeless women and their children, assists in locating resources necessary to correct their homeless situations, and acts as an information center in areas such as employment, housing, financial assistance, and counseling. Students participated in a number of activities during their 15 volunteer hours but spent most of their time identifying resources, such as employment and educational opportunities and long-term child care, for particular shelter occupants. Whereas some of these activities did not have a direct impact on the economic status of women being serviced by these agencies, the cumulative services offered by the Emergency Shelter have a significant economic impact.

Linking the students' work at these organizations with economic theory was cultivated in student papers and poster sessions. Economic issues linked to the Emergency Shelter included education and skill acquisition, the human capital model, minimum wage issues, unemployment, occupational segregation, the cycle of poverty, child care, welfare policies, and homelessness. One student wrote in her class journal, "This organization does so much for the women and children of the Shelter . . . helping them write resumes and find jobs, giving them housing opportunities, running programs for their children, and even . . . teaching basic life skills. I'm excited about the learning prospects I am encountering."

Observations and Reflections

A number of forums allowed formal as well as informal sharing of the students' observations and reflections related to their service. Each forum was unique in terms of the required expression of experiences and staggered in such a way that the most expressive forums were at the end of the semester. In this way, students were exposed to a series of opportunities to practice their expressions of learning. Forums were intended to validate the learning experiences of the students, provide the opportunity for them to hear other students' perspectives of their learning process, and link the work of many community organizations on a single economic issue such as poverty.

Students were encouraged to include entries in their class journals describing the services they provided and the issues they encountered during their volunteer hours. "I think the Shelter works hard at giving these women as much of a 'normal' life as they can—[it allows residents to] keep confidence and self-esteem up and help them break out of the cycle of homelessness."

One class period was allocated for an open discussion of course projects. Students had the opportunity to describe their organization, discuss experiences, challenge stereotypes, and explore the relevant economic issues. The conversations were especially enlightening. One student reflected in his journal, "Somehow we pulled together several of the semester's most heated discussions today. . . . Students were lined up to speak."

Students were also required to create and share a poster that included a description of their organization, the programs it provided, and their statements identifying economic impacts. Students shared a narrative of their experiences with classmates as well as faculty. Invited participants were asked to complete an evaluation and provide their reactions to the poster session. A number of the faculty responses were related to the observations and reactions students had concerning their experiences. "A couple of students were very sensitive to the economic needs of the constituencies of their community service organization. Students, I believe, . . . had eye opening experiences [with respect] to gender, racial, etc. inequities."

Finally, an exit interview questionnaire specifically asked students to identify their project goals, reflect on whether these goals were met, and what the experience taught them about themselves, others, and economics. Typical responses included the following: "Many of the women in the Shelter are not lazy, but have had bad luck and have been in abusive relationships." "[Homelessness is] not always due to laziness or lack of skills, some people have sadly run into and had a share of bad luck."

Formulation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations

The link between what students learn during their volunteer hours and course content is critical to this step of the learning cycle. Students are expected to use their experiences to derive general theories or policy implications. The homeless shelter provides a particularly good opportunity for students to explore issues of poverty and joblessness. Students cannot be expected to formulate complex mathematical models with such a limited experience, but they can formulate realistic assumptions related to these models and break down stereotypes that inhibit the formulation of unbiased policies.[6] This is especially true when addressing incentive issues inherent in the welfare system. To facilitate students moving to this next level, each student is responsible for identifying two economic impacts of their organization on women in the community. This requirement provides the opportunity for the student to move from experience to theory by justifying why these impacts occurred.

Students volunteering at the Emergency Shelter found their previously held stereotypes of homelessness challenged. They noted, based on interactions with the people they had previously only read about in their texts, that homelessness is not always caused by laziness and low skill. Students identified and described the cycle of poverty long before these issues were discussed in class. They explained a number of the causes of homelessness and the related solutions provided by the Emergency Shelter. Finally, students outlined their expectations of the impact of welfare policies in both the short and long run and the implications of recent budget cutbacks.

Term papers provided the most structured avenue for exploration of the relationships of economic theory to volunteer experiences. Students noted many potential sources of the homelessness problem. One student wrote, "The declining supply of low cost housing is the primary cause of the increase in homelessness. . . . Contributing factors to this decrease in available housing include a retreat by the federal government from housing programs nationwide." This student continued with a detailed discussion of government policy related to issues of homelessness and poverty.

Students readily identified the impact of this organization in relation to the cycle of poverty in which many of the homeless get trapped. Students used their experiences as well as those identified in organization records to relate the agency's impact on the long-term nature of the cycle of poverty. "The Shelter stops the cycle of poverty by getting families off the street long enough for them to get other areas of life under control, such as employment and child care."

Each student was asked in the exit interview to identify how her or his paper/project was relevant to the course materials. Emergency Shelter volunteers identified the following course topics: child-care issues, the human capital model, labor force participation, the minimum wage, part-time employment, poverty, unemployment, wage discrimination, and welfare policies. One student suggested that, "the welfare discussions and welfare reform debates were made very real by my experience." Other exit interview comments included, "They are all unique—the 'stereotypical' homeless person does not apply to any of the peo-ple

ple I met. I admire their steps to get back on their own." "As far as the link to class goes, it's very disturbing to talk about poverty. It's so much easier to ignore its existence and live my selfish happy little life."

Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations

The implications or hypotheses derived in the previous stage, Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations, "serve as guides in acting to create new experiences" (Kolb 1981, 235). Creating such new experiences is generally beyond the scope of any single course given that the third stage of this cycle is often completed at the end of a course. Thus, the final step in the Kolb learning cycle is probably the most neglected. It is easy for faculty and students to stop the process before extending their learning experience beyond the confines of this single experience. The key for this application of service-learning is to determine whether students can apply their identified theories beyond their current community organization experiences. Admittedly, this application of service-learning has, to some degree, also fallen into this trap. The only formal avenues that encouraged the testing of these developed theories were the poster session and exit interview.

The poster session provided an opportunity for students to learn about the economic issues related to and the impacts of other community organizations. Students were encouraged to share their experiences with classmates and to compare the economic issues identified. For example, students who had volunteered at the Emergency Shelter were able to learn about the experiences of students who had volunteered at the Community Fitness Program. This organization provides services, such as financial counseling and resource identification, for those women who have moved out of the Emergency Shelter and into independent housing. During this poster session, the information exchanged about these two community organizations allowed students to further explore the cycle of poverty. For example, the integration of these two organizations provides a long-run view of the steps available to break out and remain out of the cycle of poverty.

Student exit interviews suggested that, with little formal incentive for further integration or application, students had already considered this option. "This experience is proving to be valuable in terms of opening my eyes up to a potential senior project for leadership studies. I would probably never have stumbled onto this opportunity as the subject for my senior thesis if it wasn't for this project!" All six volunteers at the Emergency Shelter intended to continue their volunteering beyond the course requirements.

CONCLUSION

Both student and faculty responses to the application of service-learning were positive. As one student recorded in her journal, "I think it was a very interesting and rewarding experience. I got a look at homelessness that I never would have gotten elsewhere." Faculty reactions to the poster session were overwhelmingly positive. "[This project is] a great way to *engage* students in their learning."

Community organizations also appeared to have gained from the experiences. Each agency completed an evaluation form regarding the performance of their student volunteers. Agencies indicated that they were very satisfied 88 percent of the time (with 15 of the 17 students), and every organization expressed an interest in continuing the program with future classes. Comments included, "She was well organized [and] showed a lot of initiative." The volunteer "had a genuine desire to learn about homelessness" and "surpassed expectations."

Service-learning applications provide an opportunity to involve students in the learning process. Phillips (1984) suggested that we remember 10 percent of what we hear, 15 percent of what we see, 25 percent of what we hear and see, 60 percent of what we do, 80 percent of what we do with active reflection, and 90 percent of what we teach. Although the initial incorporation of service-learning tends to be solely exposure, when the experienced academic interacts and the student believes in the educational gains, it can be guided into so much more. Indeed, it has the potential to be included in the 80 to 90 percent categories described by Phillips.

Service-learning is not without its drawbacks. Matching students with organizations and ensuring that the issues addressed by agencies can be linked to course content can involve a substantial amount of the professor's time, especially if she or he has to make initial contacts with each organization. On the other hand, students could be required to make these links as part of their projects. Once links are established, it is vital that the student have clearly established obligations and that the organization recognizes the academic component of the service. Service contracts are one way to ensure that all involved parties have mutually agreeable expectations.

Despite precautionary measures, instances will occur either the student or the agency fails to live up to the expectations of the assignment. The midsemester review of service assignments will help identify many potential problems associated with these experiences. The most common problem is the lack of organization by the community agency. For example, students may arrive at the organization ready to complete tasks only to find that agency workers have not thought of projects for the students or completed the necessary preliminary work. This frustrates students and leads them to believe they are not making an impact or meeting their obligations. This situation clearly inhibits a smooth learning experience, but it opens the door to addressing alternative issues. This disorganization leads to inefficiencies in the offering of services to the community. These inefficiencies could become the focus of the student's work—that is, the student could address the nature of volunteer work, including issues such as putting government policy into practice. This approach is especially topical given the recent workfare programs developed in conjunction with welfare policies. Thus, even a seemingly poor service experience can have a positive outcome.

The reflective stage and classroom links are critical to the success of service-learning. A number of opportunities designed to promote these goals should be provided. Developmental journals, class discussions, presentations, and term papers are some of the methods available to promote learning. A significant time commitment on the part of both the student and professor is often involved in making this a positive learning experience.

Finally, as suggested earlier, anecdotal evidence of learning is much easier to gather than empirical evidence. Papers and exit interviews can contribute to the documentation of student development through the learning cycle. It should be recognized that student reactions suggesting this work as fun and different do not preclude significant learning. It is the responsibility of the instructor to specify and reinforce the link between classroom content and service performed.

NOTES

1. See Howard (1993) for details of these examples.
2. This discussion is based on the work of Bartlett and Feiner (1992).
3. This is not to suggest that service-learning is not applicable in other economics courses. See McGoldrick (1995) and McGoldrick, Battle, and Gallagher (forthcoming) for additional applications in courses ranging from principles to the capstone experience.
4. The University of Richmond supports an office (LINCS—Learning in Community Settings) that will assist students and faculty in making these connections. A list of organizations that have an economic impact on the community was provided to the students at the start of the semester. Students were not required to choose an agency from the list, but every agency choice was cleared with the instructor to ensure that economic impacts would be identifiable. Examples of these organizations include the Community Fitness Program, the Emergency Shelter, Garfield F. Childs Memorial Fund Projects, Planned Parenthood, Women's Resource Center–University of Richmond, the Virginia Chapter of NARAL, and the YWCA. Brief descriptions of these organizations are available from the author.
5. A copy of this contract is available from the author.
6. Just as in the case of economic laboratories at Denison University, students use real-world data to "develop, explore, and test economic theories."

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