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## The Role of Service-Learning in Today's College Curriculum

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THE ROLE OF SERVICE-LEARNING  
IN  
TODAY'S COLLEGE CURRICULUM

Address given at the  
First Annual Conference  
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## Introduction

When I am given a topic or question to address I find that playing with the topic produces intellectual stimulation, helps to develop a clearer focus for my thoughts, and provides a respectable form of procrastination. This topic has been no exception in providing all three of the above; I'd like to begin by suggesting some ways we might play with the topic together over the next few minutes.

My first reaction, albeit probably too hasty and too cynical, has to do with the term "today"; that reaction is provoked by the thought, and arguable position, that today's college curriculum is a lost cause-what we should be about is thinking through the role of service-learning in the curriculum of the 21st century.

A second reaction has to do with the phrasing of the topic-it seems to imply that today's college curriculum is fixed and that the task is to figure out how to integrate service-learning into that framework.

My third reaction is a question- "What is the role of the college curriculum in today's society?". In discussing this latter reaction with a colleague, he suggested that I should flip the topic around and to address "The Role of the College Curriculum in Today's Service-Learning". While that stands the question on its head, it omits the societal aspect.

Where do these playful musings leave us? At a minimum, I believe that they indicate that in order to understand service-learning and its role in the academy, we need first to address some contextual questions and to not assume fixity in today's college curriculum. The role of education in our society needs to be raised, particularly when we use the phrase "education for citizenship" as does Michigan Campus Compact and many other organizations and programs. Furthermore, we need to inquire about the relationship of schooling to the broader educational enterprise and how that schooling is constructed. A curriculum, after all, is the institutionalized construction of a set of ideas about knowledge in a given society at a given time. All of this suggests that we pose the question as follows, "What is the role of service-learning in shaping curricula to meet the challenges of 21st century society?"

In order to pursue this question and to arrive at some workable ideas about service learning, it seems critical to consider the following questions:

1. What is the current social and political context of American Higher education and how is this affecting curriculum reform?
2. What is service -learning and how is it related to the broader community service movement?
3. What is the role of the academy in promoting knowing and doing in society?

After briefly considering these questions, I would like to suggest a theoretical rationale for service-learning in the

academy and to illustrate how service-learning and society are linked through curricular structures.

#### Curriculum reform and the context of higher education

While the recent waves of reports on needed reforms in American higher education have focused on several aspects of education, including instruction, administration, access, and organization of schooling, much of the emphasis has been on problems with the curriculum. A review of these reports and their proposals is too large a task for us here today, but we need to acknowledge the pressures driving the curriculum reform efforts, some of the critiques made, and the solutions proposed. While it may go too far to say that the curriculum has failed, we cannot say either with any confidence that there is an accepted and successful curriculum into which service-learning can be fitted or adapted.

Among the pressures are the political ones that note the rising cost of education and its seeming increasing failure to prepare students for careers and for solving social problems; this pressure is particularly acute in publicly funded state institutions and land grant schools. With the end of the 80's and the fast mobility careers that produced at least short term satisfaction with an education that "paid off", students and their families are beginning to question the value received for an increasingly expensive commodity.

Other pressures include the loss of consensus on an accepted

canon of knowledge, the increasing depth and narrowness of disciplines, the increasing pressures to respond to rapidly changing technology, and the debate over content versus skills. We could go on with the litany-the point is that curricular reform is a major challenge and unfinished business in education today.

Let me illustrate this by citing one of the most recent reports. Issued last month by the Association of American Colleges, The Challenge of Connecting Learning: Liberal Learning and the Arts and Sciences Major, Volume 1 offers the following critique of the arts and sciences major in liberal arts:

The problem with the major is not that it has failed to deliver certain kinds of knowledge. The problem is that it often delivers too much knowledge with too little attention to how that knowledge is created, what methods and modes of inquiry are employed in its creation, what presuppositions inform it, and what entailments flow from its particular ways of knowing. The problem is further compounded when the major ignores questions about relationships between various ways of knowing, and between what students have learned and their lives beyond the academy. (1991:6)

I would only add that this critique extends beyond the major to the entire curriculum.

### **Service-Learning and the Community Service Movement**

Because this is an academic conference it would be easy to get caught up in a definitional exercise and spend the our time on the question of "what is service-learning?". I personally don't believe that this would be productive, while at the same time I don't want to minimize that need for a common

understanding. A number of articles over the past few years have attempted to define service-learning; I think these are best reviewed and summarized in Jane Kendall's introduction to Volume 1 of Combining Service and Learning. She notes that in that in the literature reviewed for this three volume resource book, 147 terms were used to describe the combining of service and learning. She concludes that the term service-learning is the most generic and enduring, and encompasses two levels of meaning: (1) as a type of program, (2) as an overall philosophy of education that reflects a particular epistemology and set of values. (Kendall et. al, 1990:20)

It is this latter meaning that I want to use and to elaborate upon some of its elements. Specifically, service-learning is a form of social exchange that is characterized by reciprocal learning. This reciprocity takes place in specific settings and involves interaction between the service and the learning (Stanton,1987; Giles and Freed,1985; Giles,1988). This reciprocity also suggest a blurring or elimination of the distinction between the learner and the served; this mutuality distinguishes service learning from the community service movement, particularly as it was manifested in the 1960's and early 1970's.

How is service-learning related to community service? While service-learning had some common origins with community service and while many use the terms public service, community service, volunteerism and service-learning interchangeably, I would argue

that service-learning has broader aims than just the immediate goals of providing service. I'll return to this argument in a few minutes when I outline what I think is a theoretical basis for service learning. The key point here is that service-learning is a form of social engagement, which is directed toward what Timothy Stanton calls "a critical understanding of social problems and issues" (Stanton, 1990:22). This active engagement links knowing and doing in a fundamental way; this leads to the next question-the relationship between knowing and doing.

#### **Knowing and Doing in the Academy and in Society**

One of the strong traditions in American higher education, with some notable exceptions, has been the separation of knowing and doing, with knowing being the province of the academy. This created an epistemology of knowing being objective, disconnected from action, and unrelated to the messiness of the world and its doing. This paradigm of how knowledge is created, transmitted and applied is being seriously challenged on a number of fronts; unfortunately we can't review them all here. (Giles, 1989a;1989b) Service-learning, I would argue is in the forefront of that challenge. It is promoting what Parker Palmer calls an "epistemology of relatedness" (Palmer, 1987), a relatedness between knowing and doing, a relatedness between those who know and do. This relatedness suggest that knowing is derived from doing, not just that traditional view that knowing is applied to



doing. All of this means that the certainty and isolation of the academy are being challenged in serious ways.

Having examined these three issues, we find certain societal and curricular elements that must be addressed if we are to argue for and create a meaningful role for service-learning in the academy. Among these elements are: the need for learning to be connected, the press of unsolved social problems, the emergence of new ways to thinking about knowledge, and the emergence of a societal and global order that is too complex and rapidly changing to be encapsulated in a common canon of wisdom.

#### Toward a theoretical framework for service-learning and the curriculum.

We have already identified many of the components of the role of service learning-now we need a framework in which to integrate them. As I've argued elsewhere (Giles, 1988) I believe that the educational philosophy of John Dewey, particularly as it is expressed in his theory of experience (Dewey, 1938) is the best basis for developing such a framework. I would quickly acknowledge that this is not just a revival of Dewey but the development of a new-Deweyian approach which responds to and incorporates the critiques of Dewey. (See Chaichian, 1991). These critiques rightly acknowledge the lack of a critical questioning in Dewey's work about the limits of the society as it was currently constituted.

The fundamental element in Dewey's thought was the

dialectic; it is the "and" in his major writings, the relationship between school and society, and ultimately between knowing and doing. In his theory of experience he developed two principles for linking experience and education so that experience is maximally educative. These principles suggest the relationship that we have been considering and building between service-learning is a form of linking experience and education, as it is reflected in the curriculum.

The first principle, the Principle of Continuity (also called the experiential continuum) states that experience must be shaped and assessed on an individual as well as the collective continuum to provide a direction for growth and development. This principle provides the criterion for assessing the value of a particular experience.

The second principle, the Principle of Interaction, (also called situational learning) holds that internal or subjective aspects of the experience interact with the external or objective aspects so that education is a 'transaction' between the two. This interaction occurs not only in the present moment but includes the history which the learner brings to the experience.

This all too brief explication of Dewey suggests that the service experience in its individual, social, and historical forms provides the basis for the relationship between education and democracy. These principles suggest that service learning shapes a curriculum that is connected-to the individual experiences of the students and to the broader issues of society.

Earlier I referred to the Association of American Colleges report on the major and liberal learning. While the critique, as quoted above is quite cogent, the solutions the report poses are not equally far reaching. In discussing the connections that need to be made, the report recommends connections across the curriculum and between disciplines, and suggests that the curriculum connect to the students' personal experiences, concerns, and important questions. (AAC, 1991:15) But the report stops short of suggesting a connection between the students and society, between collective experiences and social problems, between faculty and student common learning, and ultimately between knowing and doing. A neo-Deweyian framework requires the connections to go outside of the academy as well and to cut across more elements than just curricular ones.

To summarize the role of service-learning in shaping the curriculum:

1. Service learning creates knowledge as well as applies it.
2. Service learning integrates the curriculum with society.
3. Service learning connects the learner with what is being learned.
4. Service learning through social problem solving connects learning across disciplines.
5. Service learning diminishes the hierarchy between learner and teacher.
6. Service learning provides "education for citizenship".

## Service-Learning and the Curriculum:Some manifestations

Our task here was to develop a way to think about service-learning and the curriculum by considering the forces shaping higher education. Because of the concentration on a framework, and because many of the sessions over the next two days focus on program and curriculum development, I have omitted examples and stories, although we can discuss them. However, given the theoretical framework I have presented here, I would be remiss, and perhaps hypocritical not to mention some examples. This is crucial because my own understanding of this has arisen out of my work in service learning and out of the experiences of other educators.

At a recent conference on service-learning at Albion College, my colleague Cecil Bradfield and I generated a list of 16 different types of service-learning curricula from the experiences of the participants in the session and from syllabi we had collected. These are illustrated in Figure 1. In viewing these, there is a great diversity which suggests the flexibility and broad range for service-learning curricula. In this diversity, however, there appears the common element of service-learning providing an important curricular element and a connected educational experience.

Figure 1

TYPES OF SERVICE-LEARNING CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES

1. Independent Study
2. Student-initiated Courses
3. Field Methods
4. Special Topics
5. Internship Seminars
6. Freshman Seminars-Liberal Studies or Writing Course
7. Extra Credit in Discipline-based Courses (4th credit option)
8. Honors or Senior Project
9. Community-based Field Research (action research)
10. Special Service-Learning Course and Project-(e.g. literacy)
11. Courses on Voluntarism and Philanthropy w/ service Component
12. Practica in Human Service Areas (e.g. social work)
13. Off Campus Urban Semester Program
14. Experimental College Courses (non-credit)
15. Local Community Studies Courses
16. International Service-Learning

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