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## Service Learning and Curriculum Transfusion

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## Developmental Stages

# Service Learning and Curriculum Transfusion

By Irving H. Buchen

**Service learning need not be a short-term program. It can exhibit developmental stages that parallel and feed into patterns of academic growth.**

Newcomers to service learning, caught up by its initial successes, are frequently not aware that service learning is capable, with appropriate long-term structuring, of exhibiting developmental stages that feed into patterns of academic growth.

### Developmental Stages

Failing to recognize the existence and power of those stages not only impoverishes or limits the substance of service learning, but prevents it from achieving significant relations to subject matter. Indeed, one of the gifts that service learning provides to academics is an urgent, motivated, and focused energy that imparts to curriculum a motivation that more resembles the effect of transfusion than infusion.

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There are at least six major stages of development that structure a student's changing relationship to learning through service:

1. Need to be needed
2. Need to know
3. Need to know more
4. Need to understand why
5. Need to know what can be changed
6. Need to integrate action and knowledge to develop strategies for change.

Each stage is anchored in the present and the real, but some stages may have additional time dimensions. Thus, while the first two stages remain in the present, the next two involve the past, and the last two are integrative. They add the prospect of the future to the fusion of the past and the present, and thus complete the circle by returning to action or doing. Examining each stage in some detail helps us to explore the interaction between experiential and academic learning.

#### 1. *Need to be needed.*

The difference between the experience of learning and learning itself is the difference between the experiential and the academic process. Take the example of working with senior citizens. In an experiential introduction, students go to a senior citizens center. They might never have seen so many old people together in one place. The students may be in the minority.

The smells and sights may be initially bewildering. Many will not like what they see—aging can be unattractive—but they also begin to engage the personalities. They will discover senior citizens who are bright and outgoing, others who are sick and depressed.

The students become part of the "busyness" of the center and the next thing they know they are dancing or doing calisthenics and perhaps breathing more heavily than their aged counterparts! They leave not understanding all they have experienced but ready to discover what they observed and felt.

**The difference between the experience of learning and learning itself is the difference between the experiential and the academic process.**

Contrast this with a totally academic learning situation. Students are asked to define senior citizens. They search their brains. They may have grandparents, but the teacher has requested a group definition and that requires higher levels of generality and abstraction.

They mix stereotypes with facts and produce a definition of a class of

people who constitute 19 percent of the total population, but consume 64 percent of Social Security funds and, in their later years, 85 percent of medical support (and are thus seen largely as a problem and rarely as a resource).

Learning in the classroom is approached from the outside; the visit to the center approaches learning from the inside. In service learning one does not have to choose; one can have and integrate both.

**Reflection can bring to the surface key reactions and feelings, but also structure the passage from the experiential to the academic.**

The advantage of starting with the experiential is motivation—the entry point involves the satisfaction of being needed. In later stages students may discover how much more they are needed, especially if and when they become more knowledgeable.

Reflection can bring to the surface key reactions and feelings, but also structure the passage from the experiential to the academic. Indeed, what was just presented as two unrelated experiences can be linked and the experience of learning can lead to the traditional kinds of definitions and

classifications characteristic of academic inquiry. This time the academic exercise might take a different form.

To supplement the demographic figure of 19 percent, for example, students might ask: "How many senior citizen centers are there in our town? Who runs them? How are they supported?" They may also question the nature of Social Security support: "How much do they receive? What determines that? Is that enough to live on?" They even may plan to ask the seniors these questions.

Finally, the question of medical costs might lead into how active these seniors are and whether exercise programs have a preventive effect. In short, the definition process would expand to include both the experiential and the academic.

The experiential would anchor inquiry in the real, and deal with real people; the academic would move toward classification and generalization. With both contributing, the real world would be anchored in fact and precision, and generalizations would have substantial content.

#### 2. *Need to know.*

Once the experiential base is secure, it establishes a recurrent source of validation; that is, the academic is always tasked by the experiential to minister to reality and not to be self-indulgently distant or abstract. Similarly, the academic relies on the experiential and compels it to be

more informed and self-critical about its relationships. The result is a circular process that moves from feeling to fact, from experience to inquiry.

In this second stage, the need to know establishes the process firmly as a pattern of permanent growth and inquiry development. At this point the need to know becomes more focused because the student is both experience-rich and information-poor. The questions prompted by the experience are more inclusive than the knowledge base.

Now the student turns to the academic with a kind of urgency that can set learning ablaze. What is the nature of the biological process of aging? When does it start? What forms does it take? What can be done, if anything, to arrest or slow the process? What is the psychology of aging? What are the psychosomatic relationships?

Although at this point the questions may be too big to be manageable, they serve to stir a creative tension between macro and micro considerations.

#### 3. *Need to know more.*

As students continue to develop their relationships with specific seniors, their need to know becomes more comprehensive.

At this point they become practical. They want to know how they can better minister to individuals and

enhance the relationships that are being built. They become more open to reading articles and books and become more self-directed. They may want to know more about past patterns. This stage may go on for a very long time, even a lifetime, but the links between present and past are permanently forged.

#### 4. *Need to understand why.*

Some students will discover a need to go further and trace the origins of the problem. For that the students need history, but also—and here is the quantum jump—theory. In many ways this is the most advanced intellectual stage and, if pursued, can lead to a career choice as a researcher or practitioner. Such later projects prepare for the more future oriented stages.

#### 5. *Need to know what can be changed.*

The experiential base is now a lab for testing various applications or new designs and approaches. A problem-solving format emerges as the dominant methodology that seeks to combine the experiential and the academic. There is no time to prefer one form of knowing to the other; both are pressed into service.

The solution to a problem is incorporated into the need and desire to produce a larger social design and even a new paradigm of social intervention. The students return to the earlier holistic questions, only now

they are better equipped to wrestle with their size and complexity.

6. *Need to integrate action and knowledge to develop strategies for change.*

Finally, we turn to the experiential base, where the focus has become how to make change happen. This is the realm of social policy change. The final component is characterized by action, as befits the service learning commitment to experiential service. Students fuse what they have learned from working in a community environment with what they have acquired from academic sources. The test of the integration will be the soundness of the new social design and their ability to convince those in power that what they are proposing is based in reality and intelligence.

**Students fuse what they have learned from working in a community environment with what they have acquired from academic sources.**

## Conclusions

This taxonomy of hierarchical learning developments is neither prescriptive nor sequentially infallible. It may not occur in exactly this way. It may go far beyond high school. It is critical for facilitators of service learning

to be aware that there is more to the process than exposure and feeling good about making a difference.

There are emotional and intellectual developments that are both ennobling and enriching. Producing a perhaps ideal hierarchy calls the facilitator's attention to detecting signs of the students' interest, their need for more information and knowledge, and for higher levels of thinking and comprehending.

There is no reason students in middle level and high schools should not be given the opportunity to become interns and researchers, even though these roles are generally reserved for students with higher levels of education. Each stage is capable of sustaining different levels or orders of complexity, ranging from the basic to the advanced. Above all, recognizing the developmental possibilities of service learning is one of the key avenues to curriculum relationships.

Indeed, one could claim that experiential infusion through the service experience may be a form of curriculum transfusion bringing new urgency and reality to an academic discipline. What subject matter could not benefit from posing global questions, questioning existing paradigms, and exploring what new social interventions can be designed and introduced? ~B

## Working Together for Students

### Parental Involvement: A Key to Successful Schools

By Gérard Coulombe

**Staff members who enjoy strong parental support have programs in place that actively seek to involve parents and frequently demonstrate to them how to get involved.**

**S**chools appear to hold three viewpoints on the topic of parental involvement:

1. We want parental involvement.
2. We don't want parental involvement.
3. We want parental involvement only when it is needed.

#### Encouraging Involvement

There are two main reasons for encouraging parental involvement:

1. Supportive parental involvement increases the probability that students will succeed academically. Supportive involvement is stressed here because pressure can lead to conflict and counterproductive behavior.

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*Gérard Coulombe, retired, was assistant principal and principal in Connecticut schools for almost 30 years.*