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An Indirect Model of Service-Learning: Integrating Research, Teaching, and Community Service[1]

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This article suggests that there exists a continuum of service-learning models, ranging from more "direct" to more "indirect" projects, and describes indirect service-learning. In indirect service-learning, students do not participate directly in field work, but learn about some sector of the community through their teacher's own research and/or community service and use knowledge acquired through their course to create a service or product which helps to meet a need of the community. The author presents a brief description of his own implementation of the indirect approach to service-learning, and argues that the indirect model allows academics to incorporate service-learning into their classrooms in ways that improve the applicability and relevance of their students' learning while enhancing the validity of their own research.

Over the past few years, more by luck and coincidence than by design, I have managed to integrate my research, teaching, and community service in a way that I have found very satisfying and rewarding. At first, I didn't think of what I had done as service-learning, but upon reflection my experience suggested the continuum between direct and indirect approaches to service-learning described below.

Several years ago, I participated in a faculty development institute on community service learning. While I was very enthusiastic about its goals and possibilities, I had difficulty applying the direct service model to my own classes—mostly graduate courses in applied linguistics. All the models of service-learning which I found placed students in the community in a variety of (usually relatively non-technical) capacities, and related their experiences to the course content (and vice versa). But my students typically could not *directly* serve the community with the technical concepts and skills they learned in my courses *until they had completed the course!* For a few years service-learning seemed incompatible with the other demands of my subject matter and students. Fortunately, the benefits of service-learning led me to adapt the direct service model to my own needs and constraints, leading to the "discovery" of what I am calling "indirect service-learning."

Indirect service-learning expands the repertoire of service-learning models available to teachers. Faculty who might not employ direct service-learning in their teaching, but who wish to serve the community and reap the pedagogical benefits of real-life contextualization and practical application of course concepts and skills, may find the indirect model attractive. Since indirect service-learning projects can advance faculty research agendas and serve different community needs than direct service-learning projects, the indirect service-learning model also may broaden the sources of support available to faculty and programs. What follows is a preliminary description and "prospectus;" I do not presume to have considered all the varieties of indirect service-learning, nor all of its uses, benefits, and consequences. My intention is to stimulate discussion that may enrich all kinds of service-learning.

Indirect Service-Learning: An Example

My indirect service-learning experience occurred in two steps: first, because of my community service, I stumbled upon a research project; next, I turned my students loose on a problem in the schools, thereby transforming the way I taught and how they learned.

For the past few years I have served on a citizens advisory committee on foreign language curriculum and instruction for the Arlington (Virginia) Public Schools. Two years ago, adapting a model for test development that I learned about at a conference and some strategies for improving crosscultural communication (two research interests of mine), I designed a curriculum development process for Arlington's foreign language program. The project was implemented in 1993-94 and was very successful, producing a proficiency-oriented, criterion-referenced curriculum framework which will improve articulation between levels of instruction in the program and encourage teachers to employ a more current, communicative approach to language teaching.[2]

One of the reasons the Arlington foreign language program needed to (re)develop its curriculum was the need for more consistent language testing across its schools—for reasons of pedagogy and accountability. It is difficult for a faculty of teachers to test something unless they agree on what it is they're teaching, how they're teaching it, and why they're teaching it. Evaluation is an integral part of curriculum development.

In the summer of 1994 I led a five-day workshop on language test development with a core group of teachers. We generated an overall concept and plan, but the teachers had very limited time to actually develop the test itself. The foreign language program supervisor needed concrete examples of assessment alternatives to widen the test development process to the whole program but didn't have the resources. The test development process was in danger of stalling.

One of the courses I teach, "Language Testing," provides an introduction to the field to graduate students and upper level undergraduates. As I was planning the course over the summer of 1994, I thought that I might be able to make the subject more realistic and immediately relevant for my students if their term papers asked them to design models of parts of Arlington's foreign language assessment package—as a real, not hypothetical, task. The foreign language program supervisor was enthusiastic, and set aside part of a December faculty meeting for teachers to consider my students' test proposals. Of course, this assignment required that I introduce my students to the context—Arlington's demography, its school system, its foreign language program's philosophy, mission statement and newly developed curriculum framework—because any test is measured largely by how well it fits the purposes for which it is used.

I introduced the term paper requirements and the Arlington context early in the semester, and it transformed the class in ways that I hadn't expected. As we labored over discrete point test item construction or the problem of reliability in communicative testing formats, my students and I constantly related language testing principles and research to an authentic task in a real context. My lectures were punctuated by anecdotes about particular teachers I had met or classes I had observed. Their questions were guided by a real need for relevant information and had a frame of reference that made my answers more concrete. My students were constantly trying to reconcile the ideals of language testing expressed in their readings with the real needs and constraints of the teachers, students, and the school system. In language testing, validity and practicality are always in competition; my students had to justify validity demands on teachers, students, and school system resources as well as sacrifices to practicality. To do so, they had to situate their proposals in the contexts of language acquisition and testing theories; county, state and national language learning standards; and the Arlington foreign language program's particular realities.

For their final, take-home exam, I asked the students to create a sentence outline of a talk on the advantages and disadvantages of two general approaches to language testing, to be (hypothetically) presented to Arlington's foreign language teachers. This reminded them of the broad theoretical perspective as they finished their more concrete term projects. When presented during the last classes of the semester, I was astounded by the creativity, analysis, and careful construction evident in their test proposals. Each proposal described a test of one or more language skills for a specified part of the curriculum, gave item specifications and examples, and set concrete rating criteria. Students had to motivate all features of their proposed test by testing theory and by appropriateness to Arlington's foreign language program (students, teachers, and curriculum). The proposals were successful both as a demonstration of what my students had learned about language testing as well as of accessible, operationalized models for Arlington's foreign language teachers. Three days after I read them, copies of the proposed tests were in the hands of Arlington's foreign language teachers, to serve as examples of different kinds of tests they might want to use or adapt.

Only then did I realize that, appropriately [illegible] taught in the course. Because of the authenticity of the task, the assignment had high construct validity; it tested their ability to use what they had learned as well as to explain what they had proposed. It had high content validity because anything and everything they had learned in the course could be applied—the only limitations were their imaginations, the principles of test design we had discussed, and the needs of the "client." And the assignment had high face validity; my students realized that if they could create a language test for Arlington's foreign language program, they could certainly develop tests for their own classes. The assignment also enhanced scorer reliability; I was evaluating their proposals in a real-world context, with a real purpose in mind.

In their (anonymous) formal course evaluations, the students expressed enthusiasm for the project. One student wrote, "I found the group project to be an excellent opportunity to use our knowledge gained in this course for a practical purpose and I appreciate the opportunity we had to do so." Another wrote, "The final project is an excellent way to put into practice the often complex abstraction of theory." With all due caution regarding a small sample and intervening variables, I also noticed that my overall rating rose noticeably compared to previous years, as did students' ratings for their learning in the course, how well exams, etc. represented course content, the degree to which course objectives were met, and the degree of perceived challenge in the course.

Epilogue is prologue. The teachers were thrilled to have completely articulated models of different testing formats with which to work. Their appreciation of my graduate students was high. My own credibility with the teachers has been enhanced—an invaluable commodity that I will draw upon over the next several years as we expand the test development process to include all foreign language teachers and classes in the system. Last year's term papers will serve as models for future language testing students, so they can improve upon past efforts, not repeat them. To increase students' direct contact with their "clients," this year's class will meet with some of Arlington's foreign language teachers in October, to identify their assessment needs, wishes, and preferences; they'll present their products to a county-wide foreign language faculty

Some Benefits of Indirect Service-Learning

The service-learning project above has been described to suggest that the traditional model of direct, individual service-learning can be complemented by another, more indirect approach. Indirect service-learning (ISL) may be more appropriate for some educational contexts (teacher, students, and course content) and for meeting some community needs (especially more technical, system-level needs) than traditional, direct service-learning (DSL). Therefore, awareness and recognition of ISL may extend the usefulness and accessibility of the service-learning experience to a broader range of teachers and students.[3]

At the risk of oversimplifying, traditional community service learning may be seen as having two main components: Students participate directly in their community through some sort of field work and reflect upon their experience in relation to the content of an academic course. The service experience itself is often presented as an important contributor to students' personal growth—enhancing student self-esteem and helping to develop a sense of civic responsibility—as well as presenting a resource for academic learning, primarily through reflection and discussion.

The benefits of the direct model of service-learning to the community and to students' personal and educational development are great, and so are its perceived costs to faculty. Most obviously, as Herzberg (1994) notes, "A successful [service-learning] program requires a great deal of coordination between the school and the community agencies. Individual teachers working on their own to arrange contacts will find the task exhausting and daunting" (p.307). In schools without well-developed community service projects or volunteer placement offices, the demands of coordination may deter faculty from incorporating service-learning into their courses. Faculty also frequently express concerns that service-learning takes time away from their research.

In the indirect approach, students do not participate directly in field work, but (1) learn about some sector of the community through their teacher's own research and/or community service; (2) apply knowledge acquired through the course to create a service or product which helps to meet a need of the community; (3) critically analyze course content and social issues through the application. ISL shifts the management of service-learning from coordinating individual students' field work to managing students' group efforts on behalf of the community. The benefits to teachers change as well; in addition to their pedagogical value, teachers may pursue their own research through ISL projects.

In great part, a community's needs are addressed (adequately or not) by its institutions—e.g., schools, churches, and government agencies. Some community needs are essentially needs of individuals, and for these needs, direct student participation (often one-on-one) is appropriate. Volunteer tutors in literacy programs, for example, extend an institution's reach to individuals it might otherwise be unable to serve. These kinds of individual service roles are especially appropriate for students whose current training and expertise are limited and non-specialized.

Not all of a community's needs can be met by individual students (or small groups of students) working relatively independently. Some needs require more advanced training or broader knowledge than individual students can offer. Especially in the present era of shrinking budgets, some community needs are system-level needs of social institutions and community agencies themselves. Students working in teams to apply skills or concepts specific to their academic course, with the guidance of their teacher, are much more likely to be able to analyze and meet these systemic needs than are individual, unguided student volunteers. For example, a dozen college students studying high school foreign language testing practices directly would be intrusive on high school teachers and students, and a dozen individual proposals would be unlikely to provide an efficient, coherent response to the program's assessment needs. "Top-down" systemic needs of institutions require a different, top-down distribution of labor, in which the teacher does the field work and students use that field work to create the needed product or service. For example, Herzberg mentions students in accounting classes helping to revise the accounting procedures of non-profit community service agencies and students in marketing and business communication designing advertising and public relations materials for those agencies. In ISL, students have an opportunity to apply specialized career skills and gain valuable on-the-job experience, and social institutions receive work products or services which they cannot afford or which allow them to reallocate their limited resources to meet other needs.

ISL helps students apply and test the validity of course content in real social contexts and thereby learn about the community and its needs as they serve it. In ISL projects, students do not experience the community directly, but as it is represented by the teacher, from his or her own research or community service experience. While this can limit the physical and emotional immediacy of the students' service experience, it does allow the teacher to focus students' experience and learning in ways that may be more difficult in direct service-learning contexts. Students' learning roles change: in the direct approach, students receive a broad range of information through several channels (visual, aural, affective) and must discriminate and order information relevant to their service role, the course content, and their own personal development, respectively; in the indirect approach, information is largely preselected by the teacher and tends to be presented through more traditional pedagogical channels (lectures and readings), but can be enhanced by more immediate experience (videotapes and guest speakers, for example).

This does not mean, however, that ISL encourages passive learning. Since information is largely preselected for its relevance to the community's needs and course content, students can put more effort into applying their knowledge to analyze and meet the community's needs appropriately and effectively. Because all students receive mainly the same information about the community, they can work cooperatively on their service project, most efficiently utilizing their respective individual talents (c.f., Yelsma, 1994). Students working in teams can play different and broader roles in the community (c.f., Reardon, 1994). Students are able to measure the descriptive and explanatory adequacy of the theories they are learning against the yardstick of the theories' applicability to their community.

ISL sacrifices the immediacy of the student's community service experience, but may enhance other pedagogical values of service-learning. For example, Markus, Howard, and King (1993) and Miller (1994) found that students who participated in service-learning reported significantly greater ability to apply course concepts outside the classroom (among other benefits). Miller suggests that ability to apply course concepts outside the classroom, which the indirect model emphasizes, may assume increasing value to undergraduate and graduate students over other service-learning benefits.

Because the service project in the indirect approach is an outgrowth of the teacher's own research or community service, he or she may be more motivated and able to direct students than is possible in many DSL contexts. Often the teacher can offer greater oversight and guidance to teams of students focused on one or a few tasks than to a range of individual community service placements. Also, the teacher may be able to integrate team projects more concretely into coursework and his/her own research. The relation between service and learning tends to shift—from general experience in the community as it applies to course content (in direct service-learning) to application of course content in the service of the community. As a result, students play different pedagogical roles (e.g., research assistants) in a different learning context (the classroom as laboratory) and different service roles (designers of a technical service or product). Students working on an ISL project work through all or most of an analytic and creative process.

ISL tends to allow greater control over students' service experiences than DSL; such homogeneity in service experiences has several benefits. (Too much homogeneity—of experience or opinion—in a classroom stifles learning, of course.) While in the direct approach, students usually must negotiate their own roles in their community service placements, in ISL projects, the teacher constructs students' shared, collective role with the community agency or institution, although students must still negotiate their respective roles within their teams. Because students share a similar role with the community, they can work in groups; consequently, ISL is likely to encourage collaborative learning. Students working in groups on a project must make explicit their own perceptions of the community and its needs, which exposes and makes them accountable for their own values, biases, and assumptions. Furthermore, a group project requiring articulation of theory with a community's reality virtually insures reflection and critical inquiry.

With ISL it is possible to evaluate students' service efforts. While it would be unfair in most cases to evaluate students by the efficacy of their proposed "solution" for an institution's need, formal evaluation criteria can be developed for assessing the accuracy of students' analyses of an institution's structure and needs and their demonstrated "proficiency" in applying course content in the project. Evaluating the students' work product tends to "legitimize" the service-learning part of the course; it has the additional benefit of forcing the teacher to make explicit the evaluative criteria (and therefore the pedagogical rationale) for the service-learning project.

Greater direction and control over students' community service efforts make it possible for teachers to advance their own research through ISL projects. Students can help to test a theory's validity and/or practicality of implementation, or construct an "experimental treatment" to be tested in the community. Students learn research methodology by participating in the research process.[4]

Teachers can benefit from ISL in other ways as well. ISL projects have the potential to satisfy the motivations which teachers most frequently report for using service-learning (Hammond, 1994): affecting social change, working with students in co-curricular settings, helping people in need (personal motivations), preparing students for employment (co-curricular motivation), and bringing greater relevance to course material (curricular motivation).

Finally, ISL projects offer the institution many of the same benefits of more traditional service-learning—e.g., pedagogical enhancement, development of students' sense of civic responsibility, and improved relations with the surrounding community. In addition, ISL can promulgate research opportunities for undergraduate students and strengthen relationships between faculty and students.

Conclusion

The direct and indirect approaches to service-learning both offer important learning and service experiences for students, and the two approaches are complementary to each other in very useful ways. Each course is a unique blending of the course's place in the curriculum, the teacher's understanding of the course content and goals, personality, and teaching style, and the students' abilities and motivations for taking the course. The indirect approach to service-learning may allow some teachers to incorporate service-learning into courses for which more direct service-learning experiences are not appropriate or practical. In particular, ISL projects may be quite efficient in meeting the educational needs of more advanced students and the systemic needs of some social institutions and community agencies. An additional benefit is that by enabling teachers to pursue their research, the indirect approach may not only open a new range of service-learning opportunities for students, but help to legitimize service-learning as a research tool in the academy.

Despite its positive representation above, indirect service-learning is certainly not a panacea. It may be abused by teachers who exploit the labor of their students.[5] It may tend toward what Howard (in Yelsma, 1994) calls the "deductive" approach to service-learning, in which service is used mainly as a learning resource, with little regard for the consequences on the community. However, the more "real" the service project, the more "synergistic" and balanced the relation between the academic and service functions is likely to be, because students will demand—from the teacher and from other sources—the information they need to create a responsible community product.

Miller (1993) defines service-learning as when "young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences...that meet community needs" (p.2). The indirect model described in this article meets and amplifies this definition, liberating our interpretations of what can constitute "active participation," "thoughtfully organized service experiences," and "community needs." The direct and indirect approaches to service-learning describe poles on a continuum, with projects like those described by Reardon (1994), for example, occupying a middle position on the continuum. Consideration and elaboration of the direct-indirect continuum may suggest new kinds of service-learning projects, further extending the accessibility of the service-learning experience to more teachers and students.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Campus Compact conference, "A National Gathering: College Educators and Service Learning," Providence, RI, May 11-14, 1995.

[2] I have since presented 'the Arlington model' at conferences and in workshops, and an article about it is forthcoming in *Foreign Language Annals*. The context of my community service put me in a win-win situation: I served one of the community's needs, but the community became my research context. It gave me a (very practical) research question which allowed me to apply—and test the applicability of—certain theoretical constructs in my field of study. It willingly offered subjects for my "pilot study" (the initial curriculum development project), it created the evaluative standards for my hypothesis-testing (not statistical significance, but real-world impact and success), and it is now offering me further research sites to assess and extend the external validity of my "theory." The whole research cycle has been very efficient: the "cost" to me, in terms of time and effort, has been no more than most research projects I have done in the past (and dramatically less than some), and the "return on investment"—when the practical value of my efforts to the community are included—is comparable to my previous research efforts.

[3] It is possible to view ISL as one end of a natural continuum in a typology of service-learning approaches and in the development of service-learning programs. For example, Herzberg (1994) notes that community service learning projects often show a pattern of development—from relatively simple projects utilizing students' general abilities to a greater variety of more focused projects making use of students' specialized skills.

[4] A teacher does not have to have a prior research or community service agenda to incorporate indirect service-learning into his/her classroom. One easy way to begin "growing" an indirect (or direct) service-learning project is to ask students completing the course what applications they can think of for the course's subject matter that would be possible within the constraints of the course.

[5] I should note that I have never sought nor received remuneration for my work with the Arlington Public Schools.

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