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## Getting Started with Service Learning: Teachers at all Levels Integrating Service into the Curriculum

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# Getting Started with Service Learning

## Teachers at all Levels Integrating Service into the Curriculum

by Robert J. Exley, Ph.D., Western Community College, Council Bluffs, IA

### QUESTIONS ABOUT INTEGRATING SERVICE LEARNING INTO THE CURRICULUM

Is service learning about *what we teach* or is it about *how we teach*? Are we speaking of the *content* of the discussion or the *methods* used during a session when we emphasize the importance of reflection? How can I make the service learning component *an integral part of the course* and not just another add-on assignment? These are but a few of the questions that come to mind when beginning to integrate service into the learning expectations of a course. Starting with the basics helps.

Remember the simple who, what, when, where, why, and how questions of curricular design. Who are we teaching? What content and information will we be teaching them? When is the most appropriate time to teach this in the context of their education? In what setting can students best learn this course material? Why is it important to teach this content and to teach them in this manner? And how can we be most successful in teaching this information?

The answers to these most relevant questions frame the use of service learning. Many semesters of trial and error, discussions with colleagues, research within the fields of experiential education and service learning, and the solicitation of genuine feedback from students produced the following strategies for integrating service into the curriculum.

### IDENTIFYING COURSE COMPETENCIES

#### Who and What

This comprehensive review will reveal the areas where your current design may not be the best fit for today's student. For example, students today are far more consumer-oriented than those of just a few short years ago. Student consumers expect that the learning will be directly applicable to their immediate life interests. Students want to be able to see a visible connection between what they are learning and how that affects their daily lives. I call this the "test of connectivity."

Many times, the course competencies and learning objectives are still

relevant, but the means by which we are "teaching" and the student is "learning" fail to meet this test of connectivity. Service learning provides a process for helping the students see this connection. However, service learning is not an all-or-nothing teaching strategy, and curricular integration does not mean that you must abandon other methods of instruction.

### How and Why

A very important aspect of curricular design is determining the most effective way for getting the message across. Research on effective teaching (Cruikshank, Bainer, and Metcalf 1995) emphasizes the importance of using a variety of teaching strategies in the course of instruction. Service learning is just one teaching strategy, but it works extremely well for many different disciplines and with many different personalities. One must be cautious and thorough when determining how best to use it with certain courses. A common mistake is to assume that service learning must mean a minimum of 20-30 hours of service per semester combined with regular classroom reflection sessions. Be aware that this is only one way to use service learning, many others exist. Although there are no magical formulas, certain principles determine the role and scope of service learning for a given course.

### IDENTIFY THE COMPETENCIES BEST SUITED TO SERVICE LEARNING

Once you have completed your review of the course and are satisfied with the competencies and learning objectives, it is time to decide which ones are most suited to the use of service learning.

Remember that service learning requires the instructor to combine the use of service outside of the classroom with the learning experiences and assignments within the classroom. In short, competencies best learned via active learning are better suited than those that

remain in a theoretical or intellectual mode. For example, a competency that requires the student to demonstrate rote memorization of content lends itself less to service learning than does one that demands the student demonstrate an applied comprehension of a concept.

Each instructor must determine the fit of service learning to the particular course. Keep in mind that the degree to which you use service learning is directly related to the course competencies and learning objectives you choose. The degree of importance of the course competency you choose may dictate the amount of service time required of the student. I have chosen to focus on service time because this seems to be the one consistently asked question by instructors new to service learning. However, the amount of time is secondary to the learning that you want to occur. It is the learning that matters most, and the most effective arena for that learning to occur is in the relationships and exchanges between and among you and the other students.



*Competencies in math are learned in this service-learning quilting program. Younger students learn about shapes and sizes. Older students discover graphs and proportions as they organize quilt pieces and design the final dimensions.*

### STUDENT LEARNING EXPECTATIONS

Once course competencies have been identified, the next step is to determine how to assess student learning in relation to the service requirement. You have the full range of options available to you for assessing student mastery of course content including objective and subjective examinations, oral reports, essay papers, pop quizzes, group projects, etc. As you do so, be sure that the assessment practice matches the degree of importance of the learning objective.

For example, when service is a small component of the course (four or five hours) and related to a competency of low importance, then the academic product (an oral report or one-page essay) should produce a minor grade in the grade book (equivalent to a pop quiz). However, if the same service component (four or five hours) relates to a highly important competency, then the classroom

experience to facilitate this learning should involve a very significant academic product producing a major grade in the grade book (equivalent to a major exam).

## REFLECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

The appropriate use of reflective teaching strategies represents the most critical aspect in assuring the effectiveness of service learning. Harry Silcox, in his *A How to Guide to Reflection* (1995), provides a useful description of the various means for reflective teaching (see chart below). He demonstrates how different strategies accomplish different learning objectives. The instructor must identify the learning objectives first and then match the most salient reflective strategy to the desired outcome.

### The Course Syllabus

The course syllabus you create should clearly define the role of service in the course and how the service connects to the course content. The student deserves an explanation for why service

is important to his or her learning. The description should include all information that the student needs to begin making the connection between his or her service, the course content, and daily living.

## CONCLUSION

Your course syllabus should clearly define the role of service in the course and how the service connects to the course content. Students deserve an explanation for why service is important to their learning. The description should include all information that they need to begin making the connection between their service, the course content, and daily living.

Service learning is a serious and effective teaching strategy that can be successfully implemented with little planning and design work, as long as you remember these steps:

- Review the existing course
- Identify key competencies
- Define student learning expectations
- Select appropriate reflective teaching strategies and
- Produce an informative syllabus

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## References

- Cruikshank, Donald R., Deborah Batner, and Kim Metcalf. 1995. *The Act of Teaching*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Silcox, Harry C. 1995. *A How to Guide to Reflection*. 2d. ed. Holland, Pa.: Brighton Press.

Thank you to the American Association of Community Colleges for the excerpts from the *AACC Service Learning Resource Guide*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1998. For further information contact, Gail Robinson, Horizons Project Coordinator, grobinson@aacc.nche.edu www.aacc.nche.edu

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Reflective Teaching Strategies</h2> <p style="text-align: right;">(From Harry Silcox, <i>A How to Guide Reflection</i>)</p>		
TYPE	PRIMARY RESULT	DESCRIPTION
Reading/Creative Projects	Foster group bonding and leadership, facilitates directed learning	Specific assignments include essays, music, videos, artwork, etc. – both in class and out
Journal Writing	Fosters personal growth	Students maintain a regular journal that the faculty member reads and responds to
Directed Writing	Fosters directed growth	Students produce essays that address specific questions or issues required by the instructor
Feelings-Oriented Oral Reflection	Fosters group bonding and trust	Class members participate in a group discussion regarding their service experiences
Student as Expert Oral Reflection	Fosters citizenship, leadership, and cognitive learning	Student leads a session providing a critique of a reading assignment or a solution to a problem
Cognitive Teaching Oral Reflection	Fosters leadership, directed learning, cognitive learning, personal growth, and critical thinking	Faculty member leads a teaching session that fosters critical thinking and problem solving