The nuts and bolts of a service-learning programme

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ABSTRACT

Particularly after 1994 higher education in South Africa has been called to renew its commitment towards socio-economic realities. In moving away from an elitist system to a more accessible and representative system, the reconfigured system will increasingly have to respond to the challenges that confront South African communities. Service-learning, if applied correctly, could be a powerful means through which higher education institutions can meet the expected goals for student learning and societal development while making contributions to addressing unmet community, national and global needs.

INTRODUCTION

In this article perspectives are shared on the key features of service-learning programmes, associated learning theories are discussed and practical examples provided. Barriers to overcome in service learning are also highlighted.

The idea of service-learning is not a totally new concept. In the South African context it has strong roots within the traditional community service model. Quite often we notice the lack of a clear distinction between these two concepts (Sigmon 1994). Kendall (1990) provides information on the 147 terms used interchangeably in the service-learning discourse. For Jacoby and Associates (1996) the hyphen used in service-learning indicates the symbiotic relationship between service and learning, whilst "community" in the service-learning context refers to local neighbourhoods, the state, nation and even the global community. These writers (1996:5) perceive service-learning as a form of experiential learning in which learners

become involved in activities that recognise human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Therefore service-learning should be integrated into the curriculum and enhance the formal academic curriculum of students by allowing sufficient time for them to reflect on service experiences.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SERVICE LEARNING WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

No one will deny the merits (such as that service-learning develops civic responsibility, provides opportunity for service, enhances student development or supports an expanding role of higher education) or the pedagogical soundness of service-learning as carefully designed service-learning programmes and experiences have proved to lead to profound learning and developmental outcomes for students. We are already informed that learning and personal development naturally complement each other in any form of learning. Therefore, in designing service-learning programmes it seems appropriate to revisit some of the most relevant development theories and try to understand how they relate to service-learning.

Cognitive development theories as ascribed by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), are particularly relevant in service-learning. Without going into too much detail of their theories, what is important for our discussion here is that all these theories have implications for service-learning. Students will, for example, develop as more complex thinkers and will understand their service-learning experiences in different ways, depending on their own level of cognitive development. Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development also places emphasis on the affective component of learning often necessary in service-learning activities. Perry

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also reminds us that people are not positions. Therefore, students should not be defined by the samples of their thinking. Instead samples of students' thinking should be used to provide clues about the cognitive structures they are using.

Moral development theories such as Kohlberg's theory on moral development are equally important in terms of service-learning. As students engage in service-learning, they will be confronted with social dilemmas. Consequently lecturers should intentionally structure reflection to help students reflect on and clearly articulate their reasoning behind their moral judgements. Moral development is also promoted through dialogue and interchange – all of them being important in service-learning.

Particularly useful in our discussion on service-learning pedagogy, is Kolb's model (1981, 1984) of experiential learning and learning styles. Building on the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget, Kolb stresses the crucial role first-hand experiences play in the learning process. The essence of his model is a description of the learning cycle, of how experience is translated into concepts, which – in turn – are used as guides in the choice of new experiences (Kolb 1981:235). Although the learner may enter this cycle at any of the four points in the process, it must complete the entire cycle before effective learning can transpire. For Kolb the immediate concrete experience is the basis for observations and reflection. From here, new implications for action can be deduced which lead to new experiences. For effective learning

concrete experiences on which the learner reflects, synthesises, conceptualises and experiments with, are central. In service-learning learners usually begin with a concrete service experience, then embark on a period of reflection, analyse what happened, and look for the implications of what they have discovered in this process. Only hereafter are the learners able to integrate the observations and their implications with their existing knowledge and formulate concepts and questions. This enhances a deeper understanding of the world and the root causes of the need for service-learning.

Within service-learning one will easily depict the assumptions made by liberal education (Jeavons 1995), namely developing the capacity for understanding and making sound judgements. To be able to do this, integrative thinking is required from a learner that is personally engaged and one that can make judgements from a distance. These abilities are nurtured and applied for the public good – most applicable to the outcomes often proposed for service-learning. In a very positive manner Hatcher and Bringle (1997) draw our attention to additional advantages posed by service-learning, namely that it exhibits the traditional tensions of general education and that it extends the boundaries of the traditional classroom. They alert us to the fact that service-learning enhances interdisciplinary studies, provides lessons in cultural diversity and fosters civic literacy.

Table 1
Some of the most discernable differences involved in service-learning programmes

	Traditional course	Service-learning course
Place	Classroom	Classroom, community, fieldwork-related experiences
Lecturers	Lecturers on different levels	Lecturers, supervisors, clients, peers, community leaders and other knowledgeable people
Preparation	Readings, previous courses	Expanded readings, previous courses, personal characteristics, site visits
Learning	Writing, exams, cognitive, short term, theoretical, passiveness, sequential, linear, structured learning, convergent thinking, deductive learning, usually assessed at end of course	Writing exams, cognitive and affective development for short and long term, practical, active, perplexity, non-linear, expansive and integrative, divergent thinking, inductive learning from experience, learning continues beyond the course
Assessment	Lecturers on various levels	Lecturers, supervisors, self-assessment and even community leaders
Architect	Individuals	Teams comprising academics, members of the triad and students

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN "TRADITIONAL" COURSES AND SERVICE LEARNING COURSES

Lecturers who become involved in service-learning for the first time often ask for an explanation on how it differs from "traditional" courses. They are usually concerned that it requires too many changes in their curriculum. Table 1 draws on some of the most discernable differences involved in service-learning programmes.

From Table 1 it can be deduced that service-learning fosters higher levels of cognitive engagement and requires a variety of cognitive skills. Typical problem-based learning approaches therefore seem most applicable and relevant within a service-learning programme.

One needs to understand that, by integrating service-learning into the formal curriculum, we provide students with far more than giving them opportunities for first-hand learning experiences. The truth is that we provide them with opportunities to encounter opposing definitions of the common good, diverse stances on the root cause of social problems and questions about who and what knowledge is for. We are indeed developing the inquiring mind.

CLARIFYING OUTCOMES

Service-learning should be viewed as an important means to meet programme and module outcomes and not as an add-on. From the initial design phase of a curriculum service-learning should be included. Here lecturers should ask themselves what their reasons are for wanting to incorporate service-learning activities into their teaching and to identify those reasons most important to them. Another aspect to consider is what the expectations of lecturers are for students when they have to observe, analyse, synthesise and evaluate the community in the light of concepts and theories presented in class. Careful consideration should be given to whether service-learning will indeed promote the understanding of a particular course's content.

Table 2

Types of outcomes in service-learning programmes

Aspect	Explanation
Knowledge/under-standing	Knowledge about the specific discipline and course-related information and the acquisition-related information, concepts and ideas. Knowledge about specific community problems/issues, eg major aspects and characteristics of the issues, causal and correlated factors, associated issues; skills related to the particular subject-matter.
Cognitive skills beyond information acquisition	Critical thinking, applying information to problem-solving situations, analysing information and concepts, seeing patterns and relationships, data analysis, preparing reports and tacit learning skills are all relevant.
Procedural skills	Information-gathering skills, appropriate and accurate application of information for goal-attainment and, specifically, how course-related information applies to a specific community issue. Verbal proficiency in articulating, presenting information related to community issues, research information.
Social skills	Concern for the welfare of others, a broader circle for people about whom one feels concern and responsibility, leadership, cooperative collaboration, conflict resolution, the ability to establish and maintain productive and constructive working relationships with off-campus organisations, public speaking.
Attitudes/values/self-confidence	Conscious formulation and/or clarification of personal values or feelings, value and strive to be persistently reflective, value and support social justice, engage in active and lifelong learning, a high level of altruism, broad and consistent tolerance of others, and willingness to accommodate them via mutually acceptable compromise, sensitive towards social constructivism.
Personal growth	Self-esteem, sense of personal worth, competence and confidence, self-understanding, insight into self. Self-direction, personal motivation, sense of usefulness, doing something worthwhile, ability to make a difference, openness to new experiences, ability to take responsibility, acknowledge and accept consequences of actions, willingness to explore new identities, unfamiliar roles.

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Although the primary focus of service-learning programmes should be the academic content, awareness of underlying educational values – such as environmental awareness, multiculturalism and diversity, peaceful resolution of conflict and community building – is imperative.

Cognisance should be taken that, although service-learning is not intended to be used in every course or module, it is indeed possible to integrate it in any discipline. Guiding questions to ask here is what the purpose(s) of a specific discipline within society is/are and what the knowledge base of the discipline offers ordinary citizens.

TYPES OF OUTCOMES

It is impossible to achieve all the proposed outcomes formulated for service-learning. The number of learning outcomes will depend on the amount of time students will be involved in service. The following types of outcomes are provided to stimulate thinking on what can be achieved with service-learning programmes.

Most of the above-mentioned outcomes formulated for service-learning are in line with the well-known critical outcomes stipulated for outcomes-based education in South Africa and with the South African Qualifications Authority. The call for integration of naturalistic inquiry into the curriculum is a request to develop a coherent curriculum, one that involves creating and maintaining visible connections between purposes and everyday learning experiences (Beane 1995). The underlying assumptions of critical qualitative inquiry require that students will continuously connect the field learning with some overriding context – a constant effort to derive meaning from the experiences gained in the field and in the lecture venue.

Theory into practice

The following outline serves as an example of a module outline on how to bridge theory and practice in an early childhood education programme.

Module description

This module examines the relationship between development and learning in early education through the study of (neo-Vygotskian) cultural psychology. This theoretical perspective emphasises the role of context, culture, language, and collaboration in learning. Students are given the opportunity to bridge theory and practice through collaborative activities with children at the Soweto Simunye Daycare Centre (fictitious name). The Vygotskian perspective is contrasted with Piagetian and behavioural perspec-

tives in the study of other early childhood programme models.

Learning material (eg study guide or prescribed text book)

Course schedule

Week of	Topic	Assignments
July 9	Course introduction	
July 16	What is the Soweto Simuny Daycare Centre?	Write down your reflections on the Centre
July 23	The Vygotskian approach	Theme 1
July 30	Mental tools and higher mental functions	Theme 2
Aug. 6	Continue	Written assignment
Aug. 13	Vygotsky and Piaget	Theme 3
Aug. 20	Zone of proximal development	Fieldnotes*
Aug. 27	Infants and Toddlers	Theme 4
Sept. 3	Continue	Fieldnotes*
Sept.10	Preschool	Theme 5
Sept. 17	Using mediators	Theme 6
Sept. 24	Continue	Fieldnotes*
Oct. 1	Programme model presentations	Theme 7
Oct. 7	Continue	Fieldnotes*
Oct. 13	Conclusion and synthesis	
Oct. 20	Reflection	Reflection report
Nov. 3	Examination	

- **Fieldnotes**: The module expects learners to spend six 90-minute sessions collaborating with young children at the Soweto Daycare Centre. As soon as possible after a visit to the Centre (but not later than the following day) learners should write up their experiences as a fieldnote consisting of three parts: setting, narrative and reflection. Fieldnotes provide students with the opportunity to analyse and reflect upon experiences at the Centre and link them to theory discussed in class. Theoretical links should become a more significant part of field-notes as the semester moves along and more theory has been covered. Fieldnotes are also essential for helping the facilitator assess how well theory is applied at the Centre and whether the programme is meeting its goals. Fieldnotes are usually limited to two typed pages, single spaced.
- **General site observations**: Here learners should reflect on what they have noticed about the classroom as they have entered, what the feeling in the room was and the attitude of the children and the activities of that day.
- **Narrative**: The narrative describes some high-

lights of the interaction between the learner and the child(ren) as accurately as possible. The learners should, for example, reflect how you interacted with the children, how they interacted with them and how they interacted with one another or with equipment or activities. Activities learners engage in with children, the linguistic and cognitive strategies and understandings they brought to, the problems posed by the activity, as well as their reactions to learner involvement should be described. Questions such as the following can be asked: Did they seem to have a plan or idea of what they wanted to do, or were they lost? Learners should be specific and concrete and try to use the children's own dialogue as much as possible. Notes should be written on how they worked with specific apparatus. The learner should not interpret in this section, as the place for that is in the next section. This should be the longest section.

- **Reflection**: Here the students state their opinions and thoughts about what happened that particular day. They might discuss what they learned about the children and the activities or raise questions they have about the children's interaction with the activities. This is also the place to bring in the student's own learning and development in the programme and the module and bridge theory to practice. The student should be allowed to engage in interpretation, as it relates to their previous experiences, knowledge and ideas. Students should reflect on whether what they had observed confirmed or contradicted what they already thought they knew.
- **Evaluation of fieldnotes**: A decision should be taken on the percentage (weight) attached for fieldnotes. If, for example fieldnotes count for 40% of the final mark, one-fourth could be earned by turning in all fieldnotes on the dates assigned and following the instruction. The other three-fourths will be determined by the evaluation of four fieldnotes, which may receive a score from zero to 10. Students may be allowed to revise fieldnotes written in the beginning before resubmission if they wish. Fieldnotes are evaluated on following the fieldnote format and turning the fieldnote in on time, clarity of description of specific details of experience, thoughtfulness of reflection and analysis of experience, relating experience to course material and the absence of technical problems (spelling and grammar for example).

The final examination should allow ample opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of concepts rather than for the memorisation of facts. At least 20% of the final mark should be allocated for attendance and participation.

EXAMPLES IN VARIOUS DISCIPLINES AND SUBJECTS

Cognisance should be taken that not all modules should be converted into service-learning modules. What is pleaded for, is the exposure of students to at least one module in a programme, based on service-learning. A question often raised is whether all disciplines are suitable for service-learning and whether all disciplines have the scope for service learning. If the lecturer/department is innovate, almost every discipline has potential for service-learning.

The following examples might be useful thought provoking:

Anthropology: Help people in squatter camps to explore their roots.
Accounting: Work in communities to present workshops for residents of low-income areas on household finances or budgeting.
Art: Creative dance for children – focusing on expressive medium for children with the emphasis on concepts and principles.
Biology: Work with township schools to conduct presentations on the pathology of AIDS, HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases and prevention.
English: Explore the folklore of a particular nearby culture and write up in research paper, work with artists in the community to create words for cartoons, brochures in the community or on literacy programmes.
Environmental studies: Lead nature walks to nearby parks.
History: A project on poverty and homelessness could enable teams of students to study the history of homelessness in the surrounding community. Their history and research will aid local shelters and governmental and social service agencies to better serve the homeless.
Political science: Form a non-partisan watch dog group that gives background on candidates, their voting histories, their associations, fiances, issues, affiliations, etc. so that voters can make a truly informed decision. Write a reflective paper on the apathy/involvement/attitudes of the public during an election.
Sociology: A project on social inequalities utilising reading, discussions, visits to the community, interviews with community members, etc. could assist to develop an understanding of social stratification systems and an appreciation of the amount of social inequality in South African communities. Unmistakably deciding on a service-learning site is of great significance.

CHOOSING A SERVICE LEARNING SITE

The community site affects the nature of students'

reflections and resultant learning. According to Little-field (1994), an effective service-learning programme should allow for those with needs to define those needs and must be doing work that is connected to the course in ways that will be obvious to students. Activities at the site must give students opportunities to reflect on how course concepts relate to the activities. The ideal would be that students should have direct contact with client populations or constituency groups.

It is important to note that a programme should not be developed with the view that a resourceful university rescues a needy community. It should rather be about the university (or faculty or department) that has needs related to educating its students and that the community has the resources to help meet those needs. The community as an off-campus learning laboratory should never be taken advantage of, neither should students be viewed as free or cheap labour.

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

A programme should never be developed in a vacuum but as joint venture with the community as both parties make an investment and benefit from the programme. By doing it in a participatory approach, a shared sense of commitment and responsibility is established. To maintain this relationship, trust must be built and a shared vision created (Winer & Ray 1994). A variety of ways exist how partnerships can be strengthened. Connors and Seifer (1997) mention in this regard that members of the community can be used as active and/or supplementary teachers/tutors. Academics and students should be trained to see the strengths in the community and not only its needs. We furthermore need to realise that communities do not function purely according to academic disciplines, but much more interdisciplinary.

In establishing partnerships for the delivery of the service-learning programme communication plays an important role. Roles and expectations need to be confirmed from time to time and procedures created to deal with conflict (Winer & Ray 1994). It is important that both students and community partners are informed about the number of service hours, liability issues, the line of communication, issues of confidentiality and ethical issues.

PREPARING STUDENTS

It is important that students are properly prepared and trained for service-learning. During training students should learn about the individuals with whom they will work, the issues concerned, specific skills they will need, and logistical information. This might imply more than one session or visit to the proposed site. By this time the institution should have policies in place

in terms of risks and security, transport, incentives, etc.

Part of student training would be in reflection as reciprocity and reflection are two key components in service-learning. Reciprocity ensures that service-learning is beneficial for all constituents involved, while reflection intentionally connects the service experience of the learning objectives of the course. Reflection is a cognitive activity that occurs after a concrete experience. As mentioned earlier, Kolb identifies reflection as a critical component of the experiential learning cycle and builds a bridge between the concrete and the abstract and helps to solidify a connection between theory and practice. Reflection, according to Dewey (1933), begins in perplexity and leads to future action that is well-informed. Perplexity is therefore a fundamental aspect of a service learning experience. Thus structuring ways for students to process and discuss their reactions to the service experience is a critical component to both learning and improved service learning. It is suggested that reflection should be structured as an ongoing aspect of the course, presented in multiple forms, modelled by the lecturer/instructor, connected to the course content and supported by the class context. Eyer, Giles and Schmiede (1996) refer to the four Cs of reflection, namely continuous, connected, challenging and contextualised reflection.

Examples of reflection activities, among others, mentioned by Hatcher and Bringle (1997) are personal journals, ethical case studies, directed writing, student portfolios, directed readings, personal narratives, classroom assessment techniques and the so-called experiential research paper. Students can also reflect and learn through speaking and oral presentation in order to effect change and impact a particular group of people (eg through focus groups, informal discussion, presentations, formal class discussions, recruiting other volunteers, teaching, co-operative learning, story-telling, legislative testimonies, etc) (Eyler, Giles & Schmiede 1996).

Students can be prepared in various ways for service-learning. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) find role-play and the shadowing of a trained, experienced person on site, as well as a training video useful in this regard. The use of service-learning student assistants is often unexplored.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

The final stage in designing a service-learning programme is determining how to assess and evaluate the outcomes. This is part of programme self-evaluation, which forms the basis for the enhancement of a programme's quality and allows for an informed redesign so that next time the course's outcomes will be improved. The outcomes of assessment and

evaluation are important for a variety of interested role-players on various levels. It is important that the course be improved for future students so that learning is maximised. It is also extremely important to establish whether the anticipated benefits to the community were accomplished. At the institutional level, it is desirable to document the value of the service-learning efforts for colleagues. The community would like to know whether they were receiving the expected benefits. In the last instance, assessment can contribute to the growth of the field of service learning if well executed and documented.

Understandably assessment must be customised to the specific situation, programme and context in which the service-learning took place and one should know what is to be measured. Therefore, outcomes should be described in measurable terms. Decisions on how the information is to be used, what questions should be asked and what techniques should be employed, should lead the assessment plan. A variety of qualitative (eg focus groups, analysis of students' work), quantitative (pre- and post-tests examinations) and subjective (post-test surveys, interviews and journals) techniques is often used to gather assessment data. Furco (1996) warns us that we should use instruments that are reliable and have good test-retest value and that we should collect and report on data that are useful to the intended audience, taking into consideration clearly defined limits, scopes and purposes. Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon and Kerrigan (1996) add to the list of applicable research methods and techniques the use of documentation, such as syllabus analysis, the review of vitae, existing reports and activity log books which can bring other important perspectives into the assessment.

CONCLUSION

In this article it was argued that service-learning could undeniably be an effective means to contribute to the hard realities and needs of South African communities. It should, however, not be viewed as a panacea for the deep rooted socio-economic and educational problems of communities. It does provide a powerful way of educating students and higher education institutions to become more sensitive towards the appalling circumstance of the majority of South Africans. Therefore it is suggested that we acquaint ourselves with the barriers that often lead to institutions and departments closing down their programmes. Enthusiastic academics report to be disillusioned by practicalities such as the high costs of transport and other unexpected and unforeseen expenses related to service-learning. In the South African context students regularly report on feeling insecure in historical disadvantaged communities, that their safety is not guaranteed, while fears of contracting AIDS are explicitly expressed.

A sensible way to implement service-learning programmes and modules would be to start on a small scale, taking sufficient time for planning, keeping log books of costs and all forms of engagement and for reflection. The establishment of sound relationships with the community and service providers will, to a great extent, determine the sustainability of the engagement. Over and above all other considerations, service-learning should be meaningful and done with the correct intentions and based on sound pedagogical approaches.

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