

Invitational Rhetoric and the Case for Service Learning

SAGE Open
1–5
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244011433604
<http://sgo.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

This research argues for repositioning Service Learning as a necessary part of public education, with the transformative goal of empowered communities operating in a social-collaborative framework from communities dependent on overburdened state and local government programs and services. Such repositioning depends on recognition of Service Learning as a means of providing that preparation. To “mainstream” Service Learning, this research proposes two initiatives: (a) Foster the idea of the Service Learning experience as citizenship/community building by associating the experience with embedded cultural values and (b) apply Invitational Rhetoric in persuading students and parents to view Service Learning as something other than imposed servitude or social consciousness for a grade. Service Learning has proven to be successful in changing students’ attitudes about their place in society. If Service Learning were a part of the common educational core, the potential for repositioning its value to citizenry would be highly expanded. Because many communities lack access to education and training for the citizenry, Service Learning could supply that link to empowerment.

Keywords

Service Learning, instruction and curriculum, rhetoric, community engagement

Introduction

This research argues for repositioning Service Learning from a peripheral tool in public education to a necessary part of public education, with the transformative goal of empowered communities operating in a social-collaborative framework from communities dependent on overburdened state and local government programs and services. Repositioning Service Learning from optional projects to required projects is dependent on a shift in thought about Service Learning, in which there is recognition of Service Learning as a means of providing that preparation. Acceleration of the societal shift could occur via Invitational Rhetoric and revisioning the idea of “service” in society.

Service Learning programs are implemented at all academic levels, from elementary schools to higher education, and yet Service Learning is not a part of the common core curriculum in the national educational system. Service Learning remains peripheral when compared with basics such as mathematics, English, history, and science, and yet educating students on the fundamentals of citizenship and societal functions is a necessary part of social development. To “mainstream” Service Learning, this research proposes two initiatives: (a) Foster the idea of the Service Learning experience as citizenship/community building by associating the experience with embedded cultural values and (b) apply Invitational Rhetoric in persuading students and parents to

view Service Learning as something other than imposed servitude or social consciousness for a grade.

Literature Review

Research reveals measured positive outcomes in Service Learning models in the education framework. Eyler (2002) examined the role of reflection in effective programs and argued that Service Learning models should be supported within institutions and through national policy. Hunter and Brisbin, Jr. (2000) discovered that students who have a Service Learning experience will view the experience positively and will be inclined to seek other service opportunities. Jones and Abes (2004) found that outcomes of a Service Learning course extended beyond completion of the course, providing a context for reflection on individual identity, relationships to others, and an internally defined sense of self. Melchior and Bailis (2002) analyzed three national Service Learning initiatives for conclusions about such programs’ impact on students’ civic engagement: (a) Serve America, (b) Learn and Serve, and (c) Active Citizenship Today. Based on

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their research, the authors found that Service Learning can provide young people with meaningful experiences as active and effective citizens and assist them in acquiring necessary skills for identifying issues in their community and acting on them. Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, and Ilustre (2002) had similar results, with students demonstrating expected changes in civic attitudes, while rating their own skills for engagement and expressing plans to be involved in civic activities in the future. Morgan and Streb (2001) found that students' immersion in Service Learning exercises in which they had a voice increased their level of satisfaction with Service Learning, as well as their self-concept, political engagement, and attitudes toward out-groups. Saltmarsh (2005) argued that civic learning is an integral part of the Service Learning experience, resulting in "civic professionalism." He asserted that "civic learning draws attention to the civic dimensions of education, emphasizing the need not only for development of the disciplinary mastery and competence, but also for civic awareness and purpose," in his assessment (Saltmarsh, 2005, p. 2). Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, and Anaya (2003) found that all beginning students developed critical-thinking skills in Service Learning experiences, and that Service Learning experiences benefit students, faculty, agencies, and educational programs. Strange (2004) concluded that Service Learning provides students with a firm foundation for academic majors and overall academic performance.

Defining Terms: Service Learning, Historical Context, and the Concept of Citizenship

Butin (2010) addressed a common theme in any Service Learning discussion—a varying concept of what it actually means. The author notes that for many scholars/educators, defining Service Learning rejects the educational model of transferring knowledge "downward," from knowledgeable teachers to passive students in 50-min increments. Communication scholars would see the obvious similarity to the "Single Bullet Theory" of mass communication, in which a single message is transmitted simultaneously to a passive mass audience, who receives the message and instantly shares a reaction. Whereas a "downward" education model would have a teacher at the front of the classroom "transmitting" a learning initiative to a room of students simultaneously "receiving/processing" information, Service Learning provides an experiential factor of activity on the part of the students, in which their participation in the learning event provides context and introduces critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Butin offers that Service Learning is "a pedagogical practice and theoretical orientation that provokes us to more carefully examine, rethink, and reenact the visions, policies, and practices of our classrooms, and

educational institutions" (p. 19), as well as reassess teaching methods and scholarship.

Incorporating Service Learning into the national core curriculum would involve shifting societal thought, and societal shifts in thought occur within historical context. At present and historically, the United States continues to feel the effects of the economic recession that began in 2007. Finances of state governments are closely tied to prevailing economic conditions. The economic recession that began in the fourth quarter of 2007 and lasted through the second quarter of 2009 created great fiscal stress for all levels of government and produced a strong climate for reexamining the roles played by every level—federal, state, and local. State governments play several roles in this intergovernmental fiscal system, including creator and financier of some local government services; conduit for, and redistributor of, federal funds; and providing direct public services such as health and hospitals, public safety, and highways. State government general expenditure in 2009 totaled US\$1,554 billion. The 3.3% increase in general expenditure from 2008 to 2009 was in contrast with the 1.2% decline in general revenues. By contrast, from 2007 to 2008, general revenue rose 3.9% and general expenditure rose 5.6%. During 2009, 31.3% of state government general expenditure was in the form of grants and aid to local governments (including independent school district governments), thereby underlining the states' role as a financial resource for their subordinate governments (<http://www2.census.gov>).

The nationwide state budget crisis creates a need for proactive citizens who can shape their communities rather than appeal to overburdened state offices and services. Ideally, a national educational core Service Learning program would introduce the idea of "empowered citizenry" from the elementary education level and continue to promote such attitudes throughout the program, while allowing students to become educated in community-building skills. For students in upper-level and higher education, the emphasis would shift to necessary job skills and enhanced personal development, while continuing their educational social-collaborative experiences.

Varlotta (2001) offered that when college-age students were asked to define "citizenship," many students were guided by a political philosophy called "liberalism," a philosophy that theorizes the primacy of the individual citizen (the author termed it the "ME") over the democratic community (the author termed it the "WE"); for liberals, "citizen" refers to the rational, autonomous, equal members of the state who enjoy the freedoms associated with democracy. The author then bases such thoughts in the historical documents of the Constitution of the United States of America, the Declaration of Independence, and the Federalist Papers, and the contained tenets of those documents of *rationality*—the capacity for reasoned mental activity; *equality*—a potential capacity for equality rather than an actual state of being; *autonomy*—with an individual's identity (as a citizen or

otherwise) as autonomous, existing independently of social context; and *freedom*—defined as “freedom from the state,” a type of laissez-faire institution with minimal constraints; and “freedom to” rule themselves as equal members of the democratic state. In such consciousness, the “ME” takes priority over the “WE.”

Varlotta (2001) noted that, in contrast, the Communitarian Community denotes a consensual community grounded in and bound by a “common good.” Varlotta’s research argues for an overlapping of the “ME” and the “WE” as individual citizens negotiate their roles within a collective culture with shared concerns. That complex yet meaningful scenario should be included in an effective Service Learning-based education—an awareness of the self as an active, participating member of a society/community who retains individuality while still recognizing the need to work for a better community experience.

Value Analysis and Invitational Rhetoric

Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) stated that “touchstone” American value systems include the *Puritan-Pioneer Value System*, which is rooted in the idea that persons have an obligation to themselves and their community to work hard at whatever they do; the *Personal Success Value System*, which involves a highly pragmatic concern for the material happiness of the individual; and the *Collectivist Value System*, in which the community becomes the vehicle for personal release and empowerment, such as the Civil Rights movement or the Feminist movement (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). Although those values are evident in some Service Learning activities, repeatedly linking Service Learning to cultural values would make integration of Service Learning into the educational core more apparent.

First, this proposal argues for attaching the Puritan-Pioneer Value System to Service Learning projects at the elementary educational level, and using positive-value words such as *activity*, *community*, *dedication*, *duty*, *family*, *responsibility*, and *virtue* when discussing the projects, with the goal of establishing strong self-identity while instilling a work ethic attached to the community. This addresses the ME/WE dichotomy early in a child/student’s life and allows for that student to remain self-aware while learning about his or her society’s history, government, and various societal functions in the life of individuals or individual families. Service Learning projects at this level would need to be based on the developmental capabilities of the children and academic resources of the school and surrounding community. For example, children in middle childhood might show more independence from parents and family, start to think about the future, understand more about their place in the world, pay more attention to friendships and teamwork, and want to be liked and accepted by friends (<http://www.cdc.gov>). In those

early grades, it would be important to make Service Learning projects adaptable to the child’s development, such as the lesson offered in Project Citizen’s “What Is Authority?,” in which the child analyzes the role of government and learns the concept of authority (<http://www.civiced.org>). The idea of “lawful citizenry” respecting the community laws, such as “No Littering,” could be reinforced by a clean-up day in which the students clean up the litter on the playground.

By the time the child is in the fifth grade, things have changed. Children in this age group might start to form stronger, more complex friendships and peer relationships. It becomes more emotionally important to have friends, especially of the same sex. They face more academic challenges at school, become more independent from the family, begin to see the point of view of others more clearly, and have an increased attention span (<http://www.cdc.gov>).

For those children, the “Learning to Give” website offers a lesson titled, “We the Kids—The Three Branches and Me,” in which students learn concepts such as how to work in cooperative groups, name and define the three branches of government, list the three characteristics of the trial and appellate courts, and create an editorial cartoon, among other things. They may present the “Bill of Rights” through a song with creative movement to a retirement community or another classroom in the school. The lesson also encourages students to create posters that instruct about the core democratic values. Students are encouraged to display posters around the school to share their knowledge and creativity with other students and visitors to the school (<http://www.learningtogive.org>).

Second, this proposal argues for attaching the Collectivist Value System to Service Learning projects at the secondary level, and using words such as *brotherhood/sisterhood*, *cooperation*, *equality*, *humanism*, *social good*, and *unity* when discussing the projects, with the goal of establishing awareness of shared community concerns and the need for working together. Students at the secondary education level could be expected to have a more developed self-identity at this point in their academic career, and the communitarian approach would still address the ME/WE dichotomy, but students would experience an emphasis on community contribution for a common good. Service Learning projects at this level would become more complex, allowing for students to use critical-thinking and problem-solving skills when analyzing issues in their communities. Once again, Learning to Give addresses the level of awareness in the middle school student with a lesson titled, “Power to Make a Difference: Intro to Philanthropy Unit.” The students learn to define “philanthropy”; develop awareness of the individual philanthropists and the causes they support; use philanthropy vocabulary words, such as *civic responsibility*, *common good*, *foundation*, and *nonprofit sector*; research a philanthropic organization and its mission; create a persuasive radio advertisement for a nonprofit organization; and choose an organization to

personally support with a donation of time or treasure and justify the choice (<http://www.learningtogive.org>).

Finally, this proposal argues for attaching the Personal Success Value System to Service Learning projects at the higher education level, and using words such *career, dignity, security, identity, personal recognition*, and *respect* when discussing the projects, with the goal of assisting the individual with career pursuits, while training the individual to assist in community building as well. At this level, whether the student is pursuing the final year for a high school diploma, 4-year degree, or a certification program, the emphasis would be on developing skills and expertise that not only would benefit the student in a career but might also be used on a communal level, even on a part-time or volunteer basis. At this point, students would be expected to demonstrate a semiprofessional awareness of behavior and practice that could benefit their communities. Projects would be at the most advanced level of sophistication and would directly address community concerns.

High school and college-age students are able to use their levels of awareness about the community and combine that awareness with communication skills to be peer mentors, volunteers, and active youth. Service Learning models at this level range from using Service Learning in public speaking classes for persuasive speeches to using Service Learning as part of studies on aging. Individual classes and disciplines use a variety of projects at high schools, community colleges, and universities.

The desired result of the repositioned educational model would be one in which Service Learning is present at every educational level, and projects reflect/reinforce embedded cultural codes. As previously stated, Service Learning is experiential, and including that kind of learning in the educational core would allow students to view their communities from the inside out, experiencing varying roles and responsibilities in which they trace community issues from symptom to cause. This fosters the opportunity for creativity and critical thinking in which a situation is introduced, and students are asked to analyze that situation and propose a solution—minus judgment.

A key component for repositioning Service Learning is revisioning the idea of “service” as it relates to the academic experience. Invitational Rhetoric allows educators to present Service Learning as an opportunity for developing citizenship and personal awareness while acquiring necessary life skills. Invitational Rhetoric produces a consensus of understanding, because the rhetor is inviting the audience to accept the invitation to listen to a particular perspective, and thereby receive the opportunity to better understand it. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others’ perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

The key factor of Invitational Rhetoric is in the approach. The stance taken by invitational rhetors toward their audiences

is obviously different from that assumed by traditional rhetors. Invitational rhetors do not believe they have the right to claim that their experiences or perspectives are superior to those of their audience members and refuse to impose their perspectives on them (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

As noted by Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009), Invitational Rhetoric has had significant influence on feminist scholarship. Feminist rhetorical scholars present the format as one in which civil discourse is possible when discussing redefining social roles. There is no distinct movement or social shift rooted entirely in Invitational Rhetorical origins; the style is generally regarded as one in which the emphasis is based in civility and ethical discourse. That would be a leading factor in using the format for adopting Service Learning into the national core curriculum, because there is no blame attached to the current model—only an opportunity to create a new component in the national curriculum. Another factor influencing the choice of the Invitational Rhetorical format is the need for equality in the argument, without presupposing “superiority” of service behavior. In introducing Service Learning as part of an educational process, the presentation must be one of shared opportunities for all involved—learner, educator, community—and not a need to be morally superior by learning information and skills to serve the community. Everyone must be *equally* committed to the project, and enjoy benefits.

Novak and Bonine (2009) introduced the concept of Invitational Rhetoric as a form of persuasion in a public speaking course and found that using the format in persuasive speeches made students more comfortable than the traditional format of coercion. The students were less threatened by an Invitational Rhetoric approach because the goal was not about convincing the listener of a “right” or “wrong” way of thinking—the goal of the speech was establishing understanding (Novak & Bonine, 2009).

“Service” is a loaded word, with a multitude of associations, from “service to one’s country” referring to military personnel, to careers in the “service industry” referring to jobs ranging from waiting tables (“servers”) to hotel management, and “customer service” referring to answering customers’ complaints or frequently asked questions. “Community Service” refers to anything from school-sponsored activities, to neighborhood projects, to judicial sentences imposed on an individual for minor legal infractions. With such varying concepts of service, the additional varying concepts of Service Learning make the idea of required Service Learning experiences even more problematic.

Invitational Rhetoric would present Service Learning according to the previously discussed values, with both “Service” and “Learning” attached to positive, supported cultural values. It would lack judgment—no student would be lauded as “good” or “better” than others because of the participation, nor would the student be “sentenced” to serving the community for a grade. By attaching an *invitation* to continue a tradition of core values of the *dedicated* individual who works for the *social good* of his or her community

while maintaining *dignity* and earning *respect* from his or her peers on the way to his or her *career*, the rhetor provides a positive association for the student educated in a Service Learning curriculum.

Service Learning projects would balance the ME/WE dichotomy by allowing students to see what their efforts produced and gain a sense of accomplishment in completed projects, while hopefully transforming their perspectives about issues in their community.

Conclusion

Service Learning has proven to be successful in changing students' attitudes about their place in society, even as it exists as peripheral learning. If Service Learning were a part of the common educational core, the potential for repositioning its value to citizenry would be highly expanded. With local, state, and federal budgets being tightened, it is up to citizens to become community builders and shapers. However, many communities lack access to education and training for the citizenry, and Service Learning could supply that link to empowerment. A variety of factors must be considered in implementing a national educational Service Learning core, from cost of training educators in Service Learning to feasibility of more advanced projects, but the idea remains possible with an organized framework. Although there might be initial costs and training involved, the long-term benefits of a Service Learning curriculum gain credibility as more state and local programs are lost to budget cuts. The vision of autonomous citizens giving back to their communities seems less idealistic and more necessary than ever.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Bio

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