

Service-Learning Definitions

Overview

There are many definitions of service-learning. It is both a method of teaching and a method of learning. It is active and transformational, built on the tradition of experiential education, with the added dimension of social conscience. It takes many forms, ranging from the relatively informal to the highly-structured, and from individual encounter to group experience. It can be an individual internship, a group service project thoughtfully concluded, an optional class assignment, or a fully-integrated, rigorous component of an academic course.

To be valuable, service-learning always includes the community as partner, responding to requests for a genuinely needed community service. To be truly educational, it always includes careful reflection on the service experience, connecting the student's personal discovery with broader theoretical and moral issues that inform academic study. Such reflection can be articulated in a variety of ways, many of which will be discipline-specific; but it must be articulated, more than once, so there is a tension between experience and theory.

Service-learning recognizes that there are many teachers (and many learners) and many places. The best service-learning is a true partnership between the community, the student and the faculty that moves toward clear academic goals but allows for surprise and discovery.

At Pacific Lutheran University

- **Academic service-learning** brings together students, faculty, and community partners for a course in which students' service experience and academic theory inform each other through carefully guided reflection. The service assignment, developed in partnership with a community organization and engaged over time, can include any work that both responds to a demonstrated community need and supports the goals of the course. Faculty challenge students to integrate what they are discovering in their community service with what they discover in class, and through this inquiry, students become critically and increasingly aware of the intersection between their scholarship, their action, public issues and social justice.
- **Co-curricular Service-Learning** brings students and community partners together in work that serves the community. The students' experience is accompanied by guided, intentional and thoughtful reflection on the context and meaning of their work and its implications for their vocation and their role as thoughtful, committed, caring citizens of the world.

Scholar-Service as a Mode of Service-Learning

Students engaged in “service-learning” work in service settings. They complete volunteer commitments, internships, or course projects. Their learning may involve personal self-awareness and development, spiritual growth, mastery of information, field application, or skill refinement. Students learn to integrate personal experience, scholarship, and public issues. Service-learning experiences prepare students for life-long learning, community service, and committed thought and action in ideologically plural cultures.

Scholar-service is a type of service-learning that stresses methodological self-consciousness. Service experiences are lived texts that accompany and complicate the written texts of the field. By eliciting students’ intuitive and critical resources, scholar-service experiences teach students how to continue developing competence on their own initiative.

Through scholar-service courses, students develop skills in collaborative problem identification and problem solving. Insights initially intuited through course work can be elaborated upon, critiqued, or intensified as students are challenged to embed abstract principles within the lived space of human interaction.

Even when disciplined based, scholar-service courses are interdisciplinary in intent and practice. Students learn that the disciplinary boundaries which organize knowledge sometimes impose limitations on our understanding. But students also come to appreciate how different disciplinary methodologies can serve as resources for addressing complex problems.

Creative, generative questioning lies at the heart of the scholar-service experience. Faculty help students develop questioning skills and apply them in practical situations. Serving as companions and guides, faculty introduce students to a field’s resources for themselves and their work as part of an on-going practical conversation within and across disciplines and communities. Modeling the back and forth movement between theoretical knowledge and concrete problem-solving, faculty support students as they encounter the recalcitrance of human dilemmas to absolute answers. Through scholar-service experiences, students see that theories are not purely abstract and academic, but have consequences for individuals and for society.

Patricia O’Connell Killen
Susan Brown Carlton
10/29/93