

## **Teaching Tips: Service Learning and Education on Aging**

**Submitted by: Robert G. Bringle, Ph.D.**

Director, Center for Service and Learning  
Chancellor's Professor of Psychology and  
Philanthropic Studies, IUPUI

Service learning has much to offer educators who would like to deepen the understanding that students have of adult aging beyond a superficial understanding of content knowledge. My first contact with service learning was with a national demonstration Intergenerational Service-Learning Project organized by Jim Firman through the National Council on Aging. Although we conducted a formal evaluation of the experience (Bringle & Kremer, 1993), it was very apparent before the data were analyzed that service learning provided a powerful pedagogy for deepening the learning, developing a broader sense of civic responsibility, and dramatically influencing the personal and professional lives of students. Although related to other field experiences that can be offered in courses (e.g., internships, field observation, research) and outside of courses (e.g., co-curricular community service), service learning is unique because of its emphasis on the civic education of students.

In an APA award address, Altman (1996) proposes that along with foundational knowledge (content and cross-disciplinary knowledge) and professional knowledge (practitioner skills and content), socially responsive knowledge should be an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum. How can the challenge of educating future generations include socially responsive knowledge in a manner that is pedagogically sound? How can education prepare students for active participation in democratic processes in their communities? How can students acquire the philanthropic habits that will enrich their lives and contribute to their communities both through their professional roles and through their roles as citizens? The importance of answering these questions is heightened by a related question: "Why do we need more than a vocational education? In part, because we live more than a vocational life: we live a larger civic life and we have to be educated for it" (Mathews, 1995, p. 70).

### **Service Learning as a Pedagogy**

For these reasons, educators are attracted to pedagogy like service learning, which engages students and faculty in their communities in educationally meaningful ways. Service learning is defined as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). The service component in a course can be designed as an option to a traditional academic assignment (e.g., research paper), a requirement for all students, a disciplinary capstone course, or a 4th credit service learning option in a 3 credit semester hour course (Enos & Troppe, 1996). In service learning classes, students do not receive academic credit for engaging in community service; they receive academic credit for the learning that occurs as a result of the service experience (Howard, 1993).

Service learning classes engage students in service activities that simultaneously attain two goals: the service activities (a) are beneficial to the community stakeholders (e.g., agency, clients, neighborhood residents) and (b) meet the instructor's educational objectives. The service learning class, then, establishes democratic, **reciprocal** relationships in which both the community and the campus forge the relationship, invest and benefit, teach and learn. Thus, well-executed service learning represents a coordinated partnership between the campus and the community, with the instructor tailoring the service experience to the educational agenda and community representatives ensuring that the students' community service is consistent with their goals (Zlotkowski, 1999).

In addition, the service experience provides a rich text from which academic lessons are learned through the interplay between theory and practice. The educational outcomes are derived from community service through **reflection** activities (e.g., structured journals, small group

discussions, directed writing; see Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, (1996). The presumption is that community service does not necessarily, in and of itself, produce academic learning. Reflection activities provide the bridge between the community service activities and the educational content of the course. When properly designed and implemented, reflection activities direct the student's attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied, analyzed, and interpreted much like a text is read and studied for deeper academic understanding. Well-designed reflection activities should (a) intentionally link the service experience to course-based learning objectives, (b) be structured, (c) occur regularly, (d) allow feedback and assessment, and (e) include the clarification of personal values (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Critical reflective thought, then, can add new meaning to service experiences, enrich the academic content of the course, and develop students' ability to take informed actions in the future (Dewey, 1916, 1933; Hatcher, 1997).

As a form of experiential education, service-learning shares similarities with internships, field education, practica, and voluntary service. Furco (1996) places these forms of education on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are internships and practica with their primary focus on the students' career development and preparation. At the other end are volunteer activities, in which the emphasis is on civic involvement and the services provided to recipients, with no formal goals for learning. Furco locates service-learning in the middle of the continuum and states that it is unique in its, "intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring" (Furco, 1996, p. 5). However, what is most distinctive about a service learning course (in contrast to a practicum, field observation, or co-curricular service) is having civic education be a deliberate educational goal through which students develop an understanding of their current and future role in their communities.

Altman (1996) notes that socially responsive knowledge has not been emphasized

in higher education, and he suggests that service learning is the preferred pedagogy for achieving socially responsive knowledge. There are three goals for socially responsive knowledge "first, to educate students in the problems of society; second, have them experience and understand first-hand social issues in their community; and third, and most important, give students the experiences and skills to act on social problems" (Altman, 1996, pp. 375-376). Service learning engages students in challenging community service settings that confront the application of course content to new situations, expose them to unfamiliar issues and to perspectives different from their own, and encourage them to consider how solutions can be developed for difficult societal issues. The promise is that service learning can produce enriched forms of learning that transcend traditional content-based mastery and allow students to develop new ways of thinking and acting that are integrated with their personal values. There is increasing evidence that service learning is effective in helping students develop socially responsive knowledge as well as facilitating learning in the more traditional domains of content and skills, such as the capacity to view phenomenon from multiple perspectives and to apply knowledge developed in one setting to other settings (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray; 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Service learning is well suited to courses focused on aging and resources are available to guide instructors who wish to modify a course to encompass a community service component with appropriate reflection activities. The website for Building an Intergenerational Service-Learning Infrastructure in Gerontology (<http://www.gt.pitt.edu/>) provides resources to those interested in intergenerational service-learning in gerontology, links to participating colleges and universities, and information on conferences related to gerontology. The Clearinghouse on Service-learning for Healthy Aging (CSLHA) gathers information on service-learning partnerships between communities and higher educational institutions that are dedicated to promoting the health of older adults ([www.healthyaging.us](http://www.healthyaging.us)).

*Teaching Tips continues on page 14*

---

## Teaching Tips Continued

Additional resources are available at Campus Compact ([www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)), the national organization that supports community service, service learning, and civic education.

### References

- Altman, I. (1996). Higher education and psychology in the millennium. *American Psychologist*, 51, 371-378.
- Bringle, R.G., & Hatcher, J.A. (1995). A service-learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 112-122.
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1999). Reflection in service learning: Making meaning of experience. *Educational Horizons*, 77(4), 179-185.
- Bringle, R.G., & Kremer, J.F. (1993). An evaluation of an intergenerational service-learning project for undergraduates. *Educational Gerontology*, 19, 407-416.
- Enos, S. L., & Troppe, M. L. (1996). Service-learning in the curriculum. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds.), *Service-learning in higher education* (pp. 156-181). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E., Jr. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Eyler, J., Giles, D. E., Jr., Stenson, C. M., & Gray, C. J. (2001). *At a glance: What we know about the effects of service learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993-2000: Third Edition*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University.
- Eyler, J., Giles, D. E., & Schmiede, A. (1996). *A practitioner's guide to reflection in service-learning: Student voices and reflections*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University.
- Furco, A. (1996). Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. In *Corporation for National Service, Expanding boundaries: Serving and learning* (pp. 2-6). Columbia, MD: The Cooperative Education Association.
- Hatcher, J. A. (1997). The moral dimensions of John Dewey's philosophy: Implications for undergraduate education. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 4, 22-29.
- Hatcher, J. A., & Bringle, R. G. (1997). Reflections: Bridging the gap between service and learning. *Journal of College Teaching*, 45, 153-158.
- Howard, J. (1993). Community service in the curriculum. In J. Howard (Ed.), *PRAXIS I: A faculty casebook on community service learning* (pp. 3-12). Ann Arbor, MI: OCSL Press.
- Mathews, D. (1995). The politics of diversity and the politics of difference: Are academics and the public out of sync? *Higher Education Exchange*, 66-71.
- Zlotkowski, E. (1999). Pedagogy and engagement. In R. Bringle, R. Games, & E. Malloy (Eds.), *Colleges and universities as citizens* (pp. 96-120). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

**Robert G. Bringle (Ph.D., Social Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) is Chancellor's Professor of Psychology and Philanthropic Studies and Director of the Center for Service and Learning at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. He most recently co-authored The Measure of Service Learning: Research Scales to Assess Student Experiences (2004, APA) with M. Phillips & M. Hudson.**