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Naming and Framing Service Learning:

A Taxonomy and Four Levels of Value

Service learning draws upon some of the noblest intentions of American higher education: its goal is to develop an educated and engaged citizenry willing and able to address society's ills. This idea of service learning resonates deeply with the felt needs of our time, and perhaps nowhere more keenly than in the urban locations of metropolitan colleges and universities. Consequently, service learning is perhaps the fastest growing and the most promising movement within higher education today.

Not surprisingly, however, it is also among the most in need of conceptual clarity, focus, and critical assessment. Indeed, given the widespread consensus that service learning is a good thing—on the part of colleges and universities that institutionalize it, faculty and students that participate in it, community organizations that embrace it, and public and philanthropic agencies that support it—there is an urgent need for clarity and precision in its theory and practice.

Let us be clear: we welcome the rise of service learning and promote it as best we can. However, if the service-learning movement is to bear fruit in any-

thing like the abundance of its vision and promise, all of the administrators, scholars, and practitioners who are now putting energy, hope, and resources into it must come to a common and precise understanding of what it is, what it can do, and how its goals might be achieved. Clarity is needed on two levels: first, on the level of practice, so that service learning can readily be distinguished from its cousins in the field of experiential education, internships, and cooperative education; and second, on the level of mission and purpose, so that the transformative claims of service learning—to promote social awareness, to develop the skills of active citizenship, and to meet the needs of individuals and their communities—can be critically understood, focused, and assessed.

This article is at once a call for a national conversation and a contribution to it. To the need for clarity in practice, we propose a taxonomy of experiential education. To the need for clarity in mission and purpose, we propose an interpretive framework that functionally relates service learning to four levels of value. The discussion begins with the lack of taxonomic precision in the service learning field.

The Need for Clarity in Practice

There are three doors in The Shriver Center of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), that are especially important for UMBC students interested in experiential education programs. Enter the first door, and you meet Simone, coordinator of the cooperative education program; enter the second door, and you meet Gina, coordinator of the community service and learning program; enter the third door, and you meet Greg, coordinator of the internship program. In practice, the basic question is, Which door should a student enter? As the following examples illustrate, the answer may not be readily apparent. To which door would you send the following students?

(1) Jessie is a social work major with a field placement at a hospice where she works with the families of terminally ill patients. (2) Maria is an information systems major with a field placement in a childhood lead prevention project. The placement involves setting up and operating a software package that maps, tracks, and correlates childhood lead poisoning cases with the stock of available lead-safe housing in critical neighborhoods in the city. (3) Peter is a Korean-speaking student and a biochemistry major with a field placement at an agency that promotes business development in the inner city.

His task is to conduct interviews with Korean business owners, to explain the goals of the agency, and to encourage Korean merchants to join a neighborhood business association—a major purpose of which is to ameliorate the tension between the African-American and Korean communities in the area. All three placements carry a stipend; each is linked to credit. The question is, What are these placements—internship, co-op, or service-learning?

Before offering our own answer, it is worth pointing out that, in the field as a whole today, there is neither precision nor common understanding on this question. In a survey of twenty colleges and universities, Heinemann and Wilson (*Journal of Cooperative Education*, 1993) found enormous conceptual variance in programs and objectives. In fact, both across and within institutions, they found no correlation between program type (co-op, internship, other) and stated educational goals and objectives. Thus, in a context in which any program type can seemingly be linked to any program goal, it is not surprising to find suggestions that declining support for traditional co-op programs could be reversed by reframing (i.e., remarketing) the program in terms of the currently more appealing language of community service.

A host of practical and theoretical problems follow from this lack of clarity, one of the most critical of which is the difficulty in carrying out adequate evaluations of service-learning programs. For example, in a recent study at Michigan State University, Markus and colleagues. (*Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 1993) found that students randomly assigned to a section of an undergraduate course in political science that required service learning performed better than students assigned to a conventional discussion section. On the face of it, this is good news for advocates of service learning, but without precision about what counts as service learning, it is difficult to know what the study really proves. Does it prove the effectiveness of everything anybody wants to call “service learning?” And what constitutes “doing better?” Critical assessment of these questions depends upon clear specification of the nature and objectives of service learning.

In fact, for Markus and colleagues, “doing better” meant that the students in the service learning section got higher grades than those in the discussion section. Are better grades and a fuller grasp of classroom material the principal goals of service learning? Moreover, in this study, service learning was operationally defined as a placement with a public agency engaged in work related to the course. What distinguishes these placements as service-learning rather than internship placements? In the absence of a clear taxonomy,

we cannot reliably say.

This level of taxonomic imprecision certainly reflects the state of the field, but it is hardly adequate for evaluation of service learning in any precise sense. The consequence is that the Michigan State study is arguably no more or less illuminating than would be a study that evaluates a chemistry class in which one section is randomly assigned to a chemistry lab and another to a discussion section—one might predict that students in the lab section would “do better.” Thus the study validates the central insight of experiential education in the broad sense—that experience improves understanding and can lead to new insights—it does not validate service learning in any particular sense. For this, we need a taxonomy of experiential education.

A Taxonomy of Experiential Education

In recent years, scholars such as Sigman (1994) and Furcow (1996) have begun to develop the typological and taxonomic clarity service learning requires. In what follows, we develop a taxonomy of experiential education as a whole by correlating the three major program types (internship, co-op, and service learning) with the goals and objectives of the major stakeholders common to each program: the academy, the student, and the host organization.

Internship

Academy. In an internship, the principal goal of the academy is educational. The goal is to enhance learning by applying the theory of a particular discipline in a practical setting. In a successful internship, students gain a clear understanding of the practical import of a theoretical body of knowledge. Typical examples of internships include education students placed in classrooms, medical students placed in clinics, and political science students placed in legislatures.

Student. The goal of the student is to understand the connection between theory and practice in a chosen field, and to gain deeper insight into a body of knowledge by grasping its practical application.

Host Organization. The principal goal of the host organization is to provide an enhanced educational experience for the student. The host organization embraces the educational objective of the academy by providing a setting in which the practical application of classroom learning takes place.

Cooperative Education

Academy. The goal of the academy in a co-op program is to create a

context in which theory is applied in a practical setting with the objective of fostering career development and job readiness skills. Co-op programs judge their success by the percentage of co-op students receiving job offers upon graduation. Typical examples of co-op placements include engineering students placed in engineering firms and accounting students placed in accounting firms.

Student. The goal of the student is the application of theory in a practical setting with the objective of developing career awareness, improving job skills, and gaining employment.

Host Organization. The primary goal of the host organization in participating in a co-op program is the recruitment, training, and assessment of permanent staff. Thus, co-ops are distinguished from internships by the objectives of the placement rather than by the placement site itself. An engineering firm, for example, could be the host organization for an internship as well as a co-op placement.

Service-Learning

Academy. The goals of the academy in a service-learning program are to be a responsible presence in the community, to educate its students to be good citizens, and to help solve the pressing social problems of our day. The goal is to create a context in which theory and practice are combined to foster growth in a student's social consciousness and civic skills. Another goal is to establish mutually beneficial partnerships in which the community and the academy work together to address and solve social problems.

Student. The goal of the student is to engage in service to the community, and, by linking theory and practice, to develop greater social awareness and civic skills. Students interested in service learning are typically interested in the opportunity for personal and intellectual growth while they help to meet the unmet needs of the community.

Host Organization. The goal of the host organization is to enter into a mutually beneficial relationship with a college or university, and, by so doing, to more effectively and efficiently fulfill their mission and purpose in the community.

We are now in a position to return to the question we posed earlier, To which door(s) would you send Jessie, Maria, and Peter? The taxonomy helps us to find the empirical answer to this practical and conceptual dilemma by directing us first to understand the goals and objectives of the student, the

university, and the host organization.

(1) Jessie, the social work major, is engaged in an internship. While her field placement involves service to the families of terminally ill patients, her principal objective is to fulfill the educational requirements of her undergraduate degree in social work, which calls for the integration of theory and practice through a field placement. The university and the hospice have collaborated to establish a placement whose principal purpose is educational.

(2) Maria, the information systems major, who is setting up a software program to analyze and track childhood lead poisoning, is in a cooperative education placement. Her principal goal is to gain career experience, and while her placement is in a nonprofit agency, engaged in service to the community, it will most likely result in a full-time professional position with the organization now hosting her. Indeed, the motive of her host organization was to recruit permanent staff, and the university has organized the placement for the purpose of providing Maria with career related skills and opportunities.

(3) Peter, the biochemistry major, is engaged in service learning. His principal motive, and that of the agency that placed him, is to ameliorate the cultural and racial divide that separates the African-American and Korean communities in the city. The university, likewise, is committed to these goals as well as to helping Peter develop his civic skills and cross-cultural understanding.

Practical Benefits of the Taxonomy

The taxonomy we propose functionally relates the academic and practical goals of the major participants in the three basic types of experiential learning. Clarifying this functional relationship has a number of practical benefits. For one, while Jessie may indeed be interested in the career skills she is acquiring at the hospice, and while Maria may be pleased to be involved in developing an important service for children at risk of lead poisoning, the taxonomy makes it possible to help students clarify and prioritize their goals and objectives, and to focus the educational, professional, and personal outcomes of the placement experience more clearly.

Second, the taxonomy makes it clear that descriptive factors such as compensation, schedule, credit, and the profit/nonprofit status of the host organization are incidental to the nature and purpose of a particular experiential learning program. That is, a service-learning placement may be paid, and an internship may not. A co-op placement may be in a nonprofit organization,

and a service-learning placement may not. Any of the program types may be full or part-time, and their reflection component may or may not be specifically linked to credit.

Third, by clarifying the relationship between program types, goals, and outcomes, this taxonomy could both eliminate the confusion in the field identified in the Heinemann study, and provide an empirical basis for rigorous program evaluation.

Finally, the taxonomy could help academic administrators think clearly and strategically about the organizational infrastructure of its experiential education programs. For example, at UMBC, academic service-learning and cocurricular student volunteer programs are funded, staffed, and supervised in different divisions of the university; internship programs are developed by individual departments as well as centralized at The Shriver Center; and the co-op program operates without any institutional link to the Office of Career Development and Placement. Whether arrangements such as these are optimal or should be changed is up to the administrators of individual colleges and universities. But in a time of shrinking resources and increased calls for public scrutiny and fiscal accountability, an important practical benefit of the taxonomy is that it provides an intelligent framework for asking questions and thinking comprehensively about the institutional arrangements and the organizational infrastructure a college or university needs to carry out its service-learning and experiential education programs.

A Need for Clarity in Mission and Purpose

Once service learning can be clearly distinguished from internships and cooperative education, it is possible to focus more directly on its purpose, goals, and practice. The basic goal of service learning is visionary and ambitious: an educated citizenry actively and effectively engaged in solving the problems of local communities and the larger society. This goal evokes an image: a vast, locally based, interdependent effort by students and citizens committed to solving major public problems. It also provokes the question we wish to address: Is this true? Is it reasonable to think that the practice of service learning is the key to a skillful and empowered citizenry and a transformed society?

At present, an affirmative answer is the article of faith that galvanizes and drives the service-learning movement. It is a conviction grounded in common sense, personal experience, and the noblest of intentions. Nevertheless,

to go from service learning as it is currently practiced to the emergence of an educated citizenry effectively engaged in solving public problems requires a big leap, both imaginatively and conceptually. Moreover, it is a leap that the service-learning movement must clarify, explain, and negotiate.

If not, what will happen five or ten years from now when students, faculty, administrators, community members, and financial supporters look around and find that our cities and communities are still riddled with massive public problems, and that our citizens are as apparently lacking in civic virtues and skills as ever? What will be the judgment of their common sense and hope at that point? Will they conclude that service learning is a disappointment and a failure? That it is not an effective instrument of the public good after all? They will indeed—unless there is a credible, interpretive framework to help focus the practice of service learning and to explain the contribution it makes to the cumulative realization of its ideal goal and purpose.

An Interpretive Framework

Typically, the broader goal of service learning is expressed in terms of problem solving: to develop educated citizens effectively engaged in the solution of public problems. For our purposes, it will be helpful to restate this goal in terms of capacity building: i.e., to develop educated citizens effectively engaged in promoting the human good; or, put more empirically, to develop educated citizens effectively engaged in promoting the conditions under which individuals and their communities can flourish.

In what follows, we will sketch the basic elements of an interpretive framework. Our intention is to provide a framework for explaining (1) how the variety of service-learning programs currently operating in American higher education can be functionally integrated, and (2) how their individual achievements can be recognized as contributing collectively to the cumulative realization of service-learning's ideal goal.

Our interpretive framework is based on the proposition that the human good is itself comprised of functionally related levels of value. We use the term "value" in this context in the generic sense of "desirable ends," which are the object and intention of human action. We also distinguish four levels of value: vital, social, cultural, and personal (Lonergan, 1985).

Vital Value

The vital level value encompasses the entire range of particular goods that

human beings need and seek to maintain their physical well being: food, shelter, health, comfort, protection, and so on. We use the term vital because these goods are essential to human life and vitality, and value because they are desirable ends needed and sought by every human being.

At present, the majority of service-learning programs operate with a focus on the level of vital value. These focus on service in soup kitchens, homeless shelters, health clinics, literacy programs, victim escort services, and the like. When people in the service-learning field speak of providing direct service, they typically mean service on the level of vital value. Sociology, history, and education are among the academic departments commonly offering service-learning courses to provide a theoretical and reflective context for service undertaken on this level.

Social Value

Whereas the vital level of value refers to the range of particular goods human beings need for physical well-being, the social level of value encompasses the range of systems and structures required to deliver those goods on a recurring basis. In contemporary America, for example, the ability to read is a vital value, and schools are institutions designed to teach that skill—and not just to one child but to hundreds, and not just this year, but next year and the next. As such, schools operate on the level of social value. We use the term social because like a school, systems and structures consist in complex patterns of cooperation, and value because systems, structures, and institutions are desirable ends created and developed in the ongoing attempt to make particular goods available on a recurring basis.

Clearly, if service learning is to fulfill its mission and purpose, it must promote and engage in service and reflection at the social level of value. Indeed, it is at this level that the confusion among internship, co-op, and service-learning typically arises, for each is legitimately involved with organizational structures and systems. But the goal of service-learning programs is to promote the conditions that enable individuals and their communities to flourish, and a crucial component of such conditions is the appropriate and effective functioning of systems, structures, and institutions.

Service-learning programs targeted at the level of social value would bring theory and practical service together to accomplish a number of goals, including insight into the contribution of a particular social system or institution to human flourishing; insight into the functional relationship between the

vital and social levels of value; and increased skill in assessing and asking critical questions about the function and the effectiveness of the system, institution, or organization in question.

Political science and sociology are academic departments that typically offer service-learning programs on the level of social value, but others, such as business, economics, information systems, engineering, environmental science, law, and nursing could (and do) offer programs as well.

Cultural Value

Whereas the social level of value involves the systems and structures that make particular goods available on a recurring basis, the cultural level of value refers to the meanings and purposes that shape and direct the systems and structures on the social level. To continue our example, schools function on the social level of value. However, the fact that until 1954 it was illegal in many locations for black and white children to attend the same public school is not a function of a school per se, but of the meanings and purposes operative in the symbols and institutions of a society at the cultural level of value.

The cultural level of value encompasses the meanings, purposes, and judgments of value of a culture, as these are carried in its symbolic, artistic, narrative and institutional forms. We use the term cultural, because it is the function of culture to discover, express, validate, and correct the meanings and purposes of a people. We use the term value because meaning and purpose are the wellspring of human action. The cultural level of value is functionally related to the vital and social levels.

Clearly, if service learning is to fulfill its mission and purpose, it must also promote and engage in service and reflection at the level of cultural value. For it is at this level that cultural judgments are made about what constitutes human flourishing, and who is entitled to flourish. Service-learning programs targeted at the level of cultural value would bring theory and practical service together to accomplish several goals, including insight into the functional relationship between the vital, social, and cultural levels of value; insight into the contributions of particular symbol systems and cultural institutions to the conditions of human flourishing; and an increased facility to critically assess those contributions.

A wide variety of academic departments could (and do) offer service-learning programs targeted to the level of cultural value. These include history, American studies, art, literature, film, sociology, women's studies, Afri-

can-American studies, and religion departments.

Personal Value

The personal level of value marks a shift of focus. Whereas the vital, social, and cultural levels of value have their referent in the external world of particular goods, institutions, and symbol systems, the personal level of value has its primary referent in the interior world of the person, in the capacity of persons to understand, evaluate, choose, and live. The hallmark of the level of personal value is the self-awareness that attends the recognition that it is up to ourselves to decide for ourselves what we will make of ourselves—and of the world we live in.

Thus, the personal level of value is functionally related to the vital, social, and cultural levels of value. For while the goods, structures, and symbols of the first three levels shape and condition interior activities at the personal level, it is also true that the inner activity of persons is the source of those structures and symbols.

To be sure, a person can drift along in a social and cultural milieu, thinking basically what everybody else thinks, choosing basically what everybody else chooses, doing basically what everybody else does. However, to drift is to fail to apprehend value at the personal level. The consequence is, then, that what one understands by human flourishing, and what one recognizes as a social problem, is defined and legitimized by the society and culture in which one happens to drift. Depending upon the culture, this may or may not include segregated schools, and it may or may not show up as a problem.

To recognize value at the personal level is to recognize that the critical, empirical ground of human flourishing lies in the actual flourishing of individual persons. How do we discern it? By learning to pay attention to the signs and conditions of flourishing in oneself, in one's relationships, and in one's community, and then seeking to realize those conditions at the vital, social, and cultural levels of value. For it is within those levels that human beings become the persons they are and build the communities they have. Of course, this is just another way of talking about an educated and engaged citizenry willing and able to address society's ills.

Clearly, if service learning is to fulfill its mission and purpose, it must also promote and engage in service and reflection at the level of personal value. Indeed, we would argue that the taproot of service learning lies at this level. For it is on the level of personal value that the question, "Why serve?" is

asked most profoundly, and that the answer, "Because it enables me to flourish, and helps make it possible for others to flourish too," is heard most clearly. And it is on this level that the question, "What does it mean to serve well?" is asked most seriously, and that personal and social signs of condescension, prejudice, and codependence are grieved most intensely.

Service-learning programs targeted at the level of personal value would bring theory and practical service together to accomplish a number of goals, including greater self-awareness and understanding of the level of personal value; insight into the functional relationship of the vital, social, cultural, and personal levels of value; and increased discernment in asking the question, "What do human beings do when they flourish?" Academic departments that could (and do) offer service-learning programs targeted to the level of personal value include philosophy, religion and psychology.

Practical Benefits of the Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework we propose functionally relates the practice of service learning to the cumulative achievement of its mission and purpose as a movement. One practical benefit of this is that it becomes possible to address the visionary character of service learning's mission and purpose coherently and pragmatically.

Second, our framework does not specify in advance the content of the human good or the nature of the conditions necessary for human flourishing. Answers to the question of what constitutes human flourishing and which social institutions and cultural symbols most effectively promote it are left to the practice of service learning itself. The framework merely helps to focus and integrate the direction of the questioning.

Third, our framework proposes that the service-learning field can be organized functionally, and specialized in terms of the level of value targeted by a service-learning program. The significant benefit from this proposal is that it points the way to overcoming the major structural problem confronting service learning today: the departmental and subject specialization of higher education. Specialties within higher education are based on a process of dividing and subdividing fields of data. English departments deal with poetry and literature; economics departments deal with economic systems. Obviously, such specialization is both necessary and useful. However, when it comes to service learning, if field specialization continues to be the conceptual framework used to interpret the role and function of service learning at

colleges and universities, then service learning will continue to be relegated to those fields that deal with the data of society and service: sociology, education, political science, and social work. In addition, service-learning programs tend to remain fragmented along departmental lines, and service-learning syllabi will continue to be circulated in conceptual isolation from each other, except as particular instances of “best practices.” The framework we suggest makes it possible to think coherently across departmental lines, and to make strategic decisions about the mission and purpose of service-learning—on individual campuses and within higher education as a whole. For instance, we can imagine the creation of an interdisciplinary major or minor that would include coursework linked to each of the four levels of value.

In what may well be the most influential page of prose he ever wrote, the late Ernest Boyer (1994) called for the creation of “The New American College.” He argued that the development of a “scholarship of service” is the key to fulfilling the historic mission and purpose of higher education in America. The taxonomy and the interpretive framework we have developed here are offered as a contribution toward that goal.

Suggested Readings

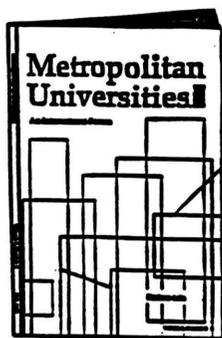
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