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The pattern of research and learning of the traditional social science technique of participant observation is similar to that of the activity of service learning. Service learning allows students to test theories of political science after their own personal observations in a service setting. It can be an effective and rewarding means of teaching undergraduates the logic and practice of social research.

Service Learning and Participant Observation: Undergraduate Field Research

Service learning is emerging as a common pedagogical technique in undergraduate education in the United States (Zlotkowski, 1996), and its success warrants further investigation and development of service learning programs in metropolitan universities. As a faculty member experienced in a service learning program, I believe that this type of educational opportunity incorporates the same logic of inquiry as participant observation and should be considered for undergraduate curriculums. Service learning allows students to test theories of political science against their own personal observations.

For the past five years, I have helped to organize a service learning program for Xavier University in which students spend eleven weeks of a fifteen-week semester in Nicaragua. One element of this program is a course on Nicaraguan politics. This article summarizes how the students' service learning experience is linked to participant observation as a means of student research, a discipline-specific pedagogy that Zlotkowski (1996, p. 26) identifies as important for the future of service learning. The students' success in Xavier's program and in their political science course suggests that service learning can be an effective and rewarding method of social science education.

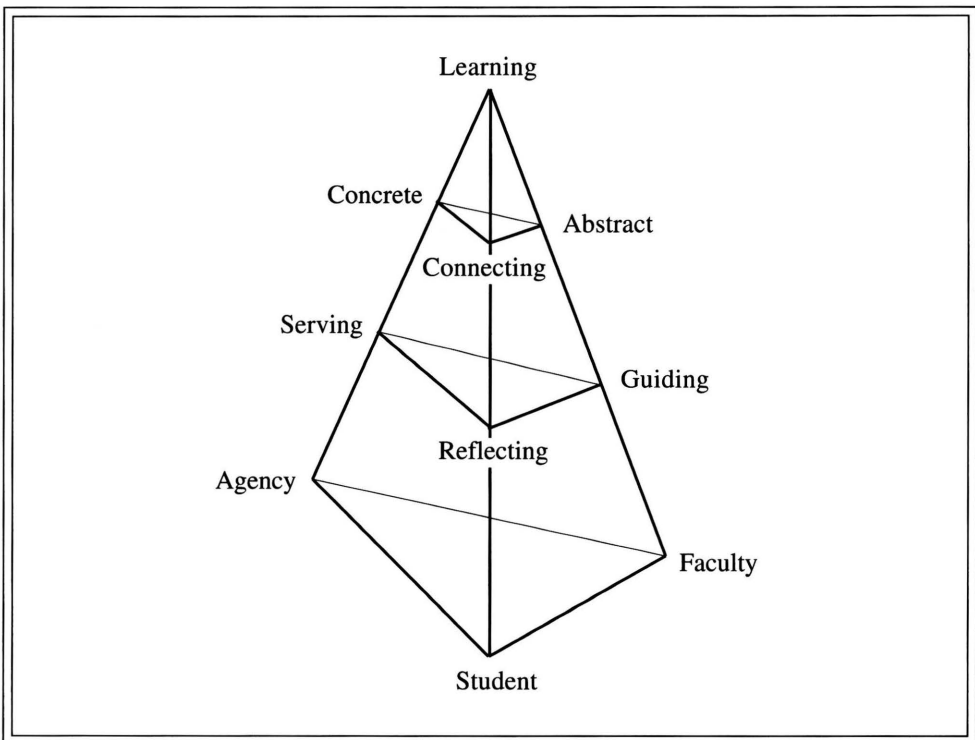
Stages of Service Learning

Service learning, like participant observation, occurs in three different stages. First, before the actual service learning can begin, students must review the

scholarly literature that relates their area of inquiry to the service experience. In the second stage of service learning, students perform their service mindful of the scholarly approaches to and explanations of the environment in which they serve. Finally, students must debrief and reflect about their experience and the existing approaches to understanding the politics of the place in which they serve.

Throughout these three stages, students, faculty, and the agency through which the student performs service interact, allowing the student to learn in a different and potentially more beneficial way than the traditional lecture hall environment. Namei's (1995, p. 3) model of service learning, quite similar to earlier theories of experiential learning (Giles, 1988; Gish, 1990), illustrates how this process works (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model for Service Learning



According to Namei, service learning entails the interaction of faculty, student, and the service environment.

Student learning is guided by faculty and the presentation of abstract concepts and theories. The service environment provides the student with concrete experiences and an opportunity for personal observation. The student reflects upon the service experience and faculty guidance to connect the concrete and the abstract. This process compels students to internalize knowledge based on their own experience and observation rather than merely absorb information.

In this mode of learning faculty assume a facilitating role. Thus, students take more responsibility to be active learners as they reflect upon and connect the theories and principles of politics with their concrete observation of reality. Service experience becomes an important empirical reference for the students. In this way, service learning contrasts sharply to the passive learning associated with the traditional lecture method. As the following discussion suggests, this pedagogical method provides students with the motivation and capacity to engage abstract theories and models in the context of concrete real world experience. This type of learning may be an important supplement to or extension of the traditional undergraduate pattern of teaching political science, and it conforms in many ways to the more traditional research technique of participant observation, sometimes called the anthropological method (Ross and Ross, 1974, p. 63) or one of the visual techniques of data collection (Feldman, 1981, p. 43).

Pre-Field Literature Review

The first stage in a service learning program is one of the most difficult. Students must be exposed to the scholarly literature that provides background and that will offer, to the students' research in the field setting, a means of developing testable hypotheses. This first stage of service learning parallels the first stage of participation observation identified by Ross and Ross (1974, pp. 67-71). Students also should become acquainted with the logic of research in the field setting. In my course the students and I discuss participant observation and the process of conducting fieldwork while performing service learning. They have little more than two weeks to read the articles and books on their topic and devise a proposal for their research, although, in ideal circumstances, students would have more time to read the literature and develop a better theoretical framework before leaving for their service projects. However, most faculty teaching in semester abroad programs like Xavier's will be forced to deal with time constraints that minimize students' opportunity to develop a sophisticated appreciation of the scholarly approaches to the location of their service. In the more common pattern for service learning programs, conducted in communities in or near the metropolitan university, these constraints are a lesser obstacle.

No matter how brief the time for service preparation and exposure to the scholarly literature, it is absolutely essential for students to develop a research proposal before they begin their service. This compels students to focus their exploration of scholarly literature and to be engaged in hypothesis testing. It also prepares them to make changes to their research agenda while they are in the field. If, for example, they have a good overview of Nicaraguan politics before they leave, they are able to adapt their topics to their evolving interests and base them on a solid background of knowledge.

The Field Experience

The service project must be planned to allow students to benefit from service and gain the opportunity to observe a social setting that may have important implications for the politics of a locality, region, or state. Most of my students perform service in hospitals, schools, daycare centers, and disaster relief shelters. By doing so, they also

become highly informed of the social bases of Nicaraguan politics. While serving, students live with families in a working-class barrio of Managua.

Before entering this course, none of my students is highly informed about Nicaraguan politics, and those who are not political science majors have very little background in social science. Nevertheless, their service experience in Nicaragua, like that of other students engaged in this kind of program, stimulates learning in a way that allows them to test the ideas of scholars, confront academic assumptions with personal experience, and help define or refine their own sense of personal identity.

Students engaged in this second stage of service learning, as in participant observation, conduct focused research investigating specific concepts and then refine their initial hypotheses. They also learn to screen out nonessential information as they focus on their chosen topics (Ross and Ross, 1974, pp. 71-74). In this stage, students actively engage those they encounter, at the grassroots level, in formal and informal interviews. In this way, service learning, like participant observation, recognizes a mutuality of observation and intensive interviewing (Lofland and Lofland, 1984).

Impact on Student Learning

As in other intercultural learning programs, students should have ongoing support in the field. Students meet a variety of local experts, and travel to most of the major cities in Nicaragua to get to know political leaders from various regions. These activities, as well as time spent living with and providing service to lower-class barrios of Managua, provide them with a profound exposure to basic Nicaraguan politics.

I find, based on these multiple sources of firsthand information and continuing e-mail communication with me regarding their research, that students are highly motivated, during their limited time in Nicaragua, to learn as much as they can about Nicaraguan politics and their research topic. They report reading more while performing their service in Nicaragua than they normally read in a typical semester on campus because their research is focused and real. Students have reported that, because of their service and the personal relationships they develop with their host families, this semester program provides them the most rewarding learning experience of their lives. Most importantly, it stimulates their interest in theories of development, dependency, and democratization that are part of their political science coursework, but that may seem remote from their college experience at a private university in the middle of the United States.

Student and Faculty Responsibilities

Because students become more active learners, teachers of service learning courses have a very different role from that in the traditional classroom setting. Instead of being the fountain of all knowledge, faculty play an equally important, but less conspicuous, role as facilitators in the learning process. After providing an overview of the scholarly literature before the service begins, teachers, seeking to foster each student's individual learning, become mentors. Faculty need to be available, through e-mail, fax, telephone, or traditional written communication, to help service learning students, off-

campus or abroad as in the case of the Xavier program in Nicaragua, resolve problems as they arise.

To ensure the success of their fieldwork, students must be flexible in their research strategies. If they observe something far more fascinating than anticipated, they need to be prepared to change their research agenda. They should take advantage of any opportunity to engage scholars, political elites, and the public through extended interviews, and take advantage of documentary research that may only be available on site. Thus, service learning, like participant observation, can be linked to other methods of field research (Feldman, 1981).

At the same time, students must be systematic in keeping a journal or some formal means of collecting notes that will form the basis of the research paper and that concatenates their observations in the field. As in traditional participant observation research, systematization and measurement are the third and final phase (Ross and Ross, 1974, pp. 74-75).

Students will continue to develop their research paper as they perform their service. Requiring students to submit detailed outlines after the midpoint of their service encourages them to begin the process of assessing their experience in light of the scholarly literature. Before they return to the United States, and at completion of their service, students compose a rough draft of their research paper, forcing them, before they return home for their debriefing, to begin to draw conclusions about their experience and compare it to the existing understanding of Nicaraguan politics.

Debriefing and Finishing the Project

Upon the completion of their service, students need to take some time to reflect on their experience, the scholarly literature, and faculty advice. They should be given direction to integrate their experience with the literature, encouraging them to link their personal observations with existing theories. Students' research will reflect not only their observations but also the faculty's capacity to provide a useful theoretical framework within which students can place their experience.

To facilitate a more general review of the entire experience, students present their research papers to the other members of the class, and thereby learn from each other more about the politics of Nicaragua.

Challenges of Research and Service Learning

The major problems encountered in service learning are the same as those cited in more traditional participant observation studies. Students must have a systematic way of collecting their data to ensure the reliability of their results (Ross and Ross, 1974, pp. 75-76). Haphazard data collection or observation may provide unreliable results. Students in my class are discouraged from generalizing the findings of their research. They are aware of the limited nature of their exposure to politics and culture in Nicaragua and are only responsible for trying to link their results to those already established in the scholarly literature.

A second major problem is the contamination of data that comes with such an obtrusive data collection technique as participant observation conducted while in a service project (McCall, 1969, p. 128; Ross and Ross, 1974, pp. 76-77). While American students may initially be perceived as an alien presence, over time they gain acceptance among their host families and those with whom they serve in their projects. An extended stay and sense of community acceptance enhances their ability to perceive more clearly the everyday life and political realities of Nicaraguan politics.

Although this sense of solidarity with the community can make observation less obtrusive, students may identify with particular community members and suffer from selective perception (McCall, 1969, p. 128; Ross and Ross, 1974, p. 77) or what Webb et al. (1981, p. 199) identify as the "biased-viewpoint effect." As Geer (1969, p. 149) states, "...developing empathy with informants as a group often presents more of a problem to field workers planning a study. . . than the adoption of an interaction-facilitating role."

Clearly, according to the mission of Xavier University and the Jesuit commitment to serving the poor, faculty associated with the Xavier program hope students will develop an empathy for the plight of the poor in the Third World. Nevertheless, they are warned against siding with one political faction or another, or too easily or casually to slip into polemical analysis. To ensure exposure to the variety of opinion that exists in Nicaragua, they read from a variety of newspapers and other written sources, and interview elites and subjects who hold differing perspectives. I want my students to resist becoming one-sided in the political analysis of the situation in Nicaragua.

Despite my best efforts, in the end my students' knowledge and understanding of Nicaraguan politics is based on their service and family life in a working class barrio of Managua. This barrio is not necessarily representative of other barrios in Managua or the rest of Nicaragua. Nevertheless, recognizing unavoidable limitations on field research observations, I feel the students' first hand experiences provide a wealth and depth of data that cannot be attained through more representative survey sampling techniques. The richness of sharing human experience should not be minimized in assessing the utility of participant observation and service learning.

Conclusion

My experience in a semester abroad service learning program at Xavier University demonstrated that service learning provides faculty and students a marvelous opportunity to experience a new method of teaching and learning. Incorporating the logic of participant observation means that service learning also provides undergraduates the opportunity to conduct research in a field setting, enabling them to see how their learning can make a difference in the real world, and establishing a life-long commitment to improving communities and public service. In this model, service learning compels students to examine the fundamental assumptions on which American democracy operates, especially the pluralistic empathy for the other in society (Barber and Battistoni, 1993; Boyte and Farr, 1997; O'Neil, 1990; Stanley, 1993).

Service learning may facilitate faculty development as well. Students' service and research can offer valuable insight into the real world of politics at the grassroots level that is often difficult to discern in the ivory tower. Student findings compel faculty to assess our own understanding of politics in the context of the experience of our students. Thus, service learning is a promising and rewarding new option for teaching undergraduates, one that engages them in an active learning process based on an often overlooked research strategy in political science, participant observation.

Note: I would like to thank Susan Namei for her comments and suggestions. Any errors or omissions are solely the responsibility of the author.

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