

Service-Learning: Three Principles

By Robert Sigmon

A practitioner discusses three principles of service-learning and basic tools for putting them into practice.

Service-learning terminology has emerged in the past 10 years, and—as in the case of many traditional Christmas carols—the authors are unknown. The great carols belong to the public, a product of folk traditions at their best. Service-learning represents the coming together of many hearts and minds seeking to express compassion for others and to enable a learning style to grow out of service.

The term service-learning is now used to describe numerous voluntary action and experiential education programs. Federal laws now use the phrase. Its diffusion suggests that several meanings now are attributed to service-learning. If we are to establish clear goals and work efficiently to meet them, we need to move toward a precise definition.

The following notes indicate three fundamental principles of service-learning and several tools for practitioners who are involved with service delivery and learning programs.

My first contact with service-learning was in the late 1960's when the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)—using federal dollars—popularized a service-learning internship model. Service-learning at that time was defined as the integration of the accomplishment of a public task with conscious educational growth. A typical service-learning activity was a 10- to 15-week full-time experience in which students carried out work tasks in communities while also receiving academic credit and/or financial remuneration.

Voluntary action and experiential

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education programs have grown steadily in this country during the past decade. Service-learning rarely has been examined carefully as a style and has been much overshadowed by more popular program styles. These, in brief, are:

- *Classroom-based experiential education* in the form of simulations, games, programmed instruction, computerized learning packages, group process techniques, and library-based independent study;
- *Career exposure and life-style planning* programs, part of the massive career education movement that has been popularized by the writings of such people as Richard Bolles;
- *Outward Bound* programs and their counterparts using outdoor and wilderness settings for growth and learning;
- *Cooperative education*, an example

of the vocational programs placing students primarily in “for profit” settings;

- *Adult self-initiated learning exercises* sustained without the aid of educational institutions or professional teachers;
- *Programs rooted in public need settings*, including voluntary action programs, public service internships, academically based field practica, and some work-study programs.

All six styles have in common an emphasis on individual development. Programs based in public need settings add *service to others* as a major dimension. The service-learning style is best understood in this type of program, for it focuses on both those being served and those serving.

Based on my work designing, managing, and evaluating programs with

Servant Leadership, by Robert K. Greenleaf, Paulist Press, New York, 1977 (330 pages, \$10.95).

In the 1920's Greenleaf finished college and became a groundman—post-hole digger—for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. In 1964 he retired as the company's director of management research. Since then he has been active as a management consultant to businesses, educational institutions, and social service groups.

His concept of the servant as leader was developed over the years and crystalized when he read Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, a story that shows how a group disintegrates with the disappearance of the servant who had sustained the members with his spirit as well as his menial labor. Greenleaf contends that great leaders are those who are servants first, *i.e.*, who lead because of a desire to serve rather than to gain power or personal gratification.

Greenleaf cites historical examples of servant leaders, including Thomas Jefferson, and predicts that in the next 30 years leaders will come from the “dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world” rather than from elite groups who have not learned to listen and respond to the problems of those to be served.

In his chapter on “Servant Leadership in Education,” Greenleaf returns to his theme of the need for secondary and post-secondary schools to prepare the poor “to return to their roots and become leaders among the disadvantaged.” He states that the goal of a college education should be to “prepare students to serve, and be served by the current society.”

Greenleaf also devotes chapters to “The Institution as Servant,” “Trustees as Servants,” “Servant Leadership in Business,” “Servant Leadership in Foundations,” “Servant Leadership in Churches,” “Servant Leaders” (profiles of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Donald John Cowling), “Servant Responsibility in a Bureaucratic Society,” and “America and World Leadership.”

Greenleaf shows a way of putting together two overworked words (service and leadership) into a fresh perspective. In *Servant Leadership* he offers experiential learning managers a holistic framework for understanding the significance of service-centered learning for individuals and institutions.

service and learning dimensions, and with a spirit of inquiry about how any of us serve well and are served well by our actions, I suggest the following three principles for those in similar positions.

Principle one: Those being served control the service(s) provided.

Principle two: Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions.

Principle three: Those who serve also are learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned.

Robert Greenleaf, author of *Servant Leadership, A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (see box), defines service as it is used in this service-learning formulation.

One who serves takes care to make sure that other peoples' highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?

Learning flows from the service task(s). To serve in the spirit of the Greenleaf definition requires attentive inquiry with those served and careful examination of what is needed in order to serve well. As a result, *learning objectives are formed in the context of what needs to be done to serve others.*

Unfortunately learning objectives may be superimposed upon rather than derived from the service task even in programs that strive to adopt the service-learning style. In the SREB service-learning internship model of the 1960's, for example, the hyphen between service and learning was highlighted because it illustrated the link between the two. Unfortunately, the nature of the service received limited attention; the focus was on the learning outcomes sought. The proper emphasis in service-learning, in my view, is not on the link between the two, but on the distinctiveness of a service situation as a learning setting.

Over the years I have been exposed to people who teach and develop tools that aid individuals and institutions in planning for and carrying out service-learning activities in accordance with these three principles.

An awareness-building exercise for prospective servers helps assure that principles one and two are taken into account. The exercise is a simple process of using guided questions based on a distinction between "acquirers" and "recipients" of services. To be an "acquirer" suggests active involvement in the request for and control of a service. As an "acquirer" an individual or institution is involved in some self-analysis of the situation and is active in selecting the type of service and provider. To be a "recipient" connotes limited, if any, active participation in seeking assistance, treatment, or help.

To understand the distinctions between "acquirers" and "recipients" and to plan activities, students can:

- Describe one or more situations in which each has been an "acquirer" of a service;
- Describe one or more situations in which each has been a "recipient" of a service;
- Describe one or more situations in which each has been a direct service provider to an individual, organization (Were those served viewed as "acquirers" or "recipients"?);
- Discuss these experiences with a partner or a small group;
- List the key themes noted in the descriptions of services;
- Examine these themes alongside the three service-learning principles, or the Greenleaf definition of service, or within the "acquirer"- "recipient" framework;
- Move into various phases of discussion and planning for a service-learning activity.

An analytical tool for looking at four basic constituencies in service delivery situations has been helpful to me. The first constituency is made up of those who acquire services; the second, service providers; the third, technology developers (those who budget, plan, manage, develop curricula, design, monitor and generally run things); and the fourth, those who provide resources, the policy makers.

Service-learning projects can have as the "acquirer" of service any of these four constituencies. The central question is: Does the service being provided make any sense to those expected to benefit from the services delivered? Will they be better able to serve themselves and others because of it? Closely related is the question

of who are the individuals who fill the roles in any service delivery activity. And how do they relate to one another?

The accompanying Service Task Check List is a practical tool for examining program elements and actors in most voluntary action or public service-oriented internships. Seven participants are listed along the horizontal axis, and 10 program functions associated with student projects are listed on the vertical axis.

The Check List can be used in several ways. The list across the top *introduces major categories of actors* in a service-learning activity and their distinctive expectations, roles, and relationship patterns. The questions down the left side relate to the development and implementation of a service project and can be *guides for planning an activity*. Participants should be required to be specific in the responses and encouraged to examine closely the implications of who controls the services to be rendered.

A faculty member, an agency supervisor, and the student involved can use the list to *examine a student's service-learning activity*. Two avenues of analysis are possible: What are the similarities and differences in perspective among the three participants, and who in fact is in control of the services being provided? As a planning tool for individual projects, the Check List can provide a similar overview of *who will be in charge* and how each participant views the control issues in a proposed activity.

In order to review a departmental or institution-wide service-oriented education program either being planned or in existence, different constituencies can complete the check list and then note and *discuss comparisons and contrasts*. These profiles also can be checked out against the Greenleaf service definition or the three principles outlined earlier.

A project or service plan work sheet is another tool for helping discover responses to "Who is to be served by this activity?" and "How are those to be served involved in stating the issue and carrying out the project?" Proposed categories for a model work-sheet are:

- Summary of situation to be influenced;
- Key individuals, organizations, and

Place a check in the appropriate box for each question. If more than one answer is valid, rank the answers in order of importance.

| Service Task Check List | | 1. Citizens, the service acquirers | 2. Direct care providers | 3. Policy makers, resource sanctioners | 4. Technical staff and technology developers | 5. Individual faculty advisors | 6. Program coordinator | 7. The service-learner or volunteer | 8. Other |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| | A. Who initiates the tasks to be addressed? | | | | | | | | |
| | B. Who defines the tasks? | | | | | | | | |
| | C. Who approves the tasks? | | | | | | | | |
| | D. Who approves the methods used in doing the tasks? | | | | | | | | |
| | E. Who monitors the daily/weekly task activities? | | | | | | | | |
| | F. Who is the server responsible to in the community or agency? | | | | | | | | |
| | G. Who determines when the task is completed satisfactorily? | | | | | | | | |
| | H. Who benefits from the task being done well? | | | | | | | | |
| | I. Who decides that a server doing a task should be withdrawn from the work? | | | | | | | | |
| | J. Who owns the final product of a server's work with the community or agency? | | | | | | | | |
| K. Other | | | | | | | | | |

institutions involved in the situation (the direct providers, technology developers, and policy makers concerned about the dilemma);

- Proposed specific service objectives;
- Experiences (activities, resources, settings, methods, and the like) to be used in conducting activity;
- Criteria for assessing service outcomes;
- Specific citizens and/or institutions to be served.

Providing services in situations where "acquirers" speak in other tongues—or don't speak, or speak from cultural perspectives unfamiliar to us—is no easy task. There is a great need for the invention of tools and exercises that help potential servers engage those to be served. The chief tool for most of us will most likely be one we invent for the unique situations we face.

Principle three—those who serve are also learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned—can have many varieties of expression.

Since SREB days, I have viewed *all* the active partners in a service-learning experience as learners. Not only the student, but also the faculty counselor, the agency or community supervisor, and those being served. This expectation strongly suggested that mutuality is an important dimension in learning.

In a service-learning activity, the service situation allows ample room for the coordinator to define some learning objectives (*e.g.*, what skills and knowledge does the task require, what skills and knowledge does the

student possess, what still needs to be learned for the students to have some of their own learning expectations, for the program sponsoring the activity to have stated learning outcomes, and for the acquirers of services to have learning expectations. The critical task is making sure the services to be rendered are not overwhelmed by the learning tasks. It is my conviction that once an appropriate service activity is formulated and checked out, learning potential becomes apparent.

Even in well planned service-learning programs with clearly defined learning objectives, however, significant unplanned learning will occur. Often it will challenge value assumptions and will require thoughtful reflection and sharing with others.

A major need in service-learning is for educational researchers to examine the distinctive learning outcomes associated with service delivery. Where does service end and learning begin in a service-learning setting? How is service delivery aided or handicapped by learning expectations? Do the service-learning principles stated here make any difference to the quality of service and learning acquired?

Service-learning is called a utopian vision by some and too demanding and impractical by others. Service-learning, as discussed herein, is rooted in the belief that all persons are of unique worth, that all persons have gifts for sharing with others, that persons have the right to understand and act on their own situations, and that our mutual survival on the planet Earth depends on the more able and the less able serving one another.

Service-learning as formulated here is a partial corrective to the self-deception many of us service providers practice. We spread around our talents and knowledge because we have it to use and enjoy sharing. We do research in communities to justify our positions or test a promising methodology. We do group-oriented work because we are trained in group processes. We want clients to come to us. We advocate for the handicapped, poor, young, elderly, and minorities because we want to serve without realizing that they may not be impressed.

As providers, our degree of control over services and service systems is excessive in most instances. If we are to be measured by the Greenleaf criterion of those served growing as persons, becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants, then we are called to invent ways to engage those to be served, and that primarily has to be on their turf and terms.

My hope for these notes is that they will stimulate dialogue on what service-learning principles say to those using major experiential education styles mentioned earlier.

A constant challenge those of us face who provide learning opportunities for people in service settings is to be what Greenleaf calls "servant leaders." "Servant leaders" are people who formulate visions, arrange the structures, and manage the action within the spirit of the service-learning principles. Greenleaf pushes me and, I hope, many others to invent the distinctive ways in which we all can better serve and be served. □