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Aaron Ferguson

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Making the Case for Service-Learning in First-Year Programs

Aaron Ferguson

Today's college students are graduating high school without the skills necessary to undertake the responsibility involved in college level academic work and lifestyles. Additionally, recent national surveys have shown that students are increasingly becoming more academically and socially disengaged (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1999). In response, educators have begun to focus first-year programs on supporting students in terms of grade-based, academic achievement. Within the context of current theory and research in the field, this article will investigate the potential of service-learning as a forum for students to develop more holistically (academically, personally, and civically) within the context of first-year programs.

“Experience is not what happens to man, it is what a man does with what happens to him.”
- Aldous Huxley, 1932

The inaugural first-year experience course, “University 101,” was started in 1972 at the University of South Carolina in response to the 1970 student riots protesting the Vietnam War, other perceived social injustices and local campus issues. One of the major goals of the course is to encourage students to develop a more positive attitude toward the university and the learning process (USC, n.d.).

Today's students' needs are different than they were in 1972. Ericson and Stromer (1991) have found that students are graduating high school without the skills necessary to engage in college level academic work and are not prepared to assume personal responsibility for managing their own schedules or academic programs (p. 25). Additionally, recent national surveys have shown that students are increasingly becoming more academically and socially disengaged (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1999). Technology is creating more opportunity for personal disconnection from course material and peers through the use of tools like WebCT, instant messaging systems, online class notes, and PowerPoint presentations.

In response to these phenomena, educators have begun to focus first-year programs around content that supports grade-based academic achievement such as note-taking, test-taking, and organizational skills. These courses also introduce students to other support services on campus (USC, 2002). Though this structure may, in some cases, help students obtain better grades, there is a large aspect of student development that these first-year programs overlook.

With the aid of technology and academic support programs, students may learn to be more efficient at earning high academic marks, but it is unclear as to how beneficial current first-year programs are to student learning outcomes or a student's overall development, including academic, personal, and civic development. This article is intended to support the increased use of service-learning in first-year programs and to explain how service-learning can address the needs of today's students, help them to become more successful learners, and enable students to develop more holistically throughout their college careers.

Contemporary First-Year Programs

“When knowledge acquisition is viewed as the most important goal of education, the educational system fails to develop intellectual habits that foster the desire and capacity for lifelong learning.”

-John Dewey, 1916

In October 2003, the National Resource Center (NRC) for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition undertook its sixth national survey of first-year seminar programming in United States higher education institutions to assess what first-year experience courses are focusing on currently. The survey found that the top rated primary objectives of first-year programs in the U.S. are to develop academic skills (n=394, 63.5%), provide an orientation to campus resources and services (n=370, 59.6%), and foster self-exploration and personal development (n=247, 39.8%). Respondents were also asked to identify the five most important topics that comprise the content of the first-year seminars. The five most frequently reported topics were study

Aaron Ferguson is a member of the 2006 HESA class. He graduated from the University of Connecticut in 2003 with a double major in Psychology and International Commerce and a minor in German. Aaron grew up in Storrs-Mansfield, Connecticut.

skills (n=390, 62.8%), campus resources (n=382, 61.5%), time management (n=371, 59.7%), academic planning/advising (n=361, 58.1%), and lastly, critical thinking (n=325, 52.3%) (USC, 2002).

The current focus of first-year programs has turned away from personal development and shifted toward preparing students for traditional teaching methods (based on memorization, textbooks, and lectures) by emphasizing student support services and improving basic academic competencies. However, despite the heavy focus of first-year programs on academic support, relatively few gains are seen by universities in student grade-point-averages, persistence to graduation, and academic ability (NRC, 2003). To define learning as simple knowledge acquisition does not address the many other capacities humans have to make sense of information. For this reason, first-year programs are not as effective as they could be and are missing a crucial element.

Traditional Teaching Methods

The traditional teaching method is effective in some instances where students simply need to know factual information, like the bones in the human body for physiologists or genus and species of plants for botanists. In other instances, however, where application of knowledge is essential, educators are finding fault with traditional methods. The two major shortcomings of a traditional lecture approach are that context-specific learning creates an inability for students to generalize their skills within other areas, and rote learning does not require, or even allow, students to make personal connections to the material (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999).

It was not until 1994 that the American Association of Colleges (AAC) recognized a need to assess the traditional teaching method model and formed the Task Force on General Education. The task force's findings strongly suggested a need for educational expansion beyond the acquisition of knowledge. It was determined that students become more engaged with the learning process when active learning strategies are employed (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2002). Traditional teaching methods treat knowledge as a commodity and students as a consumer. Without active learning, students fulfill course requirements and build transcripts as if they were collecting trading cards. Service-learning can help educators move past the paradigm of education through knowledge acquisition toward a more active, engaging pedagogy.

What is Service-Learning?

The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) (1993) developed the following definition of service-learning which incorporates elements that effectively address the shortcomings of first-year programs:

Service-learning is a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully-organized service that [sic] is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience. (as cited by CUPS, n.d.)

This definition addresses the essential elements of service-learning as they apply to student engagement and development: a *formal* connection between learning outcomes and a service experience, reflection on that experience, and the personal connection derived from that reflection as it applies to the community and their needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Furco, 1996).

These elements are necessary to deepen students' understanding of and connection to course material. This connection is the key to how first-year programs can be more effective in educating students to become more successful learners and more deeply engaged in their education. A service experience should be considered an additional resource, on par and in conjunction with assigned texts or lectures from which students gain knowledge. Walt Whitman remarked upon the importance of personal experiences when he said, "All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own, else it were time lost listening to me" (Whitman, 1964, p. 29). The benefits of using service-learning can be seen in the increased richness and uniqueness of the experiences students are able to have.

The elements of service-learning listed above are key to affording students a real-life forum through which to apply the information they learn in a book or from a professor and make it “their own.” Rather than encouraging students to view learning as a commodity whose value is quantified by a letter grade, service-learning experiences provide students with a tangible application for their learning and persuade viewing learning as a process. Fostering this habit in first-year students can make the difference between four years of simply acquiring knowledge or becoming effective, successful learners. Service-learning can be used in first-year programs to encourage students to understand themselves better as learners and develop appropriate learning strategies to be able to think critically in any classroom setting. Service-learning in the context of first-year seminars is a flexible and adaptable means of addressing the issues that current first-year programs have yet to address.

Making the Case for Service-Learning in the First Year

The roots of service-learning originated in the early 1900s with John Dewey’s educational theories and pedagogy. Three basic conditions Dewey stresses to maximize inquiry-based learning as an educative force are to: (a) present problems to awaken new curiosity, (b) generate interest in the learner, and (c) make learning intrinsically worthwhile to the learner (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). These three conditions align with the three basic elements of service-learning mentioned earlier and can be met within the context of these elements: service experience, active reflection, and a personal connection.

The following sections lend theoretical credence to Dewey’s philosophical principles as they relate to three potential outcomes of service-learning and how service-learning application can address the needs of current first-year students.

Service: Intellectual and Ethical Development (William Perry)

Personal development and interpersonal skills are often viewed as secondary to the academic goals of the academy. As a result, these skills are segregated from academics into student services and activities. However, service-learning advocates assert that personal development and interpersonal skills form the foundation of student learning (Furco, 1996).

Dewey’s first condition to increase student learning is to awaken a new curiosity in the student. A student’s curiosity suggests a level of personal engagement with a topic. In order to promote new curiosity within a student, it is important for a student to be in the proper mindset to think critically and engage with course material. In the *Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development*, Perry outlines nine positions in which students find themselves as they try to find truth through learning. Perry’s positions begin with the idea of dualism. Students in a dualistic position view the world in dichotomies of right and wrong in which absolute Truth can only be handed down by certain authority figures (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 132).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, students in a relativistic position contextually define knowledge based on experience. Students in the relativistic position are able to differentiate between what makes a person an ‘authority’ and use information from many sources to create their own perception of truth (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 132). Using the element of service, educators can provide a context within which students can move from a dualistic to a relativistic position.

The catalyst for development through the nine positions is dissonance between an initially held belief and new, contradictory information. This dissonance can be felt emotionally or cognitively when an experience is counter to feelings or ideas to which a student is accustomed. When confronted with dissonance, a dualistic thinker will simply accept new information from the authoritative source based on extrinsic qualifiers of authority, without question, and overwrite their own previously held beliefs or feelings. However, if a student is prompted and encouraged to reflect on new information as it relates to what he or she previously knew, the student will begin to realize that he or she has the ability to choose his or her own criteria for assessing truth.

Kessler (2000), a proponent for engaging learning strategies, writes the following about emotional dissonance as it relates to service:

As we ‘witness’ the state of our emotions, we can discover the equilibrium that is a precondition for social and emotional capacities essential to all learning: understanding and managing one’s own emotions, recognizing the emotions of others as distinct from one’s own, managing and reducing stress, becoming ready to focus on new information. (p. 39)

When students face more dissonance within experiences and develop ways to reconcile that dissonance, they become able to think more critically about new information and its source.

Dissonance triggers a student to move into a position of self-guided truth based on personal experiences where the student is the ultimate authority on accepting or rejecting information as truth (Clinchy, 1989, p. 16). When students engage in a service project, they are exposed to more diverse ideas and people than they would regularly encounter, thus students are forced to reconcile any discrepancies that arise from such encounters and potentially conflicting sources. If educators provide an appropriate forum and tools for students to reconcile these differences, students will be motivated to investigate their curiosities about the different and unknown rather than shy away from them. Through this process of reconciliation, students develop personal ways of coming to their own truth. Critical reflection is one way to promote comparison of personal ideas and beliefs with those of others.

Reflection: Successful Intelligence (Sternberg)

In service-learning, reflection is the key to making sense of an experience and any personal dissonance produced by the experience. Traditional teaching methods focus on the conveyance of knowledge from teacher to student. Service-learning holds personal experience at an equal level to knowledge gained in the traditional learning process. David Kolb (1984) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Transformation happens as a result of active, critical reflection (Kolb, 1984).

Dewey’s second condition for increasing student learning is to foster student interest. Students generally like to study subjects in which they are interested or in which they do well. Successful intelligence is “the use of an integrated set of abilities needed to attain success in life, however an individual defines it” (Sternberg, 2004b, p. 274). In other words, in order to be successful, a student needs to have the ability to relate to information in a way that is relevant to the student’s own strengths and interests, not just those areas in which they are already doing well.

Sternberg based the idea of successful intelligence on Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1999), which suggests that our school systems reflect our culture by teaching, testing, reinforcing, and rewarding students in terms of two primary kinds of intelligence: verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical. Multiple Intelligence Theory addresses the fact that humans have additional strengths, such as visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence that are not traditionally valued in an academic setting (Gardner, 1999). The key difference between these two theories is Gardner’s focus on what is being learned and Sternberg’s focus on how students are learning.

Successful intelligence addresses the challenge of encouraging students to successfully relate to course material, regardless of its type. Successful intelligence also focuses on students’ strengths and weaknesses as they apply to the learning process. Finally, successful intelligence values learning methods that use analysis, creativity, and practical application of knowledge, in addition to memorization, in order to expand learning for students with strengths in other areas (Sternberg, 2004a).

Sternberg (2004b) stated that “when students think to learn, they also learn to think” (p. 275). When students know their strengths and how they best relate to information, they can approach learning in a way that is interesting to them. Kessler (2000) noted that “teachers often ignore the larger questions of personal meaning and purpose in life. Educators teach *mechanical* techniques that engage the rational mind. They rarely give students tools to access what wisdom they might possess about their life mission” (p. 60). Critical reflection provides an avenue for students to demonstrate learning without being held to one objective measure of understanding.

Service-learning allows for many different ways of approaching material within a course through various reflection techniques, thus allowing students to tease out their respective strengths in a more appropriate context. When students are prompted to dig deeper into their service experience, they are being trained to look beneath the surface of issues and be creative and flexible in developing their perspective. As students gain a better understanding of their successful intelligences and identify learning tools and methods which appropriately fit their learning style, they will be more apt to identify ways to be successful in various learning environments (Sternberg, 2004a).

Personal Connection: Cathexis and Involvement (Astin)

Many academicians discount how students as individuals interact with their campus environment, other people in the community, and their course material. Traditional pedagogies focus on elements external to the student: physical resources, professor quality, and curriculum. Using these pedagogies, institutions have viewed the student as a “black box,” wherein knowledge is something extrinsic to the learner. Education is looked at as a process of passive consumption of information on the part of the student (Astin, 1984, p. 520).

Dewey’s third condition to increase student learning is that a student must be intrinsically motivated to learn. Astin’s theory of student involvement adds a unique concept to address this condition: *cathexis*. Cathexis is the idea that people invest energy into objects, other people, and activities outside of themselves (Astin, 1984, p. 523). If a student invests significant time or psychological and physical energy into an activity, they are “cathecting.” The more cathecting done with an object or idea, the more intrinsically motivated a student is to be engaged with that object (Astin, 1984). For Astin, the key to involvement is the behavioral manifestation of such psychological connections, as measured through effort and behavior. Briskin (1996) echoed this sentiment when he said, “Seeing through and beyond is essential in our work...we cannot know ourselves, or the [environment] we are a part of, in any depth unless we engage the full breadth of our humanity, vitality, and understanding” (p. 9).

Service-learning provides an opportunity for students to get outside of their books, and outside of themselves, and cathect with real people and real situations about which they are learning. Students can interact with real people, address real issues, and initiate real change. In service-learning students are able to find an intrinsic motivation to drive their learning process and link it to actions in their lives outside the classroom through a service project. If students are able to increase their involvement within their courses and cathect with course material, according to Astin and Dewey, learning outcomes will improve.

Beyond the First Year

“The supreme task of all political institutions...shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society.”

-John Dewey, 1957

Additionally, findings suggest that service participation is positively associated with a number of short-term cognitive and affective outcomes during the undergraduate years (Astin & Sax, 1998). Among other things, research has found that service participation positively affects students’ commitment to their communities, to helping others in difficulty, to promoting racial understanding, and to influencing social values. In addition, service participation directly influences the development of important life skills, such as leadership ability, social self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and conflict resolution skills. Service participation also has unique positive effects on academic development, including knowledge gained, grades earned, degrees sought, and time devoted to academic endeavors (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Students who are taught analytically, creatively, and practically perform better on assessments, regardless of the form of assessment (i.e., multiple choice, essay, verbal, etc.). That is, they outperform students instructed in conventional ways, even if the assessments are for straight factual memory (Sternberg, 2004b). Moreover, research shows that these techniques succeed regardless of subject-matter area. Data collected with thousands of students shows that training to understand and use one’s own successful intelligence in the classroom works for many students, in many subject-matter areas, at many grade levels (Sternberg, 2004a).

Every course does not need to be service-learning oriented. Some course material does not lend itself well to such a design. However, if students are given the appropriate tools, they can develop personal ways to make sense of course-material through active reflection, and they can connect course material to their experience outside of the classroom. The impact of such habits can last throughout their college careers and into their professional careers (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Conclusion

“If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he had imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him.”

-Henry David Thoreau

Literature overwhelmingly supports the importance of student involvement and development within the first year of college because it is a transitional time in which students are striving to gain acceptance into academic and social areas of their college community (Furco, 2002). Service-learning encompasses the elements of the aforementioned theories to encourage student development toward relativism, awareness of how to learn successfully, and how to connect emotionally and psychologically with their individual disciplines during their collegiate years. The implementation of service-learning represents a move toward creating self-aware, conscientious, and motivated learners.

As the academy strives to open its doors to an increasingly diverse population, form and function of institutions must change to accommodate an accompanying diversity of student needs. Service-learning can address the needs of modern first-year students in the context of first-year programs in a way that current programs do not. Students are typically taught to build on knowledge throughout their college experience. Service-learning principles can teach students how to build on their skills for learning, working, and relating with other people, as opposed to teaching students how to simply process information.

When first-year programs began, students were more intrinsically motivated to think and learn on their own. However, students today are not as involved in their own learning. Teaching them how to efficiently acquire information is only treating the symptoms of a disengaged student. Implementing service-learning in first-year courses can give students the skills and motivation to not only achieve high grades, but also to develop intellectually, socially, and personally.

This article only touches the surface of service-learning principles as they apply to first-year programs and the academy. Additionally, service-learning is only one form of experiential education that can be applied to traditional learning environments to enrich student learning experiences and aid in student development. It is this author's hope that the theories and research presented in this article will motivate educators to consider how more active learning strategies can supplement their teaching practices toward supporting more holistic student development. Students are becoming more complex, the world is becoming more complicated, and following tradition is not always the best method to help students adapt to the changes they will face after leaving our institutions. Service-learning provides the opportunity and support for students to break free of conventional ways, guide their own development, and follow their own path.

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