Service-Learning Course Design: What Faculty Need to Know

Based on a Magna Online Seminar titled “Service-Learning Course Design: What Faculty Need to Know” presented by Barbara Jacoby, Ph.D.

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About This White Paper

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Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 5

1. What Makes Service-Learning Unique: Reflection and Reciprocity ........................................... 6

2. Service Learning Works Across the Disciplines and in Varied Situations .............................. 13

3. Step One: Designing the Process —
   Aligning Pedagogies with Desired Outcomes ............................................................................. 16

4. Step Two: Successful Community Partnerships:
   Principles and Types of Service .................................................................................................... 19

5. Step Three: Finding the Right Community Partner
   and Working with Students ............................................................................................................ 22

6. Step Four: Assessing and Evaluating the Service Design — Distinctives and
   Examples ................................................................................................................................................ 25

7. Step Five: Developing a Syllabus — Evaluating Learning .......................................................... 28

8. Step Six: Sidestepping Design Pitfalls of Communication and Expectations ................... 31

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 32

Appendix A: Resources ........................................................................................................................ 33

Appendix B: Checklist ............................................................................................................................ 35
**Introduction**

Service-learning is recognized as a high-impact educational practice. With its unique combination of academic content, service experience, and critical reflection, more and more faculty members are adopting it as time goes on.

It is not surprising that service-learning is a hot issue among faculty worldwide. They say service-learning enhances both their teaching and the students’ learning. By integrating course content with real-life experience, service-learning has tremendous potential to meet faculty goals for student learning. As a faculty member, you will find it stimulating to explore connections between your discipline and critical questions facing our global society.

Service-learning is also a win-win situation for community organizations and students. Community organizations benefit from a surge of new ideas, energy, and assistance as delivery of their essential services is enhanced. Students deepen their understanding of course content, increase their ability to solve problems creatively and collaboratively, combine theory with practice, and increase their understanding of the complexity of social issues. It sharpens their ability to solve problems with creativity and collaboration – skills highly valued in the workplace.

It is true that the process of creating a service-learning course can seem overwhelming to faculty. Indeed, if it were as simple as waving a magic wand, then all service-learning courses would run smoothly and without a hitch.

But that’s not how it works in the real world. The outcomes covered here are possible with the help of a well-designed and well-taught service-learning course. So whether you’re just getting started with service-learning, introducing it into a new course, or bringing it into a course you’re already teaching, this white paper will guide you.

There are many challenges and pitfalls to avoid. But the purpose of this white paper is to break down the process of creating a service-learning course design into manageable steps using proven advice and strategies.

Areas we will cover are defining what service-learning is, service-learning across various disciplines, the importance of both reflection and reciprocity, and steps to take – designing the process, building a successful community partnership, finding the right partner, assessing and evaluating service design, creating a syllabus, and avoiding potential pitfalls.
WHAT MAKES SERVICE-LEARNING UNIQUE: REFLECTION AND RECIPROCITY

Let’s start out by defining our terms. The definition of service-learning differentiates it from volunteering and old-fashioned community service.

It is true that there are many definitions about service-learning floating around, some since the 1970s. In fact, each reader of this white paper probably has one. But this definition is a solid working one, succinctly covering the distinctives:

“Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes.” (Jacoby, Service-Learning in Higher Education, 1996)

Service-learning is based on the principle that learning doesn’t necessarily occur as the result of experience itself, but rather, as a result of reflection designed to achieve specific outcomes.

Two key elements that need to be drawn out are the concepts of reflection and reciprocity. Let’s look more carefully at the first.

In the middle of the definition of service-learning is this phrase: “Structured opportunities for reflection.”

Reflecting combines two processes — the affective and the cognitive. It connects service and learning in a very intentional way.

Reflection is fundamental to successful service-learning because it is the element that connects service and learning. Reflecting is the bridge, like a hyphen, that connects the two.

We know that learning doesn’t necessarily occur just as a result of an experience. In fact, students sometimes come away with the wrong message. Service-learning is based on the idea that learning doesn’t occur only as a result of an action or experience, but as a result of intentional reflection on that experience, in the service of achieving specific learning outcomes.

In service-learning, opportunities for learning aren’t incidental to the course — instead, they are integrated into the course or program structure, instead of being added on at the end. Reflection must be designed by intention to facilitate the desired learning outcomes.
A reliable guide to help you is The 4C’s of Critical Reflection provided by Eiler, Giles and Schmiedes (1996). It has guided many service-learning practitioners in planning and implementing reflection activities.

Let’s look more closely at each of the types of reflection so you can see how you can use them with a course:

**Continuous Reflection:** It occurs before the service-learning experience, during it, and afterward. It is not something to be tacked on at the end of the service. It is not an afterthought. For the deepest learning to occur, reflection must be ongoing.

**Connected Reflection:** This type of critical reflection builds bridges between learning content, personal reflections, and firsthand experiences. It • makes theories real,
• turns statistics into people and situations, and
• raises questions that, were it not for the service experience, might not be raised.

But it must be intentionally connected to the content.

**Challenging Reflection:** Challenging reflection means reflecting so old questions are seen in new ways, new perspectives are revealed, and new questions are raised. It avoids simplistic, one-dimensional conclusions. It examines causality. And as the service-learning course goes on, it raises deeper and deeper questions.

Balance is the key with this “C.” What’s optimal is a balance of challenge and, at the same time, support of the student. Too much challenge with no support means students may go inside themselves and avoid the risks necessary to experiment with new ideas and points of view. If there is a lot of support but a lack of challenge, students may not leave their “comfort zones” and little or no learning or growth is likely to occur.

**Contextualized Reflection:** This means that topics and activities for reflection are meaningful with regard to the experiences the students are having at the community site. There is meaningful interaction occurring between the student, the activity, and the setting. It may or may not involve community members. The form, process, and setting of the reflection should be guided by context.

Context can relate to critical incidents or what’s going on in students’ lives. When the Haiti earthquakes occurred, a number of colleges and universities had courses across the academic spectrum in which they stopped what they were doing and used critical reflection to relate issues about the earthquake to their course content. If it is mid-term exam time, students may be stressed and may find it difficult to concentrate.
We have covered the elements of true reflection. Here are some things that true reflection is not:

- a didactic retelling of what happened
- an emotional outlet for feeling good about performing service or feeling guilty for not doing more
- getting on your high horse or soapbox
- a neat and tidy exercise that’s performed and then put on the shelf

True reflection is ongoing and it is messy. It yields more questions than answers, and more openings than closings.

While there are countless ways to do reflection, there are four modes of student reflection — writing, telling, activities, and multimedia.

Writing is usually the predominant form in academic courses. It offers the opportunity for the student to improve writing skills, organize thoughts to make coherent arguments, and generate a permanent record of service experiences that can become part of their future learning activities. It is the mode students use most often.

Writing can take the form of papers — weekly papers, or a major research project at the end of the course, or journaling. Many students enjoy journaling about their service experience. Journals can be subjective, giving students the opportunity to connect with their feelings and emotions with regard to the academic content.

Telling is any type of oral delivery — telling a story, monologues, dialogues, class conversations, and discussion. Other students benefit from storytelling, as does the student storyteller.

Reflecting can happen through action such as role-playing, which often works well for students. If activities are done with groups, it helps develop teamwork skills. You can engage students in multimedia activities using collages, drawings, photo or video essays, musical compositions and other art forms.

Telling stories through digital media means students combine narrative with still photographs. A student might prepare a three-to-five minute story, and reflection can occur rather deeply.

Here are some examples of how critical reflection is used in service-learning courses.
Example 1: Nursing Course
A definition of critical reflection: “A window through which the practitioner can view and focus himself or herself within the context of her own lived experience in ways that enable her to confront, understand, and work toward resolving the contradictions within practice between what is desirable and actual practice.”

A written reflection activity was to describe a critically reflective nurse practitioner. Students answered these questions: “What does a critically reflective practitioner do?” “How do you know that she is reflecting critically?” “How does this help you think about yourself as a critically reflective practitioner?”

In this case, the faculty member chose to ask the students to describe rather than define a critically reflective practitioner. This provides a more complete picture that’s richer in detail. For the students, describing seemed less removed, distant, and unreachable to them. Describing made it easier for them to relate reflection to their nursing practice and provided a better springboard to improvement.

Once students have written their description of a critically reflective practitioner, they reflect on that through those questions and additional ones: “Did you think about a nurse you know?” “How did you draw on other courses, readings, or discussions (synthesis)?” “Did you think only within the nursing context, or more broadly?” “What attitudes, values, and assumptions are evident in your description?”


Example 2: Contemporary Art Theory Course
This is a very different type of course from the nursing course. Learning outcomes here include employing art theory in critical thinking about a wide range of contemporary art developments, and understanding issues encountered by all involved in the arts, such as artists, museums, galleries, collectors, and critics.

Students are given questions to reflect on early in the semester: “What is contemporary art?” “What are we doing and saying when we purchase, sell, collect or display art?” “How do you assign value to pieces of art?” “Is selling, collecting, and displaying art a good thing, a neutral thing, or an insidious thing?”

The selected reading list for this course is long and varied. Some examples: write about a particular movement in art, readings about theories of leisure, alienation, private property, art and money, censorship, and subsidizing the arts.

After the students do more reading and participate in more discussion and assignments, the
class discussion questions become more complex and critical. Examples: “What is style?” “What is taste?” “What's the difference between collecting and appreciating art?” “Does art require public support?” “What about corporate support?” “Is there a right to display controversial art? Should there be?”

Rex Weil, Contemporary Art Theory: Markets and Collecting, ARRT 489C, University of Maryland

Example 3: Psychology of Domestic Violence Course
This is a two-semester course for advanced psychology students. They spend the fall semester looking closely at the theories that lie behind the causes and effects of domestic violence as well as the facts. In the spring semester, they counsel with victims of domestic violence in a battered women’s shelter.

Here is a list of course outcomes:
Understand the dynamics and effects of domestic violence; analyze the effects of gender, culture, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status on domestic violence victims and their children; and critique community response and intervention to domestic violence.

Students complete a weekly service reflection paper. It is two pages and includes multiple academic references. There’s a maximum of one paragraph allowed on what occurred at the service site. Then comes critical reflection on how the service experience relates to the course readings.

As the course progresses, the analysis gets deeper. Here are some service analysis paper topics: “What did I learn this week about women or children in crisis?” ”What is consistent with the readings?” “What’s inconsistent?” Here you can see the back-and-forth between theory and practice. “What does this inconsistency mean?” “How does culture, race, and socioeconomic status influence my service work?” “How does the agency address cross-cultural issues?” “If I directed the agency, how would I address those issues?”

Here’s how the professor graded reflection activities: with the weekly reflection papers, students received four points for an exceptionally thoughtful critique that integrates course concepts and researching into an analysis — and analysis is the key.

They received three points for a very good, thoughtful critique that applies course concepts and research. Two points were given for an average to below-average analysis that doesn’t thoroughly integrate course concepts and research. One point was given for doing the assignment but not doing it with much thought.

Karen M. O’Brien, Community Interventions: Service-Learning: Domestic Violence II, PSYC 319D, University of Maryland
Evaluating reflection: What’s the best way to go about evaluating reflection? One potent method is called double-entry journaling. On the right hand side of the page, students answer subjective questions: how did you feel at the service site? How did you feel about encountering the organization’s clients for the first time?

On the left-hand side, provide more objective reflection through questions related to the course and the academic content. Students can draw arrows to indicate the connections between their subjective reactions and the objective content. The resulting class discussions can be quite rich.

Another resource for evaluating reflection can be found in an article by Bradley (1995) in Resources. It provides a rubric you can use. You can determine whether a student’s response to what their interaction is like in a service situation. It will help you see whether what they’re seeing is rooted in just their own perspective, or whether they’ve started to realize that there are various perspectives on an issue, or whether their previous perspective isn’t accurate and where they go from there.

Once your design for reflection is set, you’ll want to consider how to use your class time in other ways. It is a given that the service experience is one aspect of course content. Then, you can see what other readings and materials will best complement that service.

Because not all students will be familiar with service-learning and how it differs from other types of learning, you have several options to help familiarize them. For example, you can present material that would be an introduction to the practice of service-learning. Some examples are the community context, presenting historical and theoretical perspectives, explaining the needs that will be addressed in the course, and a look at the root causes of the needs that the students’ service will address.

You will also want to consider other class activities such as faculty lectures, and guest lectures including members of organizations that address issues your students are studying. Other options are small group activities, book reviews, research reports, and discussions. Consider the timing of your class activities. This is important for maximum effect. In addition to service, decide what assignments will be required, and when — whether it is on a weekly basis, biweekly, at midterm, or at the end of the course.

Reciprocity means partnership
The second distinctive of service-learning is the principle of reciprocity. This refers to how we relate to the community as partners, in a spirit of partnership, and in terms of both assets and needs.

You can think of it as a two-way street. It means that all participants — faculty, community organization participants and students — expect that they will receive as well as give, learn
as well as teach, and be served as well as serve. For faculty members, it means engaging in
dialogue with community partners.

Reciprocity also should act as a reminder that the community is not a learning laboratory
for our students. Of course, that might seem obvious. But in fact, there are many community
organizations that would say that this hasn’t always been the case.

In high-quality service-learning, which is the goal to strive for, students will see how the
course is relevant to issues facing them in real life. They’ll grow to understand the
interdisciplinary nature of problems and solutions. They’ll learn about the complexity of the
social fabric, and how they can be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. They’ll
have the opportunity to act on real problems and engage with individuals most affected by
factors like racism, sexism, poverty, depression, and oppression.

The community also benefits from the two-way street of reciprocity. For one, the
organization gains new energies to broaden their delivery of services, or they are able to
begin new ones. They might be pointed to fresh approaches to a problem or a challenge
facing them at the current time.

Contrast this with the way of seeing the community as only a learning laboratory for
students. Everybody comes out ahead thanks to the power of reciprocity.
Service Learning Works Across the Disciplines and in Varied Situations

While it is easy to see how service-learning meshes with courses in the social sciences, public health and education, can it work equally well in other areas, such as the hard sciences and the humanities?

While service-learning is not appropriate for every course, it can and does work well in every discipline. No matter the discipline, research has shown that service-learning helps students identify and examine the “big questions” and the social context in which the disciplines are situated. It also asks students to consider a discipline’s knowledge base and how it is used in real practice, and consider the larger questions that lie outside the boundaries of many traditional courses. With service-learning, students see the interdisciplinary nature of problems and solutions. They see the complexity of the social fabric. They love seeing the relevance of course content to real-world issues.

Can you work service-learning into your curriculum so there’s time for both? Don’t think of it as “working in” service-learning, but as designing or redesigning the course. If you add a service-learning element to an existing course, remove another element. If you’re adding an assignment (service), reduce the volume of assignments accordingly.

Service-learning: required or optional? There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. Requiring service-learning makes it easier for the faculty member and better enables students to share experiences in class discussions. On the other hand, making it optional addresses the concerns of students who can’t do service-learning because they don’t have the time. So you offer Sociology 105, Social Problems, then offer Sociology 105 SL, the service-learning version. Offer them at the same time so students can opt for one or the other.

Here’s an example: a College Writing course was divided into two tracks. That means service-learning was optional. In the service-learning track, students performed tutoring and mentoring two days a week, one hour a day throughout the entire semester. They did journaling each week, drawing on their service-learning experience and written texts. They did a final research paper based on the experience and traditional library work.

Some of the readings the students do revolve around educational equity and inequities and some of the difficulties some citizens have accessing high-quality education. That ties in to the tutoring they do.
The second option, without service-learning, requires that students do research at the library and on the Internet. They are required to write weekly essays. They do an annotated bibliography with detailed overviews related to the essay topics. They also write a final research paper.

Service can be equal to written work in terms of learning potential. Here are three examples of how that works itself out in three very different disciplines — the first engineering, the second French, and the third, a biology course called Animal Cognition and Consciousness.

In an Engineering Design course, students worked in groups of three or four to design a playground. This was done in conjunction with the community partners.

Here are examples of the texts they used: Service-Learning, Engineering in Your Community, The Basic Handbook for Public Safety, and An Introduction to the Service Profession. You see the width in the range of readings.

Other assignments in this course are first, students develop a personal Web page and they compile a portfolio. These are what they would also compile as professional engineers. They do careful, intentional reflection in a weekly journal.

One of the learning outcomes was to conceptualize the process of engineering design. That includes how to approach a problem, the impact of social and technical factors on design, effective communication in the design process, and engineering and the democratic process.

The second example is with a very different course — intermediate French.

When Dr. Jacoby taught intermediate French, one of her course objectives was that students could engage in conversation about current issues and be able to read a newspaper in French.

She assigned them the task of picking an issue they were interested in and reading three articles from the current French press, three from the current American press, and report to the class what they read.

Then they were asked to do service in an organization, and engage the class in a conversation about what they did at the service site, what they learned, and how it compared to what they’d read in the newspapers.

A third example is the biology course cited briefly in Chapter 7, Animal Cognition and Consciousness, taught at Case Western University.
Here’s their learning outcome: “Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the philosophical questions surrounding consciousness, thought, scientific methods, incognitive ethology, and debates around the ethical treatment of animals.”

Students in this course provided 25 hours of service at the Animal Protective League. Their duties were interacting with the animals in various ways, assessing and evaluating the behavior of shelter animals, and then providing foster care for an animal, too.

There is a wide variety of required reading — about minds, cognition, animals, and studies of behavior. There are classic and contemporary ones.

There are also other assignments — ten minipapers throughout the length of the course, structured reflection and discussion days in which students must prepare in advance to respond to discussion questions. There’s also a final research paper and presentation.

**Rural settings:** What about service-learning programs in a rural environment? This presents a unique set of challenges. Schools in rural areas often have multiple needs that can be filled by service-learners. Often there are fewer community-based organizations, and those that exist may be farther from students.

Consider online service. A website, The Extraordinaries (www.beextra.org) offers “micro” service activities that can be done online, either individually or in groups. Online service works very well for adults already overburdened with other obligations.
Step One: Designing the Process — Aligning Pedagogies with Desired Outcomes

When looking at course design, the first question to ask is, “What pedagogies will align with desired learning outcomes?”

You know that learning outcomes are hot topics for discussion today. They’re required by all the regional accrediting associations at the course major and college levels. Learning outcomes need to be stated in concrete, measurable terms. And, they also need to make it clear to students what they can expect to gain from the course.

And there are other concerns you should address, too. For example:
- What do you want students to know as a result of taking the service-learning course?
- What desired learning outcomes are best achieved through service-learning? Why?
- What new awarenesses do you want them to gain?

In the previous section, we said, “Service can be equal to written work in terms of learning potential.” Let’s look at that more closely.

**Service can be equal to written work in terms of learning potential.**

As faculty members, we understand what it means to select and use a text in a course to enhance student learning. When looking at using service-learning, a good guideline is to look at it as the equivalent to text. While it is not literally a text, it serves an equivalent function. Service can be equal to written work in terms of learning potential.

When it comes to using a text, we can make it required or optional. The same applies to “service-as-text.” We determine how much of the texts students will be required to read and we can determine how much, or how many hours of service students will do. We know how to provide structures for reading, analyzing, and discussing, and evaluating a text.

This means the service experience and the course materials are equivalent to course content. Second, like text, you must decide which service experiences are appropriate for the course, and whether they’ll be optional or required. Third, it means structures need to be provided so students can thoroughly read, analyze, and discuss the “text.”

Finally, it is necessary to evaluate how well students have learned. The service-learning-text analogy suggests that evaluation should be based on what students learned from their experience.

What about readings that complement the service? There are various options, such as multiple texts the faculty member selects. In a service-learning course, these readings are
often about an introduction to service-learning.

The types of reading you choose should answer these questions:
- What is the pedagogy about?
- What is the community context students will be working in?
- Who are the people students will see and be working with?
- What needs will the students’ service address?
- What historical and theoretical perspectives underlie the need for service?
- What are the root causes?

Let’s look more closely at creating a course design.

Here are three courses, with an overall course description, a look at the service-learning outcome and how it was achieved.

**Example 1 from a Spanish course:**

Students in this course work in an organization providing services to recent immigrants from Latin America. Using Spanish, the students interview clients about their needs. Then they report the answers to the organization in a format it has requested and that meets their needs.

**Desired learning outcome:** Demonstrate an understanding of the common social, cultural, and economic issues immigrants encounter when arriving in the United States.

**How it was achieved:** Students worked with an organization providing services to recent Latino immigrants. With assistance from organization members, they crafted questions that they asked immigrants and provided the answers to the organization. Another outcome was to sharpen students’ language skills.

**Example 2 from an Introduction to Chemistry course:**

The students in this course take and analyze water samples from the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. At the same time, they’re studying the periodic table. That interaction brings the table alive as they study the chemicals that cause the pollution. The results are reported to an organization that uses the information to improve the ecological health of the Bay.

**Desired learning outcome:** Identify the causes of pollution in Chesapeake Bay.

**How it was achieved:** Students worked with a conservation organization and took water samples from the Bay, analyzed them, and added them to the organization’s database. That
organization then used that information to help them lobby for additional funding to preserve the Bay.

**Example 3 from an American History course:**

**Desired learning outcome:** Describe the lingering effects of earlier interactions between European and native Americans in today’s American society.

**How it was achieved:** Students tutored at a school near a reservation close to campus.

Obtain approvals quickly. Once you have your learning outcomes in hand, get approvals underway as soon as possible on your campus. You’ll need to find out what approvals are necessary on campus before you can teach the course. Remember that new courses often require multi-level approval by curriculum committees and other campus officials. The key here is to know what your institution requires before you proceed too far into the design process.
STEP TWO: SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: PRINCIPLES AND TYPES OF SERVICE

Of course, as faculty members, we’re concerned with learning. It is critical to realize that while most faculty are used to working independently, service-learning is very different than other courses. Working successfully with a community partner is essential. Decisions must be made in conjunction with that community partner. If it is not worth their time and effort, the service-learning experience won’t be successful.

When looking at the factors that lead to a successful community partnership, it is helpful to know the five principles — the five “Cs.” (The first three are taken from Stoecker & Tryon, E. A. (2009), Resources). They are:

- Communication
- Commitment
- Compatibility
- Cultural understanding
- Change

Let’s look at each element more closely.

**Communication** is the most fundamental component of a service-learning partnership. It is an absolute nonnegotiable. It should not be taken for granted. Communication must occur even before a successful relationship can start. Then, once the relationship gets started, along the way, there’s no substitute for face-to-face meetings. Be sure to hold some of them at the community site. It is also a mistake to primarily communicate through email and on the phone. Those should be secondary to meeting in person.

You will also realize that college faculty members and those in a community organization live in two different worlds. That means you’ll need to work with the partner to find a common language. For example, community partners are likely to scratch their heads over a term like RPT. They will ask, “What is a provost?”

**Commitment** in a service-learning partnership is serious. It may seem obvious, but it should not be taken for granted. The reality is that most community organizations operate on a shoestring budget with few staff. Often, the organization will base its ability to deliver services on the commitment you will give. They will make resource and service delivery choices based on your commitment of students’ time and energy.

Remember that the length of commitment is critical. Many community organizations will ask right away about the length and breadth of faculty commitment. *The stronger the commitment to the organization, the more meaningful the service-learning experience will be for your students.*
The shorter the time the faculty member is committed to the project, the less useful it is to the organization.

Unless a short-term service project is 10 to 20 hours during a semester, and very carefully designed around specific community needs, it will be a net loss for the organization. There are times where a short-term project just is not worth the outlay of staff time, energy, and other resources the organization would be required to provide.

Faculty members should not expect the organization to provide too much to students in a short-term service-learning experience unless a project plan has been carefully worked out beforehand.

Compatibility: A service-learning project is a partnership that requires collaboration. You know a service-learning partnership can be called compatible if one of the partners can accomplish more by working together than they could by working on their own.

A service-learning partnership can be called compatible if one of the partners can accomplish more by working together than they could by working on their own. Compatibility should exist on several levels — such as the learning outcomes you want your students to achieve, and the tasks the community organization needs. There also needs to be compatibility with schedules and the number of hours, and the level of student preparation required related to the nature of the work.

For example, if the organization needs students to conduct group counseling with victims of domestic violence, the students would need to possess advanced counseling or social work skills.

The compatibility factor also reinforces the idea that service-learning is not just about students, but also about the needs of the community organization.

Cultural understanding: This, also, is a huge issue. As mentioned previously in this section, universities and community-based organizations exist in different worlds — hence the term “town and gown.” Each group has different goals and populations to serve. Each group conducts itself and does things differently. As mentioned earlier, we even use different language.

To make matters more complex, often the student will encounter individuals who are very different from them — including gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Students need to be prepared for challenging encounters.
Change: All partnerships are about change to some extent. Consider the degree to which you want change to be part of how you develop your relationship with your community partner. And ask yourself what will change look like for other groups, too — service-learning faculty member, the students, the community, and the university?

Types of service

Remember the service-as-text analogy? Just as there are different types of texts, there are also different types of service. It can be structured in one of three ways.

- **Direct.** Students go to a community site and work directly with clients at the site. A couple of examples are tutoring, and providing stress-relief exercises for nursing home residents.
- **Indirect.** The activity occurs onsite, but there’s no direct contact with the organization’s clients. Examples are building a playground at a youth center and preparing food at a soup kitchen.
- **Nondirect.** An offsite activity. Examples are developing a website, and a publicity campaign for a nonprofit organization.
**Step Three: Finding the Right Community Partner and Working with Students**

Creating community partnerships is the single aspect of service-learning which proves most puzzling to faculty members new to it. A vital community partnership is critical to a successful service-learning experience.

**Ways to identify a good community partner:** There are many ways to identify the right partner. If there is a service-learning office on your campus, meet with them. Or there may be (depending on the size of your college or university) an office or individual responsible for developing partnerships. There may be a list available of community organizations desiring to work with you.

Some institutions already have well-developed partnerships with community organizations and are seeking to expand them. In other cases, you may need to go through a city or county volunteer bureau such as United Way, or other volunteer online clearinghouses.

Another avenue to tap into is existing service-learning relationships. A couple of examples: a health education department at a university has a ten-year-long partnership with a city near them, where they provide health education to residents.

Another example: A college has a partnership with an elementary school across the street from campus, where various faculty members from the college engage with students in different types of service-learning activities at the school.

Don’t overlook word of mouth, either. Often, individuals have relationships with community groups and might know of or have heard of a community organization desiring a partnership.

**Start early:** Contact potential partners as much as possible in advance of the course start. If you ask the organization to do their part at the last minute, you might be in for an unpleasant surprise. It is likely to prove disruptive and costly for them. Provide a draft of the syllabus to the organization well in advance.

**Questions to ask yourself:** What will each group bring to the partnership, and what will each receive from it? This is something that should be discussed with the representative of the community organization. Other questions you should answer are:
• What’s the optimum number of students?
• What kinds of skills and knowledge do they need?
• How much service is needed? How frequently?
• What are the tasks?
• How will the community partner want to be involved in reflecting on the project?
• How will student service be evaluated?

Invite the partner to class: While it might not work out for them, you’ll find that many representatives of community organizations enjoy interacting with students in a class setting. A good touch is to provide an honorarium and pay for their parking when they come to campus.

Decide how you’ll stay in touch: This is very important, covered under “Communication” in Chapter 5. It is essential to keep things running smoothly and successfully manage the project. Communicate regularly and often.

Identify a back-up service site: If your community partner wants to be involved in selecting students, you need a backup plan for students not compatible with that organization.

For example, a student who recently lost a relative in Iraq may not desire to work at a Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital. Or, you might have a student who’s a devout Catholic and your service site is a clinic that dispenses information about birth control and abortion.

Here’s how one course syllabus puts it: “No student will be asked to work with a community organization that creates a religious, political, and/or moral conflict. In case of such conflict, inform the instructor immediately. An alternative assignment will be substituted that is similar in scope and complexity.”

Prepare students: This might sound like it is stating the obvious, but it is very important. Students need to be fully prepared before they visit the community site, and then at the site. It is critical to talk with your community partner about what they would like students to know before service starts, and what you as a faculty member and they will provide. Avoid having any critical piece of information fall through the cracks.

Orientation and training should cover
• desired outcomes;
• issue information;
• the community;
• the agency;
• the population;
• a detailed list of tasks student will perform; and
• participants’ expectations and assumptions.
Include all logistical details: transportation, what to wear and what not to wear (such as jewelry and purses), what items to bring and not bring (such as cell phones and cameras), and appropriate behavior.

Don’t forget risk management and security issues — there should be others at your campus to help you with this — items like forms, parent signatures for students under 18, fingerprinting, background checks, and IDs, for example.

Regarding orientation and training, you should have answers to these questions:
- Will it be offsite or onsite?
- What tools and materials need to be provided?

Troubleshooting needs to be considered, also. It is crucial to work with your community partner to address potential issues. This again points to the importance of strong communication with the partner, as covered in Chapter 5.

**Locate resources:** Most institutions have someone to help you plan and implement your service-learning course — in a service-learning office, a center for teaching and learning, or maybe in another place such as Student Affairs or the college Dean’s Office in a larger institution.

Other resources to consider are faculty colleagues, your state’s Campus Compact office and national site, and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.

**Expect tough questions:** Expect the unexpected! How will you handle difficult questions? You can bet students and community partners will have some. You should realize there will be some questions you won’t be able to answer — and you shouldn’t try. If you tell that to your students upfront, it will help moderate their expectations.

Remember that this may a very different position for you — for example, if you’ve been teaching the same course for many years, you’re familiar with what questions students will ask.


**Step Four: Assessing and Evaluating the Service Design – Distinctives and Examples**

How to assess and evaluate the service and the learning is the last major step before writing the syllabus in collaboration with your community partner.

Grades and credit in a service-learning course are for demonstrated learning, not for service alone. You don’t award credit or grades just for a student reading a text. You award it for demonstrating learning.

First, look at it from the students’ perspective. How will students demonstrate learning from their service experiences and other assignments? What measures will I use to assess what new knowledge and skills they’ve developed?

You can utilize formative and summative assessment — formative during the course, and summative at the end of the course. You can utilize CATs (classroom assessment techniques) that enable you to ask students on a daily basis what they’ve learned, what’s troubling them, and what bigger questions they have.

There are many ways students can demonstrate learning from their service-learning experiences — there are student journals, required essays, and quantitative scales. There are also complete books on the topic. The most comprehensive is in Resources (Bringle, Phillips, and Hudson, 1994).

How will you grade the course? Here are three examples.

Students in a Biology in Engineering course (Dr. Marybeth Lima, Louisiana State University, 2008) designed and built playgrounds in five neighborhoods, in addition to reading and writing assignments. Here is the grading policy from the course syllabus:

- Midterm exam, 20 percent
- Two quizzes plus lab attendance, 20 percent
- Student portfolio, Web page, journal and selected homework, 25 percent
- Group design project, 20 percent
- Final exam, 15 percent

In a course on Public & Social Service Design (Dr. Carla Tedeschi, Texas Tech University), students used their graphic skills to create promotional campaigns for community-based organizations. Grading was based on four criteria:
• Professionalism — client interaction and class critiques
• Process — problem-solving skills, concept development, and the ability to implement suggestions
• Craftsmanship — presentation boards, electronic files and the organization of a process notebook
• Design — including target concept and appropriateness

In a course on Engineering Design, the grading was broken down like this:
• Midterm and final exams, 35 percent
• Two quizzes plus labs, 20 percent
• Portfolio, 25 percent (this includes creating web page, journal, and homework)
• Group design project, 20 percent. This was unique to this course — students worked in groups of three or four to design a playground, in conjunction with their community partner. It is stated clearly to students that grades for this project are given in consultation with the community partner.

*Make it clear to students from the start that grades reflect the learning that students demonstrate. Grades and credit are not awarded only for doing the service.* Evaluation at the site by the community partner is the difference between a service-learning course and other types of courses.

Consider whether to involve your community partner in evaluations. You’ll find they vary in how much they want to be involved. Some want to, but only if their evaluation will help determine the student’s grade. Others will leave it to the faculty member.

When working with the community partner, decide in advance how you’ll measure the extent to which their desired outcomes have been achieved.
• State outcomes clearly, in measurable terms
• State the objectives from the community organization’s perspective

On the community organization’s side, evaluation involves valuing the achievement of community outcomes. With regard to students, ask:
• Did the benefits exceed the cost?
• Were the students well prepared and equipped?
• Did students fulfill their commitments?
• What could be done better next time?

Evaluation can be objective: For a website design the students create, a 50 percent increase in the number of hits on the site was measured.

Or it can be subjective: The organization’s clients report that they have significantly better access to information from the new website the students created.
In designing the evaluation, consider how you’ll use the evaluation results in future planning. There’s an old saw about evaluation: Don’t go for just the interesting data, but go for useful data, too. With the evaluation in hand, sit down with the community partner to discuss the results and whether the partnership should be changed, expanded, or even dissolved.
Step Five: Developing a Syllabus — Evaluating Learning

A good service-learning course syllabus includes all the usual elements of a syllabus, plus several important, distinct ones:

- A service-learning definition and rationale
- Why service-learning is a part of this class
- The nature of the service-learning experience
- Student roles and responsibilities
- Readings and assignments
- Activities for reflection (remember, some students will be brand new to the concept)
- Grading, reviewing, and revising a draft of the syllabus with the community partner.

Review a draft of the syllabus with your community partner. It is quite likely that they’ll have some suggestions for readings or websites or another perspective to include in one of the points.

Be specific regarding students’ roles and responsibilities — transportation, safety, appropriate dress and behavior, and security procedures. They’re important because they will influence whether students take the course or not.

Here are four examples of successful syllabuses.

Example 1: College writing course

At the start, the syllabus contains this definition: “Service-learning is a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and they reflect on the service activity...to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.”

This syllabus goes on to say whether the service is direct or indirect, that it will occur at the community site, and that it meets needs defined by the community partner, while at the same time, meets course learning goals. It also specifies that without their participation, the services students provide would be out of reach.

Dr. Andrea Adolph, Kent State University

Example 2: Anthropology course

An anthropology faculty member describes the rationale for service-learning in a course called “The Good Society.” This is a community service-learning course, linking theory and practice by giving students the opportunity to apply classroom ideas to the real world.
A course rationale is given — it forces participants to consider issues like social justice not as an abstraction, but as ongoing struggles that touch faculty, students, community partners, and everyone in our society, and force participants to consider what it means to participate in a democracy.

The nature of the service should be spelled out. In this syllabus, students working at the community organization’s Survival Center are told, “Survival Center provides services including a soup kitchen, food & clothing exchange, food pantry & referrals. 70 percent of those who use the Center also volunteer there. The Center has created a sense of community among its visitors & volunteers.”

Specific hours are spelled out: “Volunteers who want to create and sustain this community are needed 9-4 Monday through Friday, and 4-7 Thursday.”

A second program students can participate in goes into specifics, too: “Big Brother/Big Sister sponsors a variety of mentoring programs for youth at risk. The individual mentoring program has flexible hours, requires a car, (and) requires a 9-month commitment.”

A third program, After-School Mentoring, is “walkable from campus, requires a background check and interview, has been a very popular placement. If you are interested, contact _______ immediately.”

Students must know from the start how important it is that they show up at the service site and perform assigned tasks. If I’m a student and I don’t complete the homework, I’m the only one who suffers. What if I fail to show up at my tutoring site and a child is waiting for me? That’s much more serious.

Dr. Arthur Keene, Dr. John Reiff, & Dr. David Schimmel, The Good Society, Univ. of Mass. – Amherst

Example 3: History Course

This syllabus stresses the importance of class commitment: “If you choose to participate in this mentoring program, you are making a binding commitment to mentor a student for the duration of the semester. You must go to ABC Elementary School five miles from campus on Highway XYZ and conduct mentoring sessions on at least ten occasions during the semester.

“If those ten sessions do not equal or exceed ten hours of time with your assigned mentee, you must make additional visits until the hourly requirement is met. You must agree to fulfill the ten-session, ten-hour mentoring requirement, even if you drop this course.”
A tip: *Put the rationale up front* so students who question why they should be participating in a service-learning course will know why.

It also helps because service-learning is so different from traditional course assignments. Include specifics — the type of service activity, the service location, the client population, whether the service is required or optional, how much service students will do, and at what frequency.

Dr. John J. Navin, History of Colonial America, Coastal Carolina University

**Example 4: Zoology Course**

An example of integrating reflective activity into a service-learning course can be found in a syllabus from a 2008 course at Case Western University. Students work at an animal shelter. Structured reflection and discussion days make up 30 percent of the student grade.

In the syllabus, students are told that extra preparation may be required, with topics and questions announced in class. They’re also told they’ll have ten minutes to write their views on the topic and apply theories they’ve learned.

The syllabus states, “While we will be reflecting on emotional experiences, the main point of the discussions is to provide a place for you to evaluate your philosophical views and how our experiences may have altered, finessed, or strengthened (them).”

Dr. Sara Waller, Animal Cognition and Consciousness, Case Western Reserve University
STEP SIX: SIDESTEPPING DESIGN PITFALLS OF COMMUNICATION AND EXPECTATIONS

There are two design pitfalls to avoid: a lack of communication with the community partner, and out-of-sync expectations.

Like any process, many unexpected things will occur along the way. It can’t be stressed too much that *communicating early and continuously will waylay any problems before they become serious.*

If expectations aren’t clearly laid out at the start, trouble can occur. For example, say students are expected to do something they haven’t been prepared for, or they expect to do something the partner can’t offer them. This usually stems from a lack of communication. What if you have a class of 80 to 100 students? While service-learning works best in small classes, with the right situation, it can still work well.

Look at a nondirect service that doesn’t occur at the community site. For example, you might have a communications course where students work with community organizations contacted by faculty members.

The faculty member contacts the organization and says, “I have a group of junior level media communications students available to solve a communications issue.” Students then work in teams to help them revamp their website, create a new brochure, or come up with a theme for a fundraising campaign. You might have 90 students doing nine or ten projects.
Conclusion

Service-learning is a unique experience that can expand and invigorate your teaching experience, help students deeply learn new perspectives and skills, and help a community organization reach its goals.

A successful service-learning course design means knowing, first, what service-learning is — and isn’t. It means utilizing the elements of reflection and reciprocity to tap the power of the service-learning experience. It means knowing that no matter the discipline, service-learning can be used or adapted for it. Then you can choose the right design activities, pursue a successful relationship with a community organization and educate students, assess and evaluate the design, create an effective syllabus and evaluate learning, and sidestep potential problems of communication and expectation.

Trying any new experience is a risk, especially with service-learning. But with the guidance from this white paper, your efforts will stay on course and steer you away from detours and wasted time and energy.
Appendix A: Resources

Print


Web
Campus Compact
[www.compact.org]

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health
[www.ccph.info]

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse
[www.servicelearning.org]

[www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/HE_toolkit_with_worksheets.pdf]
APPENDIX B: CHECKLIST

Step I: Consider how service-learning will help students achieve your desired learning outcomes.

1. What are your desired learning outcomes for the course you are planning? Or, if you are revising a current course design, what are the learning outcomes now and what would you like them to be?
2. What pedagogies align with the desired learning outcomes (e.g., research papers, lecture, demonstration, problem-based learning, class discussions, service-learning)?
3. What desired learning outcomes are best achieved through service-learning? Why?
4. What approvals are necessary before you can teach this service-learning course?

Step II. Determine how the combination of service and academic content will enable students to achieve the learning outcomes.

A. Service

1. What types of service are appropriate for the course?
   - Nature of service activities?
   - Service locations?
   - Client populations?
   - Other factors?
2. Will the service be required or optional?
3. How much service will the students do? How frequently? What duration?

B. Course materials and classroom activities

1. What readings and other materials will complement the service?
   - Introduction to service-learning
   - Community context
   - Needs to be addressed
   - Historical and theoretical perspectives
   - Underlying social issues
2. How will reflection be:
   - Continuous?
   - Connected?
   - Challenging?
   - Contextualized?
3. In what reflection activities — both subjective and objective — will students engage?
   - Telling
   - Writing
   - Activities
   - Multimedia
4. How will you use class time?
   - Lectures
   - Guest speakers
5. What assignments will be required?
   - Weekly
   - Mid-term
   - Final

Step III. Initiating community partnerships.
1. How will you identify community organization partner(s)?
2. Who will be responsible for initiating and developing the partnership?
3. When will you first visit the service site(s)?
4. What are the needs of the community organization?
5. How many students does the organization need? With what knowledge and skills?
   To do what tasks?
6. What role, if any, would the community partner like to have in deciding which students will serve at the site?
7. How much service does the organization want the students to do? How frequently? What duration?
8. Will you do service with the students? If not, will you revisit the service site? At what points?
9. What assets does the community organization have that contribute to your desired student learning outcomes?
10. How well do the community organization’s needs and assets mesh with yours?
11. How would the organization like to be involved in reflection?
12. Would your community partner like to be involved in the classroom? How? What compensation can you provide?
13. How will you stay in touch with your community partner?

Step IV. Assessment and Evaluation
A. Students
1. How will students demonstrate learning from their service experiences and other assignments? What measures will you use?
2. At what points will you assess learning?
   - Weekly, bi-weekly
   - Mid-term
   - Final
3. What will be the community organization’s role in evaluating students’ performance at the service site?
4. How will grades be determined?
5. How will you obtain the students’ assessment of the success of the course?
B. Community

1. How will you measure the extent to which the community partner’s desired outcomes have been achieved?
2. How will you work with your community partner to use the evaluation results to plan for the future of the partnership? Of the course?

Step V. Develop the syllabus.

1. Prepare a draft syllabus including the following elements:
   - Rationale for service-learning
   - Nature of the service experience
   - Students’ roles and responsibilities in the service experience (e.g., time required, location, transportation- See Step IV, #3)
   - How the service experience will be assessed and what will be assessed
   - Readings and course materials
   - Course assignments that connect the service and the academic content
   - Description of the reflective process; reflection activities
   - Grading policy and process
2. Visit the community partner to discuss the draft syllabus. (Provide the syllabus in advance.)
3. Based on community partner input, revise the syllabus as appropriate.
   - What revisions will you make to your expectations of students in terms of their service?
   - What modifications will you make in course materials based on your community partner’s contributions?

Step VI. Prepare to manage the process.

1. What back-up service site can you identify for students who are unable to serve at the community partner site?
2. How will students be prepared for the service experience?
   - On campus?
   - At the service site?
3. What logistical issues need to be addressed?
   - Tools and materials
   - Training
   - Appropriate dress and behavior
   - Transportation
   - Safety
   - Risk management
   - Required security procedures (e.g., forms to be completed, background checks)
4. What problems can be anticipated?
5. What campus resources are available to assist you along the way (e.g., service-learning office, faculty colleagues experienced in service-learning, university counsel, student affairs colleagues)?
6. How will you handle the really tough questions that arise from the students and the community?
Congratulations! You have completed the course design. Go forth and teach your service-learning course!
We Value Your Feedback

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