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More than experiential learning or volunteering: a case study of community service learning within the Australian context

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Community service learning is the integration of experiential learning and community service into coursework such that community needs are met and students gain both professional skills and a sense of civic responsibility. A critical component is student reflection. This paper provides an example of the application of community service learning within an undergraduate health unit at the Queensland University of Technology. Based on survey data from 36 program participants, it demonstrates the impact of CSL on student outcomes. Results show that students benefited by developing autonomy through real world experiences, through increased self-assurance and achievement of personal growth, through gaining new insights into the operations of community service organisations and through moving towards becoming responsible citizens. Students expect their CSL experience to have long-lasting impact on their lives, with two-thirds of participants noting that they would like to continue volunteering as part of their future development.

Keywords: academic service learning; civic responsibility; community based learning; community engagement; community service learning

Introduction

Service learning courses have gained popularity due to the belief that they increase student learning and impart a benefit to society (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Despite its increasing popularity around the world, Australian universities have been slow to embrace community service learning (CSL) as an academic model. Community service learning is the integration of experiential learning into coursework while meeting community needs and imbuing students with civic responsibility (Andrews, 2007). Community service learning goes beyond both the traditional work-integrated learning models, where the intended beneficiary is the student, and volunteering, where the community recipient is the primary beneficiary. Rather, it intentionally ensures equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Bishop & Driver, 2007; Govekar & Meenakshi, 2007). A critical component of CSL is reflection, whereby students consciously consider their involvement in the service and its relation to curriculum content or at least the social conditions giving rise to the service needs in the first place (Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004).

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This paper reports on the impact of a CSL program on the learning outcomes of 36 students within an elective, undergraduate women's health unit at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia. (The term 'unit' is equivalent to a 'subject'.) This was the first time the authors had explored such programs and processes with regard to student contributions to society in terms of civic responsibility, while adding value to their learning experiences. The study aimed to assess students' perceptions of the value of the CSL project in advancing the aforementioned learning goals. A case study methodology was used to guide the feedback from students about the impact of CSL within the unit, based on survey data from the 36 program participants. Findings from this case study suggest that community service learning is of considerable value to students and that well-defined research on CSL, and its theorising within university pedagogy, is warranted.

Background

Community service learning is not a new concept; the tradition of 'learn and serve' is a rich one, dating back to the classical theories of Aristotle and Plato. These theories espoused education as a means to producing good persons, endowing them with both the 'knowledge and disposition to act on that knowledge in pursuit of good ends' (Rocheleau, 2004, p. 3). Many modern theorists, including the classic liberalists Locke, Kant and Mill and romanticists such as Rousseau, continued to give credence to the notion of community service and civic duty as goals of education (Rocheleau, 2004). However, the novel view 'that community service should form part of the educational curriculum itself' has more contemporary origins (Rocheleau, 2004). In the early 1900s the great educator John Dewey criticised Rousseau's overemphasis on the individual and Plato's overemphasis on society. Rather, Dewey (1938) recognised 'the link between the process of learning and democratic citizenship' (as cited in Eyler, 2002, p. 520) and stressed the 'strength of learning from doing' (Dewey, 1937, cited in Vickers et al., 2004, p. 131). Dewey is recognised as the originator of the theoretical foundation for academic service learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Govekar & Meenakshi, 2007; Rocheleau, 2004; Vickers et al., 2004).

The translation of CSL theory to practice is well established in the US, albeit sometimes under alternate terms, including academic service learning or community-based learning. The Peace Corps, founded by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, is about learning through service, in this case through voluntary service overseas. Similarly, within the US education sector, primary, secondary and tertiary students are required to undertake community service learning projects, either within the community in which the institutions are located or internationally. Many US universities now have a designated school for service learning that provides support across departments/ faculties and assists staff to incorporate service learning into curriculum and to establish sustainable, meaningful, long-term community partnerships. Not only has CSL been embraced extensively in the US, but also over the past decade, around the world – including Canada (Hayes, 2006), Hong Kong (Ngai, 2006), South Africa (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2003) and more than thirty other countries (Berry & Chisholm, 1999; Kenworthy-U'ren, 2008).

Pedagogically, service learning is hailed as one of the primary means by which academic learning may be integrated into the real world (Ngai, 2006). Community service learning is open to a diverse range of fields and to date has been incorporated into a variety of university disciplines, including social work, nursing, education,

business and engineering (Karasik & Wallingford, 2007; Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006). Karasik and Berke (cited in Karasik & Wallingford, 2007) note that human service fields and health are particularly well suited to community service learning. The benefits of CSL have been well documented and include a clear impact on students' personal growth – in areas such as their sense of self-worth, political and social skills and developing links with others (Howard, 2003). Service learning research also showed that the students involved experienced more of a link with the community, were more accepting of racial differences, appreciated the function of service in the communities and viewed communities as having problem-solving abilities (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Howard, 2003). It has also been shown to have noticeable impact on students' intellectual development (Ngai, 2006) and 'cognitive moral development, which is related to complexity of thinking about social issues' (Boss, 1994, as cited in Howard, 2003, p. 4). However, with respect to the impact that students' service is having on local communities, Cruz and Giles (2000) noted that research on CSL is only just beginning.

Despite the extensive literature espousing its benefits, until recently, CSL has been under-utilised within the Australian higher education system. Notable exceptions include the Australian Catholic University and the University of Notre Dame (Fremantle, Perth), where CSL, historically, has been adopted in line with their Christian service values (Lavery, 2007). A small number of other secular Australian universities are also embracing service-learning projects but, as noted by Dr Amy Kenworthy-U'ren from Bond University (2008), an internationally recognised expert in the field of service learning, to date this has been only 'on an ad hoc and somewhat reactive rather than proactive basis' (personal communication, 2 December, 2008).

The recent application of CSL in a QUT undergraduate women's health unit is documented in this paper to provide an example of its use in the Australian context and to present the findings from this trial.

The context for the service learning

The unit PUB336 – 'Women's Health' was delivered in second semester of 2007 to a group of 53 students in the School of Public Health at QUT. Contact time was three hours per week. The majority of students were completing or approaching their final semesters of study before graduating from 3-year undergraduate health science degrees. The cohort comprised 47 female and 6 male students, including two international students. The age range was between 19 and 53 years, with an average age of 24 years.

The unit aims were to examine international and national contemporary women's health issues from a social, economic and political perspective and to study the health needs of specific groups of women. There were three distinct components of assessment:

- Part A – Posing and substantiating a research question (oral group presentation – weighting 15%) and discussion participation (weighting 10%);
- Part B – Development of a written communication article based on lecture topics (weighting 30%); and
- Part C – Group implementation of a community service project (total weighting 45%), which included a final project report (weighting 25%), an individual log (critical reflection – weighting 10%) and an oral presentation (weighting 10%).

This article focuses on Part C, the community service project and the individual critical reflection. Service learning as a pedagogy links with QUT's pedagogical goals, 'to provide outstanding learning environments and programs that lead to excellent outcomes for graduates, enabling them to work in, and guide a world characterised by increasing change' (QUT, 2008a) and QUT's civic responsibility goal, 'to strengthen and extend the university's strategic partnership with professional and broader communities to reflect both its academic ambition and its civic responsibility' (QUT, 2008b). Civic responsibility is defined as the responsibility of a citizen – it involves 'active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good' (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2006, p. 1). The university had provided a motivation for this project through a seminar series on service learning with international experts.

The service learning component was 25 hours, to be completed within the 13-week semester. Students allocated themselves to groups of 4–5 students and were given a list of suggested non-government agencies that were either women's health organisations and/or the project undertaken by students was about an aspect of women's health. None of the agencies had been previously approached and students were required to make the initial contact themselves. The agencies ranged in focus, from drug and alcohol issues, eating disorders, culturally and linguistically diverse aspects of women's health, sexual health, violence towards women, chronic diseases and corrective services. Students chose Brisbane-based organisations, although they had an opportunity to engage with national and/or international agencies. Each group of students completed a one-page learning contract that outlined the name of the organisation, the health issue, the name of the supervisor and initial scoping of the project. The learning contract served as a written agreement between the parties involved in the community service placements. The contract stated the responsibilities of both the students and the other parties involved in the placement. It included information about the health issue, the students' objectives and anticipated activities, expected outcomes, timeframes and a list of any issues that needed to be addressed. Students posted profiles of their service learning projects on a specifically designed women's health blog, submitted a final written project report and shared these at an oral presentation that staff from the relevant organisations attended.

The tangible products from the service encounters included the development of a range of brochures on drugs and alcohol and nutrition for young women; production of written materials for an eating disorder association; research on women's health in corrective services; health education brochures for osteoporosis prevention; a literature review for a women's health information centre; fund-raising for a street safety program for women; and a nutrition resource guide for disadvantaged young women. The students were required to write a critical reflection of their experiences throughout the community service projects in which they were engaged.

The final assessment item was a reflective journal, where students were asked to summarise their personal learning within the group setting; outline the health issue, organisation and the skills and knowledge acquired; and critically reflect on the health issue, along with their role in the group project. This reflection consolidated the learning from the service learning assessment. Reflective practice is described as an 'active, dynamic action-based and ethical set of skills, placed in real time and dealing with real, complex and difficult situations' (Bright, 1993, in Pavlovich, 2007, p. 283). Reflection assists the student to link their service with their learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The strong focus on reflective practice embeds the concept of service learning,

enabling intellectual growth, personal development and an increased social commitment from the students (Holland, 2001). The use of an online blog allowed continuous reflection on the students' practices in the community organisation. Writing the blog itself is a learning experience, it encouraged students to engage in self-directed learning while determining their personal focus for the assessment item. In the experiential learning model, learning is 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kolb's learning cycle starts with concrete experience, when students have immersed themselves in the experience they endeavour to articulate that experience through reflective observation. The next phase is abstract conceptualisation, where the students try to integrate and understand their experiences. This may lead to the students constructing theories and strategies, which may then be tested via active experimentation (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Methods

Yin's (1994) case study methodology guided the research; in particular his exploratory 'type' of case study, as it can be a prelude to further social research. This methodology has four stages: designing the case study; conducting the case study; analysing the evidence; and developing conclusions and recommendations. Yin (1994) argues that a 'case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (p. 3). Furthermore, it may enable more comprehension regarding issues that may need to be investigated in greater detail and a researcher is more likely to become aware of important issues of which she or he was previously unaware (Bannigan, 2006). Although case studies, especially single case designs, cannot be generalised to a population (Meyer et al., 2000, cited in Bannigan, 2006), it was not the intention of this case study to represent all undergraduate students, so the methodology was appropriate.

A variety of methods were utilised in the case study to gain an insight into the effectiveness of the CSL experience. This included a survey, designed, administered and processed by staff and self-administered in the final class. The survey consisted of 12 items; 7 of which were assessed with a 5-point-scale, providing options ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (see Table 1). One question was given with only 'yes' or 'no' options, while another presented students with four choices ranging from 'excellent' to 'poor'. The remaining questions were open ended and answered at the respondent's discretion. Of 53 students enrolled in the Women's Health unit, 36 responded (68% response rate), anonymously and on an individual basis in the classroom at the completion of the 13-week semester. Next, a textual analysis of the 'log' containing the critical reflections was undertaken. The data were coded, categories clustered and themes derived. This thematic analysis was checked with a second person for inter-rater reliability to ensure fidelity to the text.

Findings

Questionnaire

See Table 1 for a summary of the questionnaire results. In general, all of the students involved perceived the entire community service experience to be a positive one, with opportunities for personal development and growth and the enhancement of 'real world' skills.

Table 1. Responses to questions 1–7 and 10–11.

Question	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Fair(%)	Poor (%)
Q1. What is your overall impression of the community service experience in making a contribution to women's health and community welfare?	6 (16.7)	21 (58.3)	8 (22.2)	1 (2.8)

Question	Yes	No
Q2. I have participated in volunteer work before	28 (77.8)	8 (22.2)

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Q3. I established rapport with the staff at the community service agency	0	5 (13.9)	12 (33.3)	15 (41.7)	4 (11.1)
Q4. I can see the link between my community service experiences and the objectives of the Women's Health Unit and QUT's civic responsibility goal.	0	1 (2.8)	5 (13.9)	22 (61.1)	8 (22.2)
Q5. As a result of my community service experience I gained new insights into the organisation operations of service organisations.*	0	2 (5.7)	5 (14.3)	19 (54.3)	9 (25.7)
Q6. As a result of my community service experience I gained an awareness of community issues particularly in relation to women's health.	0	1 (2.8)	6 (16.7)	17 (47.2)	12 (33.3)
Q7. As a result of my community service experience, I would like to continue my volunteering as part of my future development.	0	0	12 (33.3)	19 (52.8)	5 (13.9)
Q10. I learned more about myself working in a group.	1 (2.8)	1 (2.8)	7 (19.4)	19 (52.8)	8 (22.2)
Q11. I feel more confident working in the real world.	0	3 (8.3)	7 (19.4)	19 (52.8)	7 (19.4)

Note: *1 missing case.

Of the students that participated in the survey 75% ($n = 27$) reported that their overall impression of the community service experience was 'good' or 'excellent'. Only one student indicated that their overall impression of the experience was 'poor'. At least 80% of students agreed that they had gained new insights into the operations of service organisations ($n = 28$), along with a heightened awareness of community issues, particularly those relating to women's health ($n = 29$). When the students were asked whether they could identify the link between their community service experience and the above goal, over 83% ($n = 30$) agreed or strongly agreed; with 52% ($n = 19$) of students stating that they felt they had established rapport with the staff at the sponsoring organisation.

The community service experience proved very beneficial to those students involved; 75% of participants confirmed that they had learnt more about themselves as a result of the group work, with less than 6% of the cohort answering negatively to this question. Additionally, only three students (8%) indicated that they did not feel more confident in working in the 'real world' as a result of their CSL experience.

Results from this study are unable to predict whether the experience will have any long lasting effect on the students' development in their future careers, although there is some evidence that students are likely to venture into their new professional arenas armed with a stronger sense of self and an increased confidence in dealing with the reality of the workplace. These results indicate that students benefited in the following ways: by developing autonomy through real world experiences; through increased self-assurance and achievement of personal growth; through gaining new insights into the operations of community service organisations; and through moving towards becoming responsible citizens. Students indicated that their community service learning experience would probably have a long-lasting impact on their own lives, with two-thirds of participants noting that as a direct result of this activity they would like to continue volunteering as part of their future development.

Critical reflections on the community service placements

The reflective journals completed by the end of the semester by the students provided insights into the community service placements. This assessment item confirmed that students felt they had benefited significantly from the experiences that the placement provided. Students' comments roughly fell into six categories:

(1) overall impressions of the experience;
(2) reflection on personal role within the group setting;
(3) forming and maintaining rapport with community service staff;
(4) increasing awareness of community issues;
(5) lessons learnt about non-governmental organisations; and
(6) negative perceptions or challenges faced.

In terms of overall impressions, students were positive about the whole experience. Students typically expressed their excitement and appreciation for having finally been given an opportunity to both 'gain insight into the working environment' and 'to develop and enhance [their] skills in relation to teamwork, communication, organisation, conflict resolution and knowledge of the community service sector'. In general, students maintained that while the CSL was 'challenging and demanding' it was still a 'rewarding and valuable experience'. In particular, many students referred to the

positive impact the experience may have in the future as they apply their degrees and knowledge to 'real world' situations. Comments ranged from the more general notion that 'this [opportunity] will definitely help me in the future for other university projects and also in the professional arena', to outlining more civic orientated benefits, such as 'working with a non-profit, non-government organisation that provides such a valuable service to the community has been a very beneficial and gratifying experience, as we have been able to assist the organisation in developing a resource that has the potential to educate and influence the lives of young Australians'. Similarly, another student noted that 'being able to get out into the public with information that may be of some assistance was a very gratifying feeling and gave me a sense of community worth'. Another student commented that the work carried out 'has really inspired me to become involved in further work that encourages the creation of supportive and understanding community environments'.

Although the majority of students' reflections on their personal role within the group setting were positive, a few mentioned that their placements at times proved 'difficult' or were 'laced with conflict'. However, these students still managed to find positive elements within their experiences. One student described the experience as a 'self-directed and intense learning experience' and considered it a platform for personal growth. Another student reflected that it was 'an enlightening experience, which highlighted the importance of developing effective communication within a group and between leaders in order to overcome issues and ensure that projects run smoothly and successfully'. Overall, student reflections showed that the majority were satisfied with their contributions and those of other group members during the projects. Many learnt valuable skills on how to handle both large groups and various levels of authority, while working cooperatively with each other, the university and the community service organisation. Students realised the 'importance of constant encouragement as well as recognition and acknowledgement of individual contributions in order to maintain a healthy working environment'. Much of the cohort was surprised and grateful for the confidence that they developed during the community service; those who did not feel confident within their settings did express that it was sometimes difficult to 'contribute to a group if it were filled with stronger personalities than theirs'. Most of these students, however, regarded this experience as a lesson in issues they need to be aware of in the workplace and were happy that this opportunity allowed them to realise the manner in which they operate in such a setting.

Comments referring to the rapport with the staff at the community service agency varied from those that believed the service 'taught them a professional way to handle people outside the university' to statements indicating that 'no rapport was formed; and that the community organisations didn't respect or care about those that were volunteering their services'.

At the end of their service students understood that 'while it is very easy to enter an organisation and have brilliant ideas, being able to mould these ideas into something that works given the constraints placed on community organisations is quite an ordeal'. The project 'opened' students' eyes to the 'importance of health promotion' and provided an overall 'increased awareness of health concerns throughout the community'.

Students developed a 'greater understanding' of and 'greater appreciation' for the role of non-profit organisations. Specific reflections included that the service learning 'introduced me to the importance of the community service sector' and that 'prior to the project … I was oblivious to the amount of effort and generosity from the volunteers

that goes into [community] organisations'. A further representative statement was that 'working with a non-profit, non-government organisation provided an extremely valuable service to not only themselves but those community members benefiting from the services provided'.

Finally, there were some negative comments expressed in the reflective assessment, primarily related to budgetary constraints, difficulties with teamwork and time management. A very small number of students indicated that they did not feel they had learnt much from the experience or that due to the nature of their 'off site' contribution to the organisation it felt as though they were just completing a group assignment. Negative comments with respect to specific issues, that is team clashes etc., ultimately ended with the student using the negative experience as a positive learning experience, something that the reflective nature of the assessment encouraged.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this small case study are similar to Eyler and Giles (1999) study, where 80% of 1100 students said their service learning experience was 'good or excellent'. In general, the QUT community service learning was perceived as being relevant and beneficial to the students' undergraduate learning experience. Specific comments showed that students viewed their placements as an opportunity to put their professional skills into practice. Furthermore, the students' reflections indicated that they perceived that being able to provide this valuable service to the community was in itself a beneficial and gratifying experience and that they believed that their specific projects had the potential to achieve positive outcomes.

Lave and Wenger (1991) define learning in terms of the particular types of social interactions that offer the appropriate framework for learning to occur instead of trying to determine the nature of the relevant cognitive processes and frameworks. They assert that the majority of theories about learning disregard its fundamental social nature and that learning results from the activity, context and culture in which it is embedded (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This contrasts with most classroom learning activities that involve knowledge that is abstract and out of context. Learning is about social participation, that is, 'an individual as an active participant in the practices of social communities and in the construction of his or her identity through these communities' (Wenger, n.d., cited in Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009a). 'Learners become involved in a 'community of practice', which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired' and this can, in fact, be unintentional rather than deliberate (Lave, 1988, cited in Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009b).

While this 'case study' was not founded, initially, on the theoretical foundations of learners within a community of practice, there are definite components of the structure and outputs of the learning that mirror some fundamentals of Lave and Wenger's learning theories (1991). For communities of practice, there needs to be a 'practice' (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009a). The women's health students are emerging health professionals across public health and nutrition disciplines. They shared and donated their emerging talents through service engagement with staff and clients in women's health organisations, thereby contributing to a shared community of 'women's health practice'. The theoretical position of 'situated learning' was implicit in the design of the community service learning within the unit and the conceptual foundation of 'communities of practice and service learning' provided a base for further thought and curriculum review.

There were a number of limitations in the case study – only 36 of the 53 students enrolled in the unit responded to the survey and only 35 submitted their individual log and reflective journal. Thus it is difficult to make inferences about the wider implications of the study. The log, journal and presentation formed part of the unit assessment and students may have felt inclined to over-sell the positives of the experience rather than give an accurate account. This links in with the broader question of how to assess CSL, which is a commonly reported challenge (Service Learning website, 2001). It should be noted here that assessment in this case study focused on the 'learning' rather than the 'service', and students' reflections are important and contribute richly to learning outcomes that go beyond academic results (Service Learning website, 2001). However, CSL must fulfil the service needs of the community, so any future developments for extending CSL need to ensure the establishment of further sustainable partnerships in the community and attention must be paid to communication, needs assessment and partnerships between university staff, community groups and the students who are undertaking the service learning. It is only when these groups are able to work together that the full benefits of CSL can be realized. Additionally, as curriculum designers we need to develop two areas: first, a deeper analytic insight into the CSL literature, particularly the theoretical pedagogies and paradigms that contribute to meaningful student learning in the context of 'community service'; and, second, an analysis of the type of community engagement by students that ensures that the 'service' needs of women's health organisations are met. The beginnings of such a pedagogical analysis could include the role of situated learning in enhancing student outcomes and reflective practice within this, theories that optimise communities of practice within a CSL context and the application of appropriate assessment 'tools' that assist in deep learning through such social interactions. Regarding assessment, Eyler (2000) claims that 'a primary task for service-learning research, then, is to refine our definition of appropriate intellectual outcomes and to design measurements that are convincing' (p. 13).

This future agenda will also consider potential barriers to successful service-learning courses that include: issues associated with the students' conduct, inadequate matches between the courses and organizations' objectives and insufficient communication between the lecturer and the organization (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Overall, from the students' point-of-view, the application of community service learning within this undergraduate women's health unit appears to have been a success. Students were mainly positive about the experience and considered themselves more able to integrate experiential learning into coursework while meeting community needs and developing a sense of civic responsibility.

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