Pedagogical Variations in Service-Learning and Student Outcomes: How Time, Contact, and Reflection Matter

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This study contributes to more effective practice by assessing how student outcomes are affected by amount and kind of contact with service beneficiaries, and frequency and variety of reflection activities. In particular, the impacts of these pedagogical variations are examined in relation to students’ (1) personal social values, (2) civic attitudes, (3) perceived course effects on civic attitudes and (4) self-reported academic benefits. Results suggest service-learning is more effective as a civic and academic pedagogy when students have (1) at least fifteen to twenty hours of service, (2) frequent contact with the beneficiaries of their service, (3) weekly in-class reflection, (4) ongoing and summative written reflection, and (5) discussions of their service experiences both with the instructors and the site supervisors.

There is now ample evidence that service-learning has positive civic outcomes for students, although we know little about the practices that contribute to these outcomes. Greater moral development, personal social responsibility, and civic values in students have been attributed to service-learning in many qualitative and quantitative studies (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Gray, Ondaatje, Geschwind, Robyn, & Klein 1996; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Myers-Lipton 1994, 1996; Parker-Gwin 1996; Sax & Astin, 1997). Yet, the academic outcomes of service-learning for students are less clear. Some studies find service-learners have neither better course grades nor more self-reported learning than traditional students (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kendrick, 1996; Miller, 1994). Other studies show students enjoy modestly positive academic outcomes (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Sax & Astin, 1997). Perhaps one reason for the mixed research findings vis-a-vis academic outcomes lies in the varied ways that service-learning is implemented and practiced in higher education. Identifying specific service-learning practices associated with positive civic and academic outcomes for students may contribute to more consistent results.

Potentially, service-learning is a tool for student acquisition of academic concepts and critical thinking skills, as well as civic values. However, service-learning is “perceived less commonly as a means of enhancing academic learning,” even by its practitioners and advocates (Shumer & Belbas, 1996, p. 215). But, “unless service-learning advocates become far more comfortable seeing ‘enhanced learning’ as the horse pulling the cart of ‘moral and civic values,’ and not vice versa, service-learning will continue to remain less visited and less important – to the higher education community as a whole than is good for its own survival” (Zlotkowski, 1996, p. 24-25). We can hone the pedagogy of service-learning, as both civic and academic education, through effective practice.

Service-learning generally denotes the inclusion of community service within academic courses and, in theory, structured reflection that integrates the two (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Ehrlich, 1997; Sax & Astin, 1997). In practice, service-learning “is many things to many people” (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). Beyond engaging students in community service, there are few practices universally associated with service-learning. Course instructors implement service-learning in a variety of ways depending upon their goals (Shumer & Belbas, 1996), but share some common considerations. For instance, how much time will students spend in their community service activities? Will their service projects include opportunities to interact with those their service benefits, such as the clients, school children, or patients at their service sites? How much class time will be devoted to talking about students’ service experiences? What kinds of assignments will help students integrate course concepts with service experiences and facilitate their making broader connections? Are there some practices, or variations of them, that are more effective than others? In an effort to specify further “best practices” in service-