

Essay Review

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Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Principles and Techniques

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After a decade of prodigious efforts, outcome assessment and service-learning initiatives are proliferating in American higher education, moving from the margins to the mainstream. It was only a matter of time until these two powerful movements would converge in a meaningful way. This convergence is enabling service-learning to benefit from the process of continuous improvement embedded in serious assessment efforts. It is also providing the assessment movement with new conceptual approaches and models to evaluate the impact of experiential and service-learning on varied constituencies.

In 2001, Campus Compact published *Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Principles and Techniques* by Sherril Gelmon, Barbara Holland, Amy Driscoll, Amy Spring, and Seanna Kerrigan. It is a welcome and timely addition to the literature on assessment and academic service-learning. This handbook offers a rich set of resources on why and how to assess service-learning. More specifically, it offers a multi-constituency approach to assessment, providing techniques and tools to assess the impact of service-learning on students, faculty, community partners, and institutions. Although it is primarily intended to guide the design and implementation of comprehensive assessment at the institutional or programmatic level, the materials can also be adapted for use in individual service-learning courses.

Overview. This work is far more than a how-to workbook. In the first section, the authors carefully set the stage for their approaches to assessment in a succinct and accessible introduction. They provide definitions of service-learning and assessment concepts, articulate rationales for assessing service-learning, identify key questions with which to

begin the assessment process, and offer a conceptual framework for the assessment methods presented throughout the book.

The second section focuses on assessing the impact on students, faculty, community partners, and the institution, each in its own chapter. Each of these chapters provides an overview of relevant literature, research, and past efforts to assess the impact of service-learning; challenges of assessing impact on that constituency; key variables to define operationally the impact of service-learning; a summary assessment matrix; assessment strategies; and examples of assessment instruments and protocols. Each assessment instrument is accompanied by information on the purpose, preparation, administration, and analysis of data for that instrument. Assessment tools include, for example, a *survey* for students, a *classroom observation protocol* for faculty teaching a service-learning course, a *focus group model* to use with community partners, and a *critical incident report* for use by institutional administrators, among others.

The summary assessment matrices are particularly effective in consolidating the information presented in narrative form. Variants of these matrices developed by the authors have been disseminated in other service-learning publications and at conferences, where they have been very well received by faculty and administrators charged with assessing service-learning programs. Tempting as it may be to use and distribute these matrices as stand-alone documents, their value is greatly enhanced by the narrative that clarifies the material, offering insights and *caveats* based on the authors' extensive service-learning experiences. Together, the summary assessment matrices and their accompanying texts offer an efficient and effective vehicle to facil-

itate informed group discussions and decision-making about assessment.

The chapters devoted to the impact of service-learning on each constituency have their own unique strengths. For example, the section on “Impact on Students” does an excellent job tracing the research to date on assessing service-learning’s impact on students and identifying several key dimensions to assess. The authors identify the following dimensions: 1) Awareness of Community, Involvement in Community, Commitment to Service, and Sensitivity to Diversity, 2) Career Development, Understanding of Course Content, and Communications, and 3) Self-awareness, Sense of Ownership, and Valuing of Multiple Teachers. The methods used to assess these dimensions include: surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

The section, “Impact on Community Partners,” is among the strongest in the handbook, revealing the authors’ extensive knowledge, experience, and insights into the complexities of working on service-learning with community partners generally, and on assessment processes specifically. They do not oversimplify or take fundamental issues for granted, such as “Who is the community?” They identify several aspects of the task that reveal their sensitivity to community partners’ interests and needs, acknowledging the complexity of negotiating partnerships that are mutually beneficial and sustainable over time.

As campuses begin to grapple with what and how to assess the impact of service-learning, the identification of which dimensions to assess and the assessment instruments and protocols provided in this handbook can be very useful. They can jump-start the process, helping campus and community planners to envision the rich array of assessment options that are possible. In most cases, campuses will need to consider carefully whether these models fit their needs. When appropriate, campuses will have to calibrate, adapt, or augment these resources to fit their own programs, institutional culture, and community partners. Nonetheless, this collection of resources can provide guidance and models so that individual campuses do not have to reinvent the wheels of assessment, but rather build on the experience and productive efforts of others.

The book concludes with a section on “Methods and Analysis,” capturing best practices for each assessment approach the authors advocate. Seven methods are featured: surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, documentation, critical incident reports, and journals. This section also elaborates on boiler-plate assessment principles and practices, with advice reflecting a service-learning context and the authors’ collective experience and

insight.

Concerns. The work does raise a few concerns, albeit modest ones in comparison to all that this book offers.

Instructional ideology as a source of bias. A feature of the handbook that may be a source of strength to some and a source of consternation—and even alienation—to others is the strong commitment to constructivist pedagogy. Based on beliefs about the social construction of knowledge and its relation to social justice and education for liberation, constructivist pedagogy complements and supports many democratizing and egalitarian goals of service-learning. But in an effort to promote constructivism, the authors of the handbook, however unintentionally, characterize other approaches to instruction in ways that are at times dismissive and pejorative, presenting them as antithetical to constructivism rather than options that often co-exist, complement, and support constructivist methods.

This can be seen most clearly in the protocols used for observing faculty and students in service-learning classrooms (Gelmon et al., 2001, pp. 72-73). The classroom observation protocol used to assess the Continuum of Teaching/Learning Contexts asks the observer to rate class dynamics on five sets of bi-polar terms: Commitment to Others from Low (1) to High (5); Students’ Role from Passive (1) to Active (5); Faculty Role from Directive (1) to Facilitative (5); and Pedagogy from “Banking” (1) to Constructivist (5).

The term “banking” refers to a compelling and oft-quoted extended metaphor developed by Paulo Freire (1990) to describe instructional dynamics in which teachers treat students as empty vaults to be filled with their insights and knowledge. It connotes the Freirean critique of repressive pedagogies used by colonial powers to indoctrinate and subjugate people. It is clearly pejorative. In the context of a classroom observation protocol, it may have been intended to indicate teacher-centered pedagogies, such as lecture or mini-lectures in which instructors disseminate information. Unfortunately, repeatedly using the term “banking” as a form of short-hand reveals an element of instructional bias and prescription that may undermine the value of the measurement instruments, and may alienate some faculty whose instructional methods and disciplinary paradigms reflect other theoretical beliefs. It would be terribly ironic if constructivist rhetoric and practices resulted, however unintentionally, in excluding faculty with different instructional beliefs from engaging in service-learning. This commentary is not a critique of constructivism, its relevance to service-learning, or the

authors' commitment to it as a progressive pedagogy. It is meant to emphasize the importance of using non-inflammatory rhetoric and developing protocols that use descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental language.

Heavy reliance on self-report to measure impact. The assessment methods featured in the handbook rely heavily on self-report. While approaches such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups provide rich information about satisfaction, attitudes, and perceived value of processes and program elements, they are generally insufficient to make compelling claims about the impact of service-learning experiences on students' cognitive abilities, which is of great concern to institutional sponsors, accreditors, funding agencies, and service-learning practitioners.

One common problem of self-report is respondents' temptation to select what they perceive to be socially-preferred answers, or answers that reflect well on them. For example, items on the Student Survey ask students to indicate the degree to which they agree with the following statements: "Most people can make a difference in their community" (pg. 34), and "I was comfortable working with cultures other than my own" (pg. 34). Several items ask students to indicate the degree to which they agree with statements about how much they learned, such as "The community aspect of this course helped me to develop my problem-solving skills" (pg. 36), and "Participating in the community helped me enhance my leadership skills" (pg. 34). Such items invite affirmative responses indicating respondents' learned positive attitudes and skills from their experience. Items such as these may offer useful information and even stimulate students and their instructors to think more seriously about the impact of community service learning, but great caution should be used in making inferences from this type of data about the development of student cognitive skills and attitudes.

Initial assessment efforts often emphasize self-report measures because they are relatively easy to develop, administer, score and interpret; are relatively low risk to participants; and can often be disseminated to large groups with consistency, enabling comparisons among cohorts over time. But the lessons learned at institutions like Alverno College, which have been engaged in assessing student learning outcomes for decades, suggest that assessing student work integrated into courses offers a more valid, reliable, and sustainable approach to assessing impact. Such measures move beyond self-report, providing direct evidence of student cognitive skills and insights. These measures can also readily accommodate artifacts of student work produced for their community place-

ments, course assignments that demonstrate mastering academic course-content, and metacognitive tasks and reflection about their achievements and learning experiences.

For this reason, student portfolios in particular have proliferated in field-based courses to assess student learning outcomes. Student portfolios are time and labor intensive to produce, monitor, support and evaluate, but they can be used both to assess and promote learning simultaneously. Likewise, course portfolios prepared by faculty are increasingly being used to document the richness and complexity of teaching interdisciplinary and multicultural courses, among others. Course portfolios are sufficiently capacious to document instructional goals, methods, assignments, assessments, syllabi, and reflection by one or more instructors and community partners, as well as student work and achievement.

Service-learning is a very complex approach to teaching and learning. It needs and deserves approaches to assessment that are capable of capturing that complexity. Direct measures of the cognitive impact of service-learning, such as those documented in student portfolios and faculty course portfolios, would be useful additions to the assessment methods featured in the handbook.

The complexity of the task. The handbook is designed to assist campuses to plan and implement efforts to assess academic service-learning—a task that requires knowledge of service-learning and assessment, as well as instructional, faculty, and organizational development. The authors have designed the book for an audience that has at least a moderate level of knowledge and expertise with service-learning but only a modest level of experience, if any, with program evaluation and assessment of student learning outcomes. The authors' decision about their intended audience is certainly warranted because many individuals charged with assessing service-learning have experience with service-learning, but often lack commensurate skills in assessment. Even those with knowledge of outcome assessment in the context of departmental campus-based instruction may not have skills in assessing experiential learning or constituencies other than students.

Thus, the authors have endeavored to define assessment terms carefully, avoid unnecessary jargon, introduce material progressively and developmentally, and provide a readable basic introduction to assessment for novitiates. Ironically, their efforts to simplify the principles of assessment may make it difficult for readers new to measurement and evaluation to anticipate the complexities, pitfalls, and limitations of inferences and claims about the

impact of service learning, particularly in field-based learning with innumerable intervening variables. This is not to criticize the authors' achievement in providing a solid introduction to assessing service-learning, which was their goal. Rather it is to underscore that the difficulty of the tasks embedded in assessment may require more skills and insight than a brief introduction or set of measuring instruments can provide.

As a useful solution to bridge this gulf in experience, the authors themselves suggest that campus planners confer with assessment specialists to ensure that their plans conform to assessment practices that will render valid and reliable results. They also suggest that planners work with other campus experts, including instructional developers, institutional researchers, and human resource specialists, among others, all of whom may provide the additional expertise needed to ensure best practices and effective utilization of time and resources.

Assessment requires high levels of communication, collaboration, consensus-building, and knowledge of evaluation and measurement. On campuses where there is already a well-developed culture of assessment, these processes may move smoothly and rapidly. For others, assessment may require a long and challenging learning curve. Barbara Wright (2000), in helping numerous campuses engage with assessment, has noted that assessment has the potential to be one of the most democratizing forces in higher education, requiring a sense of civic responsibility and community effort, drawing on and requiring the input of numerous constituencies both inside and outside the academy, creating new communities of interest across boundaries seldom traversed, building consensus about what is worth knowing and how best to teach and assess it. She concludes, "The best assessment is intensely participatory....Assessment represents a new way to mesh education on campus with the requirements

of the society that both supports it and depends on it. That is a challenge likely to keep us busy for decades" (p. 303).

Given the magnitude of the task, we owe a great debt to the authors of *Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*. Their work offers invaluable assistance to service-learning practitioners and administrators who wish to: 1) use assessment to promote continuous improvement and 2) provide evidence of the impact of service-learning on its varied constituencies. Their efforts and wisdom-of-practice provide the solid ground on which we can move forward with assessment more effectively and efficiently into this new and challenging terrain. In doing so, we can help to ensure that service-learning remains a vital part of the higher education landscape.

References

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