Bringing Reciprocity to Service-Learning Research and Practice

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In this practitioner’s perspective on service-learning research the author calls for a more empirically-based approach to practice and a more practical approach to research. A more empirically-based approach to practice can enable practitioners to strengthen their programs and influence the direction of research. A practice-oriented approach to research can enable researchers to identify and document service-learning’s outcomes as well as methods for achieving those outcomes, which will strengthen practitioners’ capacity to develop and implement exemplary programs and courses. Recommendations are made to bring practitioners and researchers together to strengthen future directions for service-learning research.

The end of the Twentieth Century has been kind to service-learning. What was once a very marginal, largely unheard of “alternative education” strategy has now become almost commonplace in the curricula of both secondary and post-secondary education institutions. There are many reasons for this rapid proliferation — pioneering work of early practitioners; support by presidents on their respective campuses and through Campus Compact; and “Learn and Serve America Higher Education” financial support available through the Corporation for National Service. Another important contributor to this proliferation is the small, but growing body of research that has begun to demonstrate the positive outcomes associated with service-learning for students, communities, faculty, institutions and schools (Eyler, Giles, & Gray, 1999). This literature has enabled service-learning advocates to demonstrate that the numerous positive outcomes of this pedagogy are based on more than just conjecture or faith. Research has demonstrated that students learn faster and more deeply through service-learning than in more traditional forms of education. Communities are served. Schools and institutions change.

The advances in both service-learning practice and research are good news indeed — surprisingly good news to those of us who experienced service-learning’s early days. But, while celebrating these considerable achievements, we should ask if this research has affected practice in any substantive way. After all, one purpose for conducting research is to improve practice in a field. Unfortunately, as I listen to service-learning practitioners, I do not hear them describe their work as influenced by service-learning research to any substantial degree. One reason for this may be the activist learning and working styles most of us bring to our work. Perhaps we need to change our orientation toward empirically-based knowledge. The other explanation for this research-practice gap may lie in the outcomes-oriented goals and direction most service-learning research has taken so far. If this research is to play a stronger role in affecting practice, service-learning researchers may need to expand both the foci and methods they utilize to examine the field.

The Nature of Service-Learning Practitioners

We know from research into the history of service-learning (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999) that its early practitioners were drawn to this work to contribute to community and student development, and to change K-12 schools and universities. These pioneers were organizers and tinkerers feeling their way toward establishing an alternative and what they suspected was a potentially very powerful pedagogy. While not opposed to theoretical literature, these practitioners tended to use it to explain their work rather than to inform it. Early practitioners of service-learning developed their instructional methods from a gut sense of what worked through trial and error, rather than from any carefully conducted research or evaluation. In a way, they were experiential learners using non-systematic means to make the academy a more supportive and enabling place for other experiential learners.

While there has yet to be any comparable research into the current practitioner pool, many of today’s service-learning educators appear to have similar approaches to practice. Like the pioneers, many are activists focused on developing and sustaining their programs, serving communities, and empowering and educating their students. These are complicated tasks, for sure. But like most active professionals,