Principles of Good Practice for Service-Learning Pedagogy

Jeffrey Howard's *Principles of Good Practice for Service-Learning Pedagogy*, is among the most widely accepted and adopted documents addressing service-learning practice. The principles were originally published in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. They include the following:

Principle 1: Academic Credit is for Learning, Not for Service

This first principle speaks to those who puzzle over how to assess students' service in the community, or what weight to assign community involvement in final grades.

In traditional courses, academic credit and grades are assigned based on students' demonstration of academic learning as measured by the instructor. It is no different in service-learning courses. While in traditional courses we assess students' learning from traditional course resources, e.g., textbooks, class discussions, library research, etc., in service-learning courses we evaluate students' learning from traditional resources, from the community service, and from the blending of the two.

So, academic credit is not awarded for doing service or for the quality of the service, but rather for the student's demonstration of academic and civic learning.

Principle 2: Do Not Compromise Academic Rigor

Since there is a widespread perception in academic circles that community service is a "soft" learning resource, there may be a temptation to compromise the academic rigor in a service-learning course.

Labeling community service as a "soft" learning stimulus reflects a gross misperception. The perceived "soft" service component actually raises the learning challenge in a course. Service-learning students must not only master academic material as in traditional courses, but also learn how to learn from unstructured and ill-structured community experiences and merge that learning with the learning from other course resources. Furthermore, while in traditional courses students must satisfy only academic learning objectives, in service-learning courses students must satisfy both academic and civic learning objectives. All of this makes for challenging intellectual work, commensurate with rigorous academic standards.

Principle 3: Establish Learning Objectives

It is a service-learning maxim that one cannot develop a quality service-learning course without first setting very explicit learning objectives. This principle is foundational to service-learning, and serves as the focus of sections four and five of this workbook.

While establishing learning objectives for students is a standard to which all courses are accountable, in fact, it is especially necessary and advantageous to establish learning objectives in service-learning courses. The addition of the community as a learning context multiplies the learning possibilities (see pp. 26-29). To sort out those of greatest priority, as well as to leverage the bounty of learning opportunities offered by community service experiences, deliberate planning of course academic andcivic learning objectives is required.

Principle 4: Establish Criteria for the Selection of Service Placements

Requiring students to serve in anycommunity-based organization as part of a service-learning course is tantamount to requiring students to read anybook as part of a traditional course.

Faculty who deliberately establish criteria for selecting community service placements will find students are able to extract more relevant learning from their respective service experiences, and are more likely to meet course learning objectives.

We recommend four criteria for selecting service placements:

1. Circumscribe the range of acceptable service placements around the content of the course (e.g., for a course on homelessness, homeless shelters and soup kitchens are learning-appropriate placements, but serving in a hospice is not).
2. Limit specific service activities and contexts to those with the potential to meet course-relevant academic and civic learning objectives (e.g., filing papers in a warehouse, while of service to a school district, will offer little to stimulate either academic or civic learning in a course on elementary school education).
3. Correlate the required duration of service with its role in the realization of academic and civic learning objectives (e.g., one two-hour shift at a hospital will do little to contribute to academic or civic learning in a course on institutional health care).
4. Assign community projects that meet real needs in the community as determined by the community.

Principle 5: Provide Educationally-Sound Learning Strategies to Harvest Community Learning and Realize Course Learning Objectives

Requiring service-learning students to merely record their service activities and hours as their journal assignment is tantamount to requiring students in an engineering course to log their activities and hours in the lab.

Learning in any course is realized by an appropriate mix and level of learning strategies and assignments that correspond with the learning objectives for the course. Given that, in service-learning courses, we want to utilize students' service experiences in part to achieve academic and civic course learning objectives, learning strategies must be employed that support learning from service experiences and enable its use toward meeting course learning objectives.

Learning interventions that promote critical reflection, analysis, and application of service experiences enable learning. To make certain that service does not underachieve in its role as an instrument of learning, careful thought must be given to learning activities that encourage the integration of experiential and academic learning. These activities include classroom discussions, presentations, and journal and paper assignments that support analysis of service experiences in the context of the course academic and civic learning objectives. Of course, clarity about course learning objectives is a prerequisite for identifying educationally-sound learning strategies.

Principle 6: Prepare Students for Learning from the Community

Most students lack experience with both extracting and making meaning from experience and in merging it with other academic and civic course learning strategies. Therefore, even an exemplary reflection journal assignment will yield, without sufficient support, uneven responses.

Faculty can provide: (1) learning supports such as opportunities to acquire skills for gleaning the learning from the service context (e.g., participant-observer skills), and/or (2) examples of how to successfully complete assignments (e.g., making past exemplary student papers and reflection journals available to current students to peruse). Menlo (1993) identifies four competencies to accentuate student learning from the community: reflective listening, seeking feedback, acuity in observation, and mindfulness in thinking.

Principle 7: Minimize the Distinction Between the Students' Community Learning Role and Classroom Learning Role

Classrooms and communities are very different learning contexts. Each requires students to assume a different learner role. Generally, classrooms provide a high level of teacher direction, with students expected to assume mostly a passive learner role. In contrast, service communities usually provide a low level of teaching direction, with students expected to assume mostly an active learner role. Alternating between the passive learner role in the classroom and the active learner role in the community may challenge and even impede student learning. The solution is to shape the learning environments so that students assume similar learner roles in both contexts.

While one solution is to intervene so that the service community provides a high level of teaching direction, we recommend, for several reasons, re-norming the traditional classroom toward one that values students as active learners. First, active learning is consistent with active civic participation that service-learning seeks to foster. Second, students bring information from the community to the classroom that can be utilized on behalf of others' learning. Finally, we know from recent research in the field of cognitive science that students develop deeper understanding of course material if they have an opportunity to actively construct knowledge (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Principle 8: Rethink the Faculty Instructional Role

If faculty encourage students' active learning in the classroom, what would be a concomitant and consistent change in one's teaching role?

Commensurate with the preceding principle's recommendation for an active student learning posture, this principle advocates that service-learning teachers, too, rethink their roles. An instructor role that would be most compatible with an active student role shifts away from a singular reliance on transmission of knowledge and toward mixed pedagogical methods that include learning facilitation and guidance. Exclusive or even primary use of traditional instructional models, e.g., a banking model (Freire, 1970), interferes with the promise of learning in service-learning courses.

To re-shape one's classroom role to capitalize on the learning bounty in service-learning, faculty will find Howard's (1998) model of "Transforming the Classroom" helpful. This four-stage model begins with the traditional classroom in which students are passive, teachers are directive, and all conform to the learned rules of the classroom. In the second stage, the instructor begins to re-socialize herself toward a more facilitative role; but the students, socialized for many years to be passive learners, are slow to change to a more active mode. In the third stage, with the perseverance of the instructor, the students begin to develop and acquire the skills and propensities to be active in the classroom. Frequently, during this phase, faculty will become concerned that learning is not as rich and rigorous as when they are using the more popular lecture format, and may regress to a more directive posture. Over time homeostasis is established, and the instructor and the students achieve an environment in which mixed pedagogical methods lead to students who are active learners, instructors fluent in multiple teaching methods, and strong academic and civic learning outcomes.

Principle 9: Be Prepared for Variation in, and for Some Loss of Control With, Student Learning Outcomes

For those faculty who value homogeneity in student learning outcomes, as well as control of the learning environment, service-learning may not be a good fit.

In college courses, learning strategies largely determine student outcomes, and this is true in service-learning courses, too. However, in traditional courses, the learning strategies (i.e., lectures, labs, and readings) are constant for all enrolled students and under the watchful eye of the faculty member. In service-learning courses, given variability in service experiences and their influential role in student learning, one can anticipate greater heterogeneity in student learning outcomes and compromises to faculty control. Even when service-learning students are exposed to the same presentations and the same readings, instructors can expect that classroom discussions will be less predictable and the content of student papers/projects less homogeneous than in courses without a service assignment. As an instructor, are you prepared for greater heterogeneity in student learning outcomes and some degree of loss in control over student learning stimuli?

Principle 10: Maximize the Community Responsibility Orientation of the Course

This principle is for those who think that civic learning can only spring from the community service component of a course.

One of the necessary conditions of a service-learning course is purposeful civic learning. Designing classroom norms and learning strategies that not only enhance academic learning but also encourage civic learning are essential to purposeful civic learning. While most traditional courses are organized for private learning that advances the individual student, service-learning instructors should consider employing learning strategies that will complement and reinforce the civic lessons from the community experience. For example, efforts to convert from individual to group assignments, and from instructor-only to instructor and student review of student assignments, re-norms the teaching-learning process to be consistent with the civic orientation of service-learning.