Sociology's Contribution to the Service Learning Movement

Sam Marullo
Georgetown University

Sociology has a crucial role to play in the development of service learning programs. As universities "rediscover" their mission of providing service to the community and to the nation in response to the social and economic problems confronting us, they realize that in order to do so effectively, they must address the underlying causes of these problems and teach students how to understand them. Our role as sociologists should be to share our expertise with our colleagues in order to educate them about the complexities of this challenge. Our courses dealing with social problems, stratification, urban sociology, poverty and inequality, social movements, political sociology, and social change, to name just a few, may not only provide the core of service learning programs, but our theory and research in these areas should be used to educate our colleagues and contribute to the structuring of these programs. Non-sociology faculty may realize quickly that sociology is a critical discipline in pioneering service learning, so we must step up to the challenge and show that we have valuable contributions to offer. However, we must return the challenge to our colleagues, inspiring them to reconsider how their own disciplines can add to the students' understandings of a complex, problem-filled reality.

Service learning is the term used to describe efforts to link community service to the academic curriculum. It is a broad, nebulously defined term, at times including academic endeavors such as internships, needs assessments, and participatory action research. I will use the term more narrowly, in the manner in which its advocates promote its use, to refer to the process through which students participate in organized service activity for academic credit that meets identified community needs, and reflect on that service so that it furthers their understanding of course material (Bringle and Hatcher 1994: 5). Furthermore, service learning activity, when done properly, should provide students with an increased awareness of civic responsibility, promote their moral development, and help them to analyze the causes and consequences of social problems (Honnet and Poulsen 1989, Levison 1990).

The key elements in this definition are that the students' service activities in the community are integrated into course-work as an academic, curricular endeavor; that the needs and attempted remedies are defined by a partnership among university and community actors in order to benefit the less advantaged; and that students undertake a process of observation, action, analysis, and reflection that demonstrates educational development. Service learning

* The author would like to thank the following for their helpful comments and suggestions on this article: Christopher Koliba, Patricia O'Conner, Penny Rue, Keith Morton, Lee Williams, Randy Stoecker, and Morten Ender. Address for correspondence: Sam Marullo, Department of Sociology, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057, telephone (202) 687-3582, fax (202) 687-7326, and e-mail S_MARULLO@GUVAX.GEORGETOWN.EDU.
asserts that universities have a role to play in solving the problems of the community and society around them, and that service (not just pure research or classroom education) is an appropriate method for universities to fulfill that obligation. From an institutional perspective, the success of a university's service learning program is measured by affecting positive changes in the community.

Dewey's critique of the American education system was that it did not connect the students' learning in schools with what they did outside of school. The university system that developed from a feudal political-economic system had not evolved along with the industrial, and now post-industrial political economy, thereby producing passive learners without the knowledge acquiring skills to succeed in a modern, rapidly changing society. Service learning programs attempt to address this problem by fostering active learning in which the student's service work becomes the "clinical component of an undergraduate liberal arts education" (Shulman 1991). It is a pedagogy that bridges theory and practice, offering a crucible for learning that enables students to test theories with life experiences, and forces upon them an evaluation of their knowledge and understanding grounded in their service experience.

In service learning programs, it is not the service itself that is evaluated; rather, it is the analytic and reflective components through which students provide evidence of their ability to learn from their service that constitute the basis for academic credit. By way of analogy, in natural science laboratory exercises, we do not evaluate and reward students for the conducting of "experiments," but instead evaluate their understanding of principles as demonstrated in their analysis of the results. To be sure, an improperly conducted experiment is likely to result in a poorly written analysis which will be reflected in the grade. On the other hand, merely following proper procedures to achieve a "successful" experiment does not necessarily indicate that the student understands the principles underlying the experimental outcome. The student's lab report serves as the basis for evaluation, demonstrating that the student understands both the theory and practice. Such a conceptualization of service learning, Shulman observes, can make a public service component a much-needed, powerful integrative force in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum (Shulman 1991).

Having acknowledged this service obligation, universities must enter into partnerships with their surrounding communities, or with communities more broadly defined, to help identify the problems and determine methods for addressing them. I emphasize the term partnership because it is crucial for the community to be involved in defining the problems and priorities, and for determining appropriate methods for intervention. Attempts to impose solutions from the outside are doomed to have little impact in actually solving problems. Worse yet, such efforts to impose solutions are likely to set off greater animosity between "town and gown" and be perceived as cultural imperialism or attempts at social control.

Service learning is distinguished from an internship program in part by the nature of and
motivation for the work done by the students. Internships are likely to be pre-professional experiences in which students prepare for or test out their career interests. In service learning courses, students either provide direct services to the needy, less-privileged, oppressed, marginalized, underrepresented, or otherwise disadvantaged; work with non-profit organizations, community organizing, or advocacy groups on behalf of such disadvantaged groups or communities; or provide support services to such efforts through research, education, outreach, and evaluation. Service learning is one type of experiential learning which, while producing the same benefits of learning analytic skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, differs in that the needs and goals of others or the community at large help to set the priorities for what is done.

Finally, the reflection component includes the analytical work required to connect the service with an academic understanding of the problem's causes, operations, and consequences, and it should promote civic and moral development. Unlike the extra-curricular activity of volunteer community service, service learning is part of the curriculum in the sense that students, faculty, and community partners are forced to go beyond providing a service, but also to analyze it, reflect on it, and critically evaluate it (Moore 1990). It is this analytical component that gives service learning a revolutionary potential because it is precisely these activities that will reveal the systemic, social nature of inequality, injustice, and oppression. It is also revolutionary to the extent that it creates a partnership for change among community and university actors. Once the sources of these problems are revealed to reside in the social and political systems that so lavishly reward the few at the expense of the many, it becomes obvious that such social systems require change. It is in this next step, advocating for change and assisting students to acquire the knowledge and skills to become agents of change, that the revolutionary potential becomes both real and problematic. The potential becomes real through the identification and critical examination of root causes which lead to advocacy for change. It becomes problematic in that it can create a backlash to sustain the status quo, with opponents targeting service learning programs.

Service learning programs can thus be seen as a university response to the severe social problems confronting the United States. In this sense, service learning is a new social movement that can be understood by examining its issue framing--constructed to provide an explanation, justification, and motivation for its operations--and its mobilization of resources. Thus far, it is a nonthreatening movement because service learning is widely perceived as "charity work" or "volunteerism" and hardly poses a challenge to the established order. However, I would argue that if sociologists fulfill their role in developing service learning programs, these programs should contain a critical analysis of the unjust structures and oppressive institutional operations that underlie these problems. Further, we should help promote and develop social change initiatives that address these problems at their root cause. In this sense, service learning provides an opportunity for institutionalizing activism committed to social justice on college campuses. In the three sections that follow, I will describe the service learning movement's frames, resource mobilization, and its potential for social change.
In order for social movements to take off, they must capture sufficient portions of the public's interest and resources. They do so by defining a problem, prescribing a solution that will mobilize resources behind its definition, and inspiring the adherents of their message to take action directed toward the desired social change. Frames make sense of the movement's goals and priorities for its own members and serve to convince others of the appropriateness of the movement's agenda for action to solve the problem (Snow et al. 1986, Snow and Benford 1988). Service learning frames must convince faculty, administrators, and students of the educational value of implementing these courses and programs; and they must convince community leaders and residents of the enhanced value of service provision and the social change potential of the program's operations. The following six frames comprise the major descriptive, prescriptive, and advocacy frames offered on behalf of service learning.

1. **Conceptual and theoretical understanding**: Service learning programs enhance learning and understanding of theories and concepts about social interactions, human relationships, and institutional operations because they are experienced firsthand by students (Chesler 1993, Miller 1994). The laboratory for applying, testing, and evaluating claims about human nature and social relations is the larger society. Service learning assignments enable students to take the claims they learn in their liberal arts courses and test them against the reality they observe in their service site. This experience not only enables them to understand better the material they are learning, but also helps them to place their own life experience in a broader context by providing a comparative base of a different reality.

2. **Values education**: Adherents claim that values formation and moral development of students is enhanced when they are forced to confront social problems (Fullinwider 1990, Kirby et al. 1991). Such moral development occurs through a series of steps, largely following Kohlberg's model of moral reasoning (1975). Service learning programs take adolescents who typically have not been exposed to social problems and confront them with such challenges (Delve, Mintz, and Stewart 1990). Well structured programs provide support, encouragement, and explanations to student volunteers, through which they begin to identify the needs and challenges faced by others, explore various explanations of such problems, and begin to empathize with the victims of structured inequities. Students are forced to do a values clarification, deciding for themselves what is most important and how their own talents and abilities can be best used in service to others (Byrne 1990: 83). Ultimately this moral development leads to internalized values regarding social justice (Eisenberg, Lennon, and Roth 1983; Keen 1990; Stanley 1993).

3. **Cognitive skills development**: Service learning advocates claim that several cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and conflict resolution are learned better through real life experiences rather than simply reading about them or simulating them in the classroom. The argument is based on evidence from experiential learning that finds greater
cognitive skills development when these programs are compared to traditional classroom learning (Fullinwider 1990, Stanton 1990). Critical thinking skills are enhanced because students are forced to confront simplistic and individualistic explanations of social problems with the complex realities they see in their volunteer work. Real world problems and constraints help students to develop their problem solving skills. Students’ conflict resolution skills are developed because the situations in which they serve are rife with conflict. Readings, class discussions, faculty-student dialogue and community partner-student interactions force them to see institutional and structural factors contributing to the problems they see and develop their skills in responding to them.

4. Diversity: Most educational institutions have made a commitment to educating about and for a culturally diverse society and world. Service learning advocates claim that differences among people, across class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual preference, religion, and other social criteria are better understood and appreciated when introduced within the supportive context of service learning programs (Berry 1990, Permaul 1993). Like most Americans, college students grow up in fairly homogeneous neighborhoods—typically segregated by race with little class variation. Service learning experiences are likely to expose students to a wide range of class, race and ethnic, and other social statuses with whom they have had little previous contact. Working toward a common goal is the best way to create mutually respectful and egalitarian views (Barber 1991). Furthermore, most college students are still experiencing the challenge of discovering and defining their own identity, so exposure to different types of people helps in this identity formation as well as to teach respect for others.

5. Citizenship: An individual's obligation to the community and to the nation is learned by working for and with others toward a collective good. Proponents of explicit civic education see service learning as a vehicle for teaching the skills and perspectives needed for a responsible citizenry in a democracy (Newmann 1990, O'Neil 1990). According to Barber, service learning fulfills these needs by promoting collective activity that is empowering. Students must work in groups or teams to achieve their goals, and they must have some input into the decision-making about what is to be done (Barber 1991).

6. Service: Universities have asserted their unique role in providing service to the community through utilizing their ability to create new knowledge and in training the future leaders of communities and the nation. Service learning is an extension of the university's service commitment in two ways: it provides services directly to those who are most in need, and it evaluates and assesses the efficacy of service delivery alternatives. The university as a corporate entity, in exchange for the benefits it receives from the community, should provide tangible services that it is especially well qualified to offer. This can include mobilizing intellectual or knowledge based resources, skilled professionals, and their students in the process of delivering services. Further, the ability to assess and evaluate how effectively the services are being provided is a specialized service that the university can offer. However, the
community partner must play a role in the evaluation process and its voice must be heard in terms of validating the results of such research.

Resources

In order to have an impact on students and the community, service learning programs require resources to grow. The social movements literature informs us that these resources can be internal, controlled by the university itself, or external resources that are cooptable toward movement ends. In this section, I note where sociology can be particularly helpful in supporting service learning.

Internal Resources

1. Free space: Universities can provide the context for free spaces to emerge, which encourage creative thinking and innovative actions (Evans and Boyte 1986). Such spaces are supported by a subculture of tolerance and academic freedom. Various service learning initiatives can be developed, tested, and modified within a supportive environment. Much as the campuses played a critical role of the social movement cycles of the 1960s (Tarrow 1994), they retain this potential for development of service learning programs in the 1990s.

2. Students: Students' energy, time, enthusiasm, and experience are readily available resources. A majority of students enter college having done volunteer work in high school and many continue volunteering as an extra curricular activity. This ongoing engagement of a good number of students in community service generates demand and support for service learning programs. Students believe that their community service not only accomplishes good in the community, but also that such experiences make them feel good about themselves, look good on their resume, and that graduate programs and employers value such activities.

3. Faculty: Faculty are a potentially powerful and necessary resource required for implementing service learning programs. Their skills, knowledge, autonomy, and time flexibility enable them to provide support for and adopt service learning pedagogies in their courses. Many participate in community service, so service learning is an extension of their own identity. It also provides them with the opportunity to integrate and consolidate some of their activities. Service learning enables the faculty to fulfill what may be defined to themselves as a personal commitment to their own communities by integrating it with their professional life. Further, if service learning sites can also serve as the location for undertaking research--whether it be evaluation research on programs, or ethnographic or field studies of human interaction--then faculty members can fulfill all of their professional responsibilities through service learning.

Because of the nature of our discipline, sociologists are particularly well-suited to see the value of service learning. Dating back to the earliest Chicago School studies, the city and the community have served as the laboratory for our research. For as long as there has been a discipline, sociology
faculty have sent students into the field to do ethnographies and participant research, so the service learning pedagogical claim that "the real world is a crucible to test our theories" is second-nature to us. Evaluation studies, community power studies, organizational studies, and studies of social movements and community organizing--with their large bodies of knowledge and longstanding research traditions--can be carried over directly to service learning initiatives.

4. **Volunteer centers**: Many universities and communities have volunteer coordination centers. In some instances, volunteer activities are coordinated through the university chaplain's office. These offices provide the knowledge of and contact with community organizations that can serve as service learning sites (see Kathleen Rice's article below).

5. **University development and public relations offices**: Service learning activities can be the source of additional fundraising for the university, used to acquire new administrative positions, student support, or academic/research positions. Development officials can assist in grant writing and fundraising that will be used to develop service learning. Segments of the university's alumni may be especially responsive to fundraising appeals or capital campaign initiatives to raise funds for the university's service to the community. Public relations officials can see the potential for the university to gain symbolic rewards and perhaps political favors from the community in exchange for its "good works."

6. **Faculty and curriculum development**: Pockets of money and faculty release time are typically budgeted to support faculty research and development, to create new courses, or to undertake curriculum reform. These can be used to develop service learning courses, assignments, or programmatic initiatives.

**External Resources**

7. **Community members**: Service learning programs depend on the time, energy, knowledge, and material support of community leaders in order to maintain the sites in which they operate. In addition to these resources directly supporting service learning, community leaders can also apply indirect pressures and incentives to encourage universities' involvement. Universities are susceptible to public opinion pressures because they wish to be seen as responsible "citizens" in the community. Furthermore, they often need political support from local, state, or national legislatures to undertake or implement their other initiatives; for example, seeking favorable zoning rulings for new construction, public financing for building, and funding for students' financial aid.

8. **Professional educational associations**: A number of professional education associations have been promoting service learning by offering educational workshops and conferences, developing
materials and doing advocacy work regarding service learning. Foremost among these is Campus Compact, a consortium of over 500 institutions of higher education organized to promote and support national and community service activities among its members and to recruit additional members (Cha, Rothman and Smith 1994). Other organizations have also devoted considerable resources to promoting service learning, including the American Association for Higher Education, the National Society for Experiential Education, the American Association of University Professors, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of Student Program Administrators. Professional associations such as the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Association, and the Modern Language Association have provided more discipline specific support. The Campus Opportunity Outreach League (COOL) and the U.S. Students Association promote service learning among university student organizations. The "Invisible College"--a project of the Campus Compact and the Education Commission for the States-provides a support and advocacy network among university faculty engaged in service learning.

9. **Local, state and federal government agencies:** From city hall officials to the federal Corporation on National and Community Service, government agencies are looking to support community service. For some, it is merely a way to stretch their limited resources through the use of volunteers. Others, however, are supportive and committed to the principles of service learning, including the Americorps and Serve and Learn programs.

10. **Foundations and private donors:** Several national foundations (e.g. Pew, Rockefeller, Lilly) as well as smaller community-based foundations are looking to support innovative service learning projects. They provide grants for funding start up costs, faculty development and curriculum review. Nationally, General Motors, Tylenol, J.W. Saxe, and the Swearer Foundation have created service awards and scholarship programs to honor students for their leadership in community service.

**Conclusion: The Potential for Social Change**

This analysis reveals the social change potential of service learning as a social movement not only in academia but for the society at large. Service learning programs will fundamentally alter the university-community relationship. No longer will the university be seen as sitting atop the hill, with its ivy-covered walls separating its members from the larger community. Instead, the university will be seen as a partner, committed to the well-being of its surrounding neighbors and the larger community. To become a credible partner, however, the university will have to make a sustained commitment of real resources to its service learning program and an investment in human capital to build the relationships that are needed to make it work.

It will also be revolutionary internally for the university's operations, as pedagogy, curriculum, rank and tenure procedures, and resource allocations are fundamentally changed. Faculty development and education are needed to overcome the inertia against pedagogical innovation and
curriculum reform--and the redistribution of resources implied therein. Institutional and discipline reward structures will need to be modified to accommodate this new style of teaching, the different types of products that will be produced, and the value of requisite long-term partnerships. Even the very nature of faculty life has the potential for fundamental change, as service learning programs may enable individual faculty members to fully integrate their research, teaching and service commitments and link them to their immediate community.

Even greater than these university and disciplinary effects, however, is the revolutionary potential of service learning as a means of educating our youth in preparation for how they will interact with the larger society. This potential goes beyond the mere provision of services by young, talented, and energetic college students to communities that need them desperately. Rather, it is in the critical thinking skills that they will acquire as they are forced to confront the question of why these problems persist. It is in the empowerment they will acquire as they learn how to challenge dysfunctional institutional operations. It is in the lifelong commitments that they will be creating for themselves to be engaged civic actors. And finally, this revolutionary potential resides in the discrediting of the political economy that results from students discovering that it is the overt operations of market forces, aided by the political-economic system designed to generate inequality, that is responsible for the misery they see. All this revolutionary potential can only be realized, however, if we establish service learning programs that offer the critical analysis needed to challenge the status quo and to which we are sufficiently committed to overcoming potential barriers.
Endnotes


2. For historical summary and applications, see Dewey (1915), Bellah et al (1991), Benson and Harkavy (1991), and Boyer (1990).

3. This includes efforts toward challenging or changing existing social structures to the ultimate benefit of a disadvantaged group.

4. As a result of their nonprofit status, universities pay lower or no property and sales taxes, receive tax support directly and indirectly through federal, state and locally funded programs, and are subsidized through federal and state tuition assistance programs.

5. Larger structural differences of the 1990s versus the 1960s mitigate against this free space potential in that students are receiving less financial aid and are more likely to be working more hours, universities are receiving less financial support from the federal government, and they have been undergoing "restructuring" to reduce internal overhead which could serve as cooptable resources for service learning movement mobilization.

6. The ASA's journal, Teaching Sociology, has published a few articles in which the authors have discussed learning pedagogy (Cohen 1995, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994, and Porter and Schwartz 1993).
References


Eisenberg, Nancy, Randy Lennon, and Karlson Roth. 1983. "Prosocial Development: A


Kirby, Donald, et al. 1991. *Ambitious Dreams: The Values Program at LeMoyne College.* (Sheed & Ward.).


