

SERVICE LEARNING COMMITTEE:
A FORUM DISCUSSION—13 FEBRUARY 2002

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- Doug: As I look at service learning, I think it's easiest to start with what citizens ought to be. And so I would like to entertain a comment or two on what makes good citizens, and then we can see if service learning is working toward that goal.
- Gordon: I think that it gets students involved beyond just being students. They get acquainted with the organizations that run the community. They get acquainted with the teachers in the community who help them to grow. And they feel like they are part of it when they leave or when they finish their education and decide to stay.
- Mark: One of the things we teach in our business setting is the importance of learning and applying social responsibility, that a business has a responsibility over and beyond just making a profit. And so I think service learning, especially in the business setting, is helping students learn and understand that they need to give something back to the community and that by doing so it will not only help them be better citizens, but it will also help them be better business people.
- Vaun: So, from this point of view, there are two things you are concerned with. One is an individual's performance in the community. And the other is that individual's impact upon the business—to make the business of citizens the business of the community.
- Mark: Exactly! I think that by serving the community they also benefit because people will have a tendency to support businesses that are participating in giving something back.
- Terry: I don't begin my perspective of service learning with how I can help the community. I begin with my student's need—a real-world application. My students need a real-world audience. And I figure, where can I get that real-world audience? So I look to see how I can make a learning situation for my students most applicable. I can go to some nonprofit businesses and do some writing for them, and now my students have a real audience and a real-world project. They are liberated from the

confines of a classroom and a teacher-only audience. And the fact that they are building for the Boy Scouts or buying some musical instruments for a homeless shelter is almost incidental as far as I'm concerned. I think it is nice that these happen. But what I'm really concerned about is that my students are getting a good learning opportunity. It turns out that the best way is for them to be involved in these nonprofit community writing projects.

Doug: I think that when many of our students come into service voluntarily with Brian Schmidt's program [Leadership & Service Institute] or into our classes seeking this experience, they are already good citizens. So in a way Terry is right. Citizenship is a byproduct of what we are trying to achieve for our students—to have experiences in our discipline that are connected to the real world. It just happens to be that while they are serving they are doing the very thing which every mother and father wants to see happen in their child—that is to become more conscious of somebody else's needs, to recognize the bigger whole out there than their own interests and wants.

Robyn: I got involved in the urban studies program thinking that I was going to go out and help change the world with a bunch of students. But what I learned was that it is not just what were doing to help the kids in Chicago—it is what's happening to our kids in Rexburg, Idaho, or from all over the country. I'm seeing changes happen to the inner-city kids, but I'm seeing a bigger change happen to our students. And I'm also seeing changes three months later when they come back and they are able to process what they have learned, whether it is in social work or communications, business or home economics. I found that one of my weakest counselors in Chicago e-mailed me that she is going to New York to participate in a whole different program—to help in food shelters, which is totally different than what we were doing in Chicago. But she wanted to make a difference. She was a home economics major. She saw that she could make a difference in Chicago, and so she is expanding her citizenship into a different area where she sees that she could actually help. Her leadership, her efforts are expanding. So I think it has a lot more to do than just what is happening in the project, it's what's happening afterwards.

- Brian: I've seen that type of change in students when they get to act on their values. It is very enriching and fulfilling for them to be able to apply what they are doing at school, to go off campus and take part and help other people with their knowledge. And they get to see the world from a different perspective than they have before. Going to the other side of town or to a different economic situation opens their eyes. They put themselves in someone else's shoes. Not that they always agree with the population that they visit, but they become acquainted with other people with different backgrounds and economic situations and values.
- Doug: It seems every parent sends their child to a university to somehow effect this change or to hope it happens. Every parent sends their child to church hoping they will learn how to change by serving. The brethren are emphasizing again and again that the youth should be serving more than being served. So when their service becomes a mode of learning in their class core, it is the best of two worlds—they are experiencing that inner change, but at the same time they are developing greater understanding in their own discipline. Putting the two together happens best in service learning.
- Anne: I would like to share an anecdote from last semester when students were awakened to a geographic and economic community beyond their own. I teach business writing, and one of the projects we did last semester was to produce an introductory newsletter for the free health clinic. So these business students who live on campus and associate on campus were finding out about a community that was under-insured, under-employed, and unable to afford basic medical care. They were developing a newsletter responding to these concerns and these issues, and I was stunned at the amount of work these students were doing above and beyond the assignment because they had a real audience. They saw this audiences' needs, and they were doing something that was very important. I was also impressed with their sensitivity. There were no judgments about why these people were experiencing financial restraints. Many of the experiences and lifestyles of the clients did not correspond to the values of these students, and yet they were very compassionate. I was impressed with that. And I believe it was a growing experience for them. One of the things I think is a challenge as I am doing service learning in my classroom, is not creating a distinction between the "real work" of service

learning and what might then be perceived as “make believe work” in the classroom. Sometimes, particularly in a writing class, my students are tempted to say, “What I am writing doesn’t really matter.” I don’t want to invalidate the other things I do throughout the semester by saying, “Okay, now you are doing real writing.”

Vaun: Suppose there is a faculty member somewhere on campus who says, “Oh, this is a nice thing. Does it in some way potentially relate to the class I’m teaching?” What is the connection between service learning and the curriculum?

Grover: If a teacher can see something in his curriculum he wants to teach that can be best taught by having students go off campus and be engaged in a community experience—whether it is a theory of how to help homeless, whether it is how to package the best content in a brochure—if he can see a way to teach an idea that can be learned best as students go off campus, then he is a good candidate for service learning. Some disciplines are hard stretched to find something that fits. The sciences, for example, are not really jumping yet because we haven’t got a lot of agencies out there that can give them scientific applications. But if we look long enough, we can probably find a lot of applications for other professors. For example, I teach social work, which lends itself to service just by nature of the field. And we have approximately 12-15 students who are participating in a service learning at the local middle school. They are tutoring and mentoring at-risk students through the detention center here in Rexburg. The students are having a great experience extending themselves from what they learn in the book. They walk out of my classroom; they go into the field; and they do it; and they come back and say, “I had no idea what it really entailed.”

Vaun: Your students are not qualified social workers. What can they actually do?

Grover: They can shadow other professionals, follow them around, observe, and get a feel for what they are getting into. Some kids in my classes are innocent and sheltered and have no idea what really happens when you go out to investigate a child abuse case. So after following a trained social worker, they either come back and say, “This is what I want to do” or they come back and say, “This is not what I thought it was” and drop my class.

- Vaun: What is the service component of shadowing a service worker?
- Grover: Well the service is that they can provide some of their own input afterwards to the social worker, and they get some insight as to what they saw and observed. That is always good. Feedback from other people is always important. Some students get more experience than others. We have one student serving in the detention center who actually gets to sit in with groups and provides input. Then we have some who are with Family Protection; and because of the nature of the job and liability, they can't get that involved.
- Bonnie: The faculty sometimes feels at a loss as to where they can place students, and that is where my role comes in. I don't work directly with any of the students, but I am a resource for the faculty. I go into the community, and I have made myself acquainted with most of the agencies. I have served on various community committees and work with these agencies on a one-on-one basis. But it needs to be a faculty driven program. We are getting calls and contacts from the community saying, "Hey, I would like a service-oriented student to come and do this." I don't have that many faculty involved at this time, and I am having to put them off. But when there is an interested faculty member, I can assist. I make the official contact with the agency, establish an agreement with them, and introduce them to the faculty member. At that point I step out of the scene, and the teacher works out all the logistics and what the program is going to be and formally signs a contractual agreement.
- Vaun: Have faculty members walked into your office and said, "Here is what I have in mind. Can you connect me?"
- Bonnie: Absolutely! But there is potential for more. Mainly, I would just like the faculty to know there is a resource for them if they want it. But this must be faculty driven. It has to be something the faculty choose and want to do. I don't think we can force faculty into service learning, any more than a faculty member can coerce students into service learning.
- Grover: Some faculty are doing it and not even realizing they are doing service learning. I am one of those. Before I became involved with this committee, I was doing things. For example, as we discussed poverty in my social work class, I once asked my students what they could do to help out. Well, students came

up with an idea. “Let’s do a penny harvest—we’ll collect eight hundred dollars worth of pennies so we can provide food and clothing for the homeless shelters.” Okay, sounds like a great idea. One thing led to another; and by the time they were done, they had collected \$3,093 and were able to service five agencies—shelter homes, food banks, soup kitchens, and so on—within two communities. When they came back from that whole experience, they were so excited. They cried as they were handing out gifts and things in December to some of the shelter home residents. It was a beautiful experience.

Terry: That reminds me of when I first started teaching as a Masters student at BYU. I had to teach freshman English, and I was thinking, “Okay, so I’m going to teach them these different papers and they’re going to have no use for me, no use for the papers, and no use for the class.” So I titled my class “Learning Writing through Community Participation.” I said, “I want you to go out and work with handicap students. I want you to go out and be a big brother, big sister. I want you to go out and do adapted aquatics at BYU and then I want you to write a narrative about what it was like. Then I want you to write an explanatory paper about how somebody can succeed in this service project next semester and the semester afterwards. Anyway, then do a research project on some aspect of that program that can be improved based on your observations.” I had my supervisor let me know she was very suspicious about what I was doing and that I was probably getting away from the core projects of English and turning it into a journalism class. So I had to go through the back door to do something like that. Then, later on, I taught technical writing and I had my students do nonprofit projects. I said, okay, you guys are technical writing students. Instead of writing for me, I want you to go out and do a proposal to get something funded for a nonprofit organization. But once again I had to do this sneakily because my supervisors thought I was getting off track.

Gordon: I had one student who volunteered time at Deseret Industries repairing equipment that was brought in—electronics equipment. This is where science and engineering do fit into it. He saw the big box of equipment and said, “I can’t do this all myself.” He came to me and said, “Can we get some of the other students involved in this.” I said it would be a great experience for them. So we got the equipment, got

together, and did the repairs. We went through parts that we had been doing in class on how to repair equipment, and the steps and so forth, and reflected on the types of equipment that were to be repaired, what could be done with some of them, and what couldn't be done. It was a win-win situation because Deseret Industries would get the equipment repaired, cleaned, and back on the shelf; and the students would get an opportunity to put into practice what they were learning in class. So it can work from a technical and engineering standpoint too.

Vaun: The inevitable question, in a place where the university is bigger than the community, is what opportunities are out there? Isn't it saturated yet?

Doug: No, we are defining "local" as not only Rexburg and Sugar City but also "local" is going to be within 30 minutes driving distance. We are going to try to expand into Idaho Falls and surrounding areas. This will allow more opportunities.

Anne: I would just give this anecdote. Terry and I team-teach a professional editing and writing class. I cannot realistically, in any way, shape, or form, keep up with the requests for editing because it is a service learning class. I feel like the bad guy as people corner in me in the hall, "Can you do this?" I can't keep up with the projects people are requesting.

Doug: Just yesterday the Upper Valley Industries called and asked, "Who was that faculty member who volunteered to help write up drafts for grants?" I said I think that was Terry Gorton. Once again, what Anne, Mark, Grover, Terry, and Robyn are doing—we are starting to make an impact on the community's agencies, and they are starting to look to us for more and more assistance now.

Vaun: What is your level of interest in getting more and more faculty involved?

Doug: Our goal is moderate growth. Ten to fifteen new faculty every year is about realistic. We're probably not able to handle growth that is too fast. But ten to fifteen new faculty every year is realistic, and finding good community partners with whom they can serve will make a difference.

Mark: One of the things that we are doing to help encourage it in our college is that we are looking at trying to integrate all the different courses and disciplines because we think

that every class has something that they can contribute to this whole service learning element. For example, we had marketing students, finance students, and students who are more into operations; and they all went out and participated in an activity and applied and integrated all those skills by giving something back to the community. So I think there are opportunities for integration among disciplines.

Terry: With the Internet, in some ways, it doesn't matter how far you have to travel, you can pick things off the Internet in North Dakota and, theoretically, do a nice project for them—as far as writing is concerned at least. One of my best projects last semester was buying musical instruments for a homeless shelter in Utah. So, yea, you can go out beyond Rexburg.

Doug: I could sing the praises of everybody at this table, having seen what their students are doing out there. The interesting thing is the connection they are creating with the curriculum. It is not just volunteering, going off and serving and feeling good feeling about themselves; but it's learning things out there that they are being exposed to in the classroom. Anne Hendrick's students doing brochures for the free clinic are learning how to package together concepts and design ideas that make sense to promote a program. I could go around the table, but the thing I would like to emphasize is coming back and helping students reflect on what happened out there. In the church we often have service activities for our youth and after we are done we give them some milk and cookies and then send them out the door. They walk away feeling good, but they very seldom understand the bigger picture of what has been happening in this moments of service. Reflect upon what is happening and connect it to the bigger pictures of what our community has out there. That is perhaps where citizenship comes back in. I think that helping students see the bigger issues of their community, see how they can make a difference, and see that the content of our courses relate to community needs is a big step for us.

Mike: I am the theoretical guy and haven't had any practical experience like other faculty members. I teach history. Looking at it historically, I think there is an interesting moment right now after 9/11 that really has focused a lot more Americans attention on service and citizenship. Professor Putnam noted recently, "In the aftermath of September's tragedy, a window of opportunity is open for a sort of civil renewal that occurs

only once or twice in a century. So in other words we have a very rare window that's open right now." I like the idea. There are very few times where you have this sense of service, when people come together. It has kind of been brewing for a couple of years, manifesting itself, for example, in the recent fascination with the "greatest generation" of World War II veterans. You look at it historically, and they weren't such great guys. There was a lot of corruption. One-third of all the stuff that was made ended up on the black market during WW II. That is hardly "greatest generation" stuff. But I think the reason there has been this fascination is because there is a hunger for service. When 9/11 punctured our consciousness and complacency a lot of things came together. If Putnam's right, this is a once or twice in a century kind of opportunity. Maybe once every three generations this comes along. We now have a unique opportunity, a big window to slide a lot of stuff through.

Doug: Where do we go from here? I would like to see more exposure of our student's to community needs, to the real world problems out there as they leave campus; to see what is happening, more exposure to community processes, and community councils to solve problems, and who comes together on those councils; to have more opportunities for meaningful service and then reflect afterwards about how it connects to their curriculum, discipline, and their classroom experiences. ☺