

journal homepage: <http://tujted.com/index.php>

# Guiding Principles for Conducting Service-Learning Projects

Eric J Russell<sup>1</sup>, Jon H. Westover, Colleen Bye, Anne Arendt & Larry L. Carter

*Utah Valley University, United States*

Received: 02 Feb 2014; Accepted: 31 December 2014

---

## Abstract

Service learning is a desired, expected or integral part of teaching and yet guiding principles for conducting service learning projects in a generalized approach seem limited. For this paper, we have expanded and modified Sigmon's (1979) four R's of service-learning (respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection) to include the following six categories, each encompassing different core principles of the "how" of doing service-learning effectively, more similar to Malone's (2010) five R's (relationships, rigor, reciprocity, reflection, and real life). These six R's include roles, relevance, reciprocity, reflection, risk management, and reporting. While the first four of our R's largely overlap with both Sigmon's and Malone's configurations, here we put forth the importance of two new and unique R's that must be carefully considered when utilizing service-learning as an effective course pedagogy, namely risk management and reporting.

**Key Words:** Service learning, higher education, community service, engaged learning

---

## Introduction

Many service-learning scholars have identified different core principles of service learning, and there have been several different formulations of the R's (Malone, 2010; MJCSL, 2001; Sigmon, 1979; Westover, 2012). Service-learning is an engaged teaching and learning strategy in which students participate in structured service activities that (Bringle & Hatch, 1996):

- Meet identified community needs,
- Enhance discipline-based knowledge and skills,

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Phone: 1-801-863-7733  
E-Mail: [eric.russell@uvu.edu](mailto:eric.russell@uvu.edu) (Eric J Russell)

- Strengthen the community,
- Encourage in-depth understanding of course content and a broader appreciation of the discipline,
- Immerse students in the subject matter and its application, and
- Enhance the students' sense of civic responsibility and community engagement.

For this paper, we have used the growing body of literature to expand and modify Sigmon's (1979) four R's of service-learning (respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection) to include the following six categories, each encompassing different core principles of the "how" of doing service-learning effectively, more similar to Malone's (2010) five R's (relationships, rigor, reciprocity, reflection, and real life). We build upon the first four R's, roles, relevance, reciprocity, reflection, and then argue from the literature for the need of both risk management and reporting principles. Cone and Harris (1996) argued for the expansion of service-learning and the development of a guiding framework in order to transform the academic experience. Furthermore, as Klob (1984) discussed and later developed as a model, the involvement of the student within a state of active experimentation can only enhance the understanding of the subject matter. Such an approach veers away from the standard lecture within academia and therefore requires specific guiding principles. These six R's of service-learning provide the theoretical underpinnings of the value-added learning and outcomes derived uniquely from the service-learning teaching pedagogy. This paper further delineates on each of the identified six R's, arguing for an adherence to them as a way of ensuring quality service-learning experiences.

## **Roles**

Service-learning consists of four distinct categories of participants with identifiable roles for each: faculty, student, originating institution/entity, and agency/partner stakeholders providing service experience in the local community (Felton & Clayton, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Each of these areas works with the others to complete the service-learning goals and objectives. As Felton and Clayton (2010) note, service-learning experiences "involve reciprocal collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, community organizations, and educational institutions to fulfill shared objectives and build capacity among all partners" (p. 2).

Faculty members often serve as coaches and coordinators. They provide opportunities in the curriculum, conduct preparation activities, and collaborate with community partners. In addition, they assist in selection of projects, advise students, evaluate performance and outcomes, and facilitate reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Ward, 1998).

Students perform multiple roles including those of colleague and project leader. They actively participate in the service-learning activities, collaborate with the community partners and other group members, carry out applicable duties, reflect, and evaluate the quality of the service-learning experience (Seifer & Conners, 2007).

The originating institution may have a formal service-learning office, other types of support, or permit it to occur informally. Either way, the institution plays a role. For example, it may provide assistance for course adaptation, assessment, or reflection tools. Additionally, it could assist in identification of potential community partners, presentations, or workshops. It has valuable resources internally as well as direct ties to the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Seifer, 2000; Seifer & Conners, 2007).

Community partners often act as the client. They interact with the institution/entity, designate a work unit or project, review service-learning objectives, provide supervision, and evaluate performance and outcomes of not only the work unit or project, but also the service-learning experience itself (Abravanel, 2003; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Seifer & Conners, 2007). Service-learning is generally most successful when community partners are collaborating throughout, from inception to completion (Felton & Clayton, 2011). Notably, "community" can be construed as being within campus, outside of campus extending to another state or country, or even virtual. The number of partners, membership size, profitability, and civic or social impact can vary greatly (Felton & Clayton, 2011).

While students are learning core curricula of the course via service learning, their clients are simultaneously learning and benefiting from the collaboration. Indeed, all categories of participants, regardless of their specific roles, are likely to benefit from the different types of synergies that are created (Workman & Berry, 2010).

## **Relevance**

The popularity of service-learning among academics is evident by the number of service-learning courses currently offered within hundreds of colleges and universities (Felten & Clayton, 2011). This implementation of service-learning within college courses bears merit with regards to enhancing the learning experience above and beyond a traditional lecture-style course. Kohn (2008) stated, “Many years ago the writer George Leonard described lecturing as the ‘best way to get information from teacher’s notebook to student’s notebook without touching the student’s mind’” (p. 6). Service-learning provides a means to “touch students’ minds” by providing a bridge between cognitive and experiential learning methods. Instructors that teach service-learning courses typically relate one or more course projects to specific learning outcomes that address a real community need. These educators also reveal how the community service relates to class content that is also linked directly to the service through course assignments. As a result, the majority of students who attend the service-learning course are more interested and engaged in the course material when compared to their traditional counterparts (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Both faculty and students attest that service-learning provides opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in their classes to real world situations (Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997). Workman and Berry (2010) expound on this perception by distinguishing the differences between traditional learning and service learning:

*[Relevance] is what incorporates and applies real and rigorous academic content throughout the service and engaged-learning activity. When students are required to analyze historical textbook case studies, performing “what if” scenarios and generating feasible solutions to the problems, they tend to discount the relevance from this learning as the events are historical or even invented, and do not impact them personally. But when students are working in real time with a real firm, and are charged with developing real feasible solutions that will cost the firm real money, the students are forced to grapple with the magnitude of multiple issues and current events significantly impacting the work they are doing. This aspect of [relevance] results in the accomplishment of real and meaningful work that will impact a firm’s performance (p. 131).*

Aside from facilitating student learning, service-learning also attributes to improving both students’ performance and social behavior skills. Over the past two decades, several studies have demonstrated increased academic achievement by students engaged in service learning (Akijobi & Simmons, 1997; Astin & Sax, 1998; Kendrick, 1996; Keyton, 2001; O’Hara, 2001; Strage, 2000; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005). Moreover, service-learning, bolsters the students’ levels of self-confidence with respect to self-esteem, teamwork, organization skills, taking action, and their commitment to civic participation (Kendrick, 1996; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005). Myers-Lipton (1996) provides evidence that service-learning students perceive themselves as having a higher degree of self-worth and social competency when compared to students who do not engage in service-learning courses. The study also suggested that service-learning students are more adept at working within a diverse population.

## **Reciprocity**

Reciprocity, within the context of service learning, means that all participants involved benefit from the experience, both student and stakeholder (Workman & Berry, 2010). This signifies that the exchange between the student and stakeholder is not one-sided, and there is an added benefit for all parties

involved (Workman & Berry, 2010). In order to foster reciprocity, it is the responsibility of the academic overseeing the service-learning project to educate, not only the students involved in the project, but also the stakeholders. This awareness, from the onset, ensures that the stakeholders understand the project and the benefits it confers (McCarthy, 2009). Being mindful at the beginning also fosters the idea that such works exist in order to add value to all parties involved (Workman & Berry, 2010).

Lough (2009) argued that reciprocity is a significant factor within a service-learning project, that it plays an important role in transforming all those involved in the project. Baker-Boosmara, Guevara, and Balfore (2006) addressed reciprocity as a factor for building a strong relationship between student and stakeholder. For the academic, being conscious of the reciprocities within a service-learning project often leads to nurturing a partnership between those serving and those served (Baker-Boosmara et al., 2006); a partnership where all parties involved realize the value in each other.

## **Reflection**

Although service-learning has a history that dates back to the 19th century, the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse website refers to the recent climate as “the ‘fourth wave’ of higher education civic engagement initiatives.” Almost all the bodies of literature expounding upon service-learning stress the integral piece that reflection provides in student learning (McEachern, 2006). McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, and Fudge (2008) also provides strong support for “the inclusion of reflection as a characteristic of service-learning” (p. 238). More specifically, Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) stated, “Service-learning researchers and practitioners agree that reflection is the essential link between community experience and academic learning: ‘reflection is the hyphen in service-learning’” (p. 38). So while the importance of reflection is agreed upon, the meaning, implementation, and assessment tools vary. Still, service-learning is more likely to be successful as a learning tool when the student’s work aligns with course materials and incorporates reflection (Felten & Clayton, 2011).

While the definitions of reflection contain common threads, having been influenced by Dewey’s philosophy (Dubinsky, 2006), Felten et al. (2006) suggested the need to redefine to incorporate the emotional component. Also in concurrence is the difficulty students have in expressing their experience, and the need to develop good practices for implementing the reflection component. In fact, many papers mention the five tenets of reflection offered by Hatcher and Bringle (1997) and the five necessary characteristics as outlined by Eyler and Giles (1999). Contrasting in the research were the different successful modalities for reflection including: daily journaling, semester long projects, and both oral and written reports (McEachern, 2006). Still, it is also agreed that assessing the learning brought about through reflection is not an easy task and more tools need to be developed and research conducted. Consequently, Marchel (2004) developed a rubric for assessment of reflection using a framework provided by Bradley (1995). Even with the aforementioned tools of assessment, more needs to be established. As service learning, and, consequently, reflection in service learning becomes more popular in education, best practices must be developed and be able to both quantitatively and qualitatively assess student-learning outcomes tied to these practices (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004).

## **Risk Management**

The practice of service-learning comes with risk and therefore, legal ramifications for the faculty, the institution, students, and the organizations being served (Goldstein, 1990). Due to the inherent risks and liabilities associated with service-learning offerings, the first step in establishing said offerings involves risk management (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2008). Though a deep understand of the law is not a requirement for facilitating a service-learning course, academics at least need an awareness level understanding of the legal and regulatory issues associated with service-learning, as well as sources they can turn to for guidance (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2008).

The risk for a majority of service-learning projects is minimal. However, there are times when service-learning courses expose students to greater risk, with the potential of harm. Faculty that teaches using a service-learning pedagogy, especially in situations where the potential for harm is greater than normal everyday situations, needs to provide the students any information pertinent to potentially

dangerous conditions and situations (Steiner & Sands, 2000). Depending on the environment where the service learning takes place, students face exposure to situations that are potentially damaging, both emotionally and psychologically. Whenever needed, faculty needs to identify avenues of counseling. It needs noting that this risk is not solely physical, but also mental. It is imperative for faculty to *do no harm*.

The risk management role in service-learning exists to minimize the risk. Through risk identification practices, faculty has the ability to change the situation, or at least, equip students with the proper tools to protect them from harm. There are established factors in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all parties involved. Mihalynuk and Seifer, (2008), identified these factors as site visits to the area, faculty supervision, an orientation for all involved, ongoing communication, transportation for students, established policies and procedures, and a loss-reporting file.

## Reporting

As Karayan and Gathercoal (2005) have argued, there is a problematic relationship between “teacher service-learning projects and assessment, evaluation, and reporting” (p. 79). Furthermore, Muscott (2000) contends that there is a fundamental need for more rigorous service-learning project assessment and reporting. Therefore, in addition to the R’s of service-learning emphasized by other researchers, (Malone, 2010; MJCSL, 2001; Sigmon, 1979; Workman & Berry, 2010), reporting is another integral element of successful service-learning pedagogy and implementation.

One study examined the impact of service-learning reporting in four journalism courses and demonstrated how having the reporting element enhanced their “motivation to study, and enhanced their desire to make a positive difference in the community” (Flournoy, 2007, p. 47). Another study demonstrated the value that service-learning reporting can have in aligning perceived student outcomes of the service-learning projects and the actual community outcomes (Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006). Once more, both Barcelona and Bocarro (2004) as well as Stachowski, Bodle, and Morrin (2008) found that effective service-learning reporting helps to strengthen not only the learning and project outcomes of the specific service-learning course, but additionally serves to strengthen the long-term collaborative relationships between higher education institutions and the community.

As it has been argued, service-learning course instructors should ask themselves the following questions related to service-learning project reporting (Driscoll et al., 1998; Gelmon, 2000):

- Have you provided an opportunity for students to share their work with their peers and the community?
- Have students been given a chance to celebrate what they’ve learned and achieved?
- Have community partners been asked for comments and feedback?

While effective service-learning reporting can take many forms and come in all styles, shapes and sizes, the existing and emerging research exploring the role of reporting in the effectiveness of service-learning projects demonstrates that service-learning reporting is a value-added component that can help drive stronger learning and a wide range of project outcomes.

## Discussion

This paper built upon Sigmon’s (1979) foundational 4 R’s of service-learning, as well as expanded on Malone’s (2010) more recent 5 R’s of service-learning formulation to include the following six categories, each encompassing different core principles of the “how” of effectively conducting service-learning projects: roles, relevance, reciprocity, reflection, risk management, and reporting. While the first four of our R’s largely overlap with both Sigmon’s (1979) and Malone’s (2010) configurations, here we have put forth the importance of two new and unique R’s that must be carefully considered when utilizing service-learning as an effective course pedagogy, namely risk management and reporting.

*Risk Management:* As Goldstein (1990), Mihalynuk and Seifer (2008), and others have argued, risk management has emerged as a “necessary evil” in designing and implementing service-learning courses and projects to minimize the inherent risks and liabilities associated with service-learning offerings. Not only is risk management important from a legal standpoint, but also from a “do no harm” perspective,

where faculty must try to ensure that potential risks for all parties (the individuals serviced, the community partner/stakeholder, the students, the instructor, etc.) are minimized and managed to the extent possible.

*Reporting:* Effective and consistent service-learning reporting is critical, as it can become a capstone to any service-learning project, assuring adequate student reflection and learning outcomes, strengthening community partnerships, and enhancing course rigor. As Barcelona and Bocarro (2004) and Stachowski et al. (2008) have argued, effective service-learning reporting helps to strengthen learning outcomes and serves to strengthen the long-term collaborative relationships. Furthermore, as Malone (2010), Muscott (2000), and others have argued, service-learning courses must maintain course integrity and rigor, and adequate reporting in the form of faculty and student assessments, evaluations, and project outcomes reporting. As service-learning reporting is often an overlooked element of effective course and project design and implementation, we argue that service-learning reporting can and should be more deeply explored. Finally, we lead the call for future research into the integral role of service-learning reporting and its outcomes.

## References

- Abravanel, S. (2003). Building community through service-learning: The role of the community partner. *Education Commission of the States, April*, 1-16.
- Akijobi, C., & Simmons, R. (1997). An assessment of elementary school service-learning teaching methods: Using service-learning goals. *NSEE Quarterly*, 23(2), 19-28.
- Astin, A., & Sax, L. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(3), 251-263.
- Astin, A., Vogelgesang, L., Ikeda, E., & Yee, J. (2000). *How service-learning affects students: Executive summary*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
- Baker-Boosmara, M., Guevara, J. A., & Balfour, D. L. (2006). From service to solidarity: Evaluation and recommendations for international service learning. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 12(4), 479-500.
- Barcelona, B., & Bocarro, J. (2004). The nature and extent of collaboration between park and recreation agencies and higher education institutions. *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, 22(4), 3-24.
- Bradley, J. (1995). A model for evaluating service-learning in academically based service. In Troppe, M. (Ed.), *Connecting cognition and action: Evaluation of student performance in service-learning courses*. Providence, RI: Campus Compact.
- Bringle, R., & Hatcher, J. (1999). Reflection in service learning: Making meaning of experience. *Educational Horizons*, 77(4), 179-185.
- Bringle, R. & Hatcher, J. (1996). Implementing service-learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221-239.
- Cone, D., & Harris, S. (1996). Service-learning practice: Developing a theoretical framework. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 3, 31-43.
- Driscoll, A., Gelmon, S., Holland, B., Kerrigan, S., Spring, A., Grosvold, K., and Longley, M. (1998). *Assessing the impact of service learning: A workbook of strategies and methods (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)*. Portland, OR: Center for Academic Excellence, Portland State University.
- Dubinsky, J. (2006). The role of reflection in service learning. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 69(3), 306-311.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Felten, P., & Clayton, P. (2011). Service-learning. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 2011(128), 75-84.
- Felten, P., Gilchrist, L., & Darby, A. (2006). Emotion and learning: Feeling our way toward a new theory of reflection in service learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 12(2), 38-46.
- Flournoy, C. (2007). Doing learning: Investigative reporting and service learning. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 62(1), 47-61.

- Gelmon, S. (2000). How do we know that our work makes a difference: Assessment strategies for service-learning and civic engagement. *Metropolitan Universities*, 11, 28-39.
- Goldstein, M. (1990). *Legal issues in combining service and learning*. In Kendall and Associates (Ed.), *Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service*. Mt. Royal, NJ: National Society for Experiential Education.
- Hatcher, J., & Bringle, R. (1997). Reflection: Bridging the gap between service and learning. *College Teaching*, 45(4), 153-159.
- Hatcher, J., Bringle, R., & Muthiah, R. (2004). Designing effective reflection: What matters to service-learning? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 11(1), 38-44.
- Karayan, S., & Gathercoal, P. (2005). Assessing service-learning in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 32(3), 79-92.
- Kendrick, J. (1996). Outcomes of service-learning in an introduction to sociology course. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 3(1), 72-81.
- Keyton, J. (2001). Integrating service-learning in the research methods course. *Southern Communication Journal*, 66(3), 201-210.
- Klob, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kohn, A. (2008). It's not what we teach, it's what they learn. *The Education Digest*, 74(4), 26-32.
- Lough, B. (2009). Principles of effective practice in international social work field placements. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(3), 467-480.
- Malone, D. (2010). Learning by service. Retrieved from <http://ondemand.duke.edu/video/21665/david-malone-on-the-five-rs-of>.
- Marchel, C. (2004). Evaluating reflection and sociocultural awareness in service-learning classes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 131(2), 120-123.
- McCarthy, F. (2009). Where we are now: A review of service-learning among SLAN colleges and universities in Asia. *New Horizons in Education*, 57(3), 8-19.
- McClam, T., Diambra, J., Burton, B., Fuss, A., & Fudge, D. (2008). An analysis of a service-learning project: Students expectations, concerns, and reflections. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 30(3), 236-249.
- McEachern, R. (2006). Incorporating reflection into business communication service-learning courses. *Business Communication*, 69(3), 312-316.
- Melchior, A., & Bailis, L. (2002). Impact of service-learning on civic attitudes and behaviors of middle and high school youth. In Furco, A. & Billig, S. (Eds.), *Service-learning the essence of the pedagogy*. Greenwich, CO: Information Age Publishing.
- Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning (MJCSL) (2001). *Service-learning course design workbook*. Ann Arbor, MI: Office of Community Service-learning Press.
- Mihalynuk, T. V., & Sarena D. Seifer (2008). *Risk management and liability in higher education service-learning*. Scotts Valley, CA: Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- Muscott, H. S. (2000). A review and analysis of service-learning programs involving students with emotional/behavioral disorders. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 23(3), 346.
- Myers-Lipton, S. (1996). Effect of a comprehensive service program on college students' level of modern racism. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 3(1), 44-54.
- O'Hara, L. S. (2001). Service-learning: Students' transformative journey from communication student to civic-minded professional. *Southern Communication Journal*, 6(3), 251-266.
- Osborne, R., Hammerich, S., & Hensley C. (1998). Student effects of service-learning: Tracking change across a semester. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 5(1), 5-13.
- Rasmussen, G., & Skinner, E. (1997). Learning Communities: Getting started. Retrieved from <http://mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/ilc/monograph/index.html>.

- Reising, D., Allen, P., & Hall, S. (2006). Student and community outcomes in service-learning: Part 1-- student perceptions. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 45(12), 512-515.
- Seifer, S. (2000). Engaging colleges and universities as partners in healthy communities initiatives. *Public Health Reports*, 115(2-3), 234-237.
- Seifer, S., & Conners, K. (2007). *Faculty toolkit for service-learning in higher education*. Scotts Valley, CA: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- Sigmon, R. (1979). Service learning: Three principles. *ACTION*, 8(1), 9-11.
- Stachowski, L., Bodle, A., & Morrin, M. (2008). Service-learning in overseas and naval reservation communities: Student teachers' powerful experiences build community connection, broaden worldview, and inform classroom practice. *International Education*, 38(1), 40-65.
- Steiner, B., & Sands, R. (2000). Responding to a natural disaster with service learning. *Family Medicine*, 32(9), 645-649.
- Strage, A. (2000). Service-learning: Enhancing student learning outcomes in a college-level lecture course. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 7(4), 5-13.
- Tannenbaum, S., & Berrett, R. (2005). Relevance of service-learning in college courses. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9(1), 197-201.
- Ward, K. (1998). Addressing academic culture: Service learning, organizations, and faculty work. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 73, 73-80.
- Westover, J.H. (2012). *Academic Service-Learning Across Disciplines: Models, Outcomes, and Assessment* (ed). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Workman, L., & Berry, G. (2010). Building the five R/five stakeholder research framework: Understanding engaged learning in the business school. *The Journal of Business Inquiry*, 9(1), 127-147.