

REFLECTIONS

ON COMMUNITY-BASED WRITING

Volume II • Number 1 • Fall 2001

Nora Bacon

Setting the Course for Service-Learning Research

When service-learning educators of future generations look back at the development of the field, they may well point to three events at the turn of the century as watershed moments in service-learning research.

In 1999, Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles published *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?*, drawing upon their own ambitious nationwide studies and dozens of smaller studies to document the effects of service-learning on students' academic learning, personal growth, moral development, career preparation, and citizenship skills.

In 2000, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* printed a special issue, "Strategic Directions for Service-Learning Research," to address these questions: "What is the present state of affairs in service-learning research? What do we still need to know? What are the research priorities for the next five years?" (Howard, Gelmon, and Giles 5). Contributors to the issue considered the phenomenal growth of service-learning programs throughout the 1990s, assessed the breadth and depth of current knowledge about the impact of service-learning, identified the most pressing questions still before us, weighed the merits of qualitative and quantitative methods, and reflected on relationships among research, theory, and practice.

This year's key event was the First Annual International Conference on Service-Learning Research, which convened on October 21 in Berkeley, California. Approximately 360 educators and scholars gathered for a program of speeches, poster sessions, affinity group meetings, and papers reporting the findings of more than 100 recent studies of service-learning. The Berkeley conference, like the *Michigan Journal's* special issue, offered an opportunity to take stock of what we as a community of researchers have accomplished and to establish our direction for the coming years.

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Where Have We Been? What Have We Learned?

The short life of service-learning research has been dominated by pragmatic concerns. First, researchers have sought to determine whether service-learning "works." In an effort to verify teachers' observations of deeper learning and to satisfy administrators and funding agencies, researchers have assessed the outcomes of service-learning programs, looking primarily at their effect on students' learning. In addition to local program evaluations and small-scale studies, the field has relied on the

national investigation led by Eyler and Giles (“Where’s the Learning?”; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton) and on contributions from Alexander Astin’s research team at UCLA (Astin and Sax; Astin, Sax, and Avalos; Gray et al.; Vogelgesang and Astin). At the Berkeley conference, Eyler and Giles distributed the third edition of “At a Glance: What We Know about The Effects of Service-Learning,” an invaluable overview of outcomes-oriented research offering a summary of findings to date plus an annotated bibliography describing 136 empirical studies.

Generally, studies of the personal and social outcomes of service-learning for students show a small but significant positive effect. “At a Glance” offers long lists of credible studies to support the claims that service-learning:

- has a positive effect on student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development;
- has a positive effect on interpersonal development and the ability to work well with

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Reflections on Community-Based Writing provides a forum for scholarship on community-based work in college writing courses. We welcome articles that report on research; describe and reflect on curriculum or teaching practices; discuss the theoretical, political and ethical implications of community-based writing instruction; or explore connections between service-learning and current scholarship in composition studies and related fields.

Contributors interested in submitting a book review (about 1000 words) or recommending a book for review are encouraged to contact the editors. We invite announcements and abstracts (200-500 words) describing current research projects and Classroom Sampler submissions describing exemplary course designs, assignments and activities and the theoretical perspectives that inform them.

Reflections is published three times a year (fall, winter and spring). Submissions will be acknowledged upon receipt and reviewed within two months.

Electronic submissions are preferred. Please use MLA documentation style and attach the manuscript as a Word or WordPerfect file to an e-mail message to Barbara Roswell (broswell@goucher.edu). The e-mail message will serve as a cover letter and should include the author’s name and address, the title of the manuscript, and a brief biographical statement. The name of the author should not appear on the manuscript itself or on accompanying materials such as syllabi.

others, leadership and communication skills;

- has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding; . . .
- has a positive effect on sense of social responsibility, citizenship skills . . . [and] commitment to service; . . .
- has an impact on such academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development;
- contributes to career development (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray 1-4).

However, a great deal of work has yet to be done. The most persistent theme at the Berkeley conference was a call for more rigor in service-learning research. Specifically, we need more multi-site studies with large sample sizes, a sharper focus on the effect of service-learning on *academic* outcomes, and studies that measure learning with psychometrically sound instruments rather than relying on students' or teachers' own reports of improved learning (Bringle and Hatcher; Eyler, "What Do We", "What's Next"; Furco). A particular difficulty in studies of service-learning is that participants are seldom randomly selected. If service-learning sections are disproportionately populated by students who come in with the characteristics being examined, then their demonstration of those characteristics at the end of the semester doesn't prove much. Similarly, the "teacher factor" may function as a confound. Janet Eyler made the crowd-pleasing observation that teachers of service-learning sections tend to be young, committed, and charismatic – so research designs will have to control for our charisma!

The second well-established line of inquiry in service-learning research results from the effort to improve the effectiveness of teachers and program administrators. Researchers have sought to support practitioners by identifying the effect of specific teaching practices and program designs. "At a Glance" lists studies demonstrating that students' learning is affected by placement quality, the quality and quantity of reflective activity, the relevance of service activities to course content, the duration and intensity of the service experience, exposure to diversity, the presence of "community voice" in service projects, and the quality of feedback from teachers and community partners (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray 6-7).

As this body of research develops, a key challenge will be to widen channels of communication between researchers and practitioners. It seems that service-learning researchers are indeed listening to teachers; in fact, most researchers in the field identify themselves as practitioners, too. When Tim Stanton, director of the Public Service Medical Scholars Program at Stanford University, asked a roomful of conference participants whether their research questions were grounded in practice—in the issues that arise daily as we administer programs or teach classes—many replied that they could hardly imagine any other birthplace for a research question. But it's not clear that teachers are listening to researchers.

Stanton appeared to be speaking for many practitioners when he noted that his decisions are seldom guided by research. Instead, he admitted, "I see the problem in front of me, and I figure it out." Whether because service-learning practitioners face problems embedded in the particulars of here and now, because we prefer learning from experience, because we come to service-learning from other disciplines whose literature makes a stronger claim on our attention, or because so much of the research has been written for an audience of funding agencies, many service-learning practitioners do not read or apply research findings. Stanton urged researchers to design practitioner-friendly studies aimed at producing "rich portraits of practice" (also see Stanton 121).

Whether because service-learning practitioners face problems embedded in the particulars of here and now, because we prefer learning from experience, because we come to service-learning from other disciplines whose literature makes a stronger claim on our attention, or because so much of the research is written for an audience of funding agencies, many practitioners do not read or apply research findings.

The Road Ahead

After reviewing the *Michigan Journal's* issue on "Strategic Directions for Service-Learning Research," after listening to the presentations in meeting rooms and the buzz in hallways at the Berkeley conference, I predict six developments in service-learning research.

First, as noted above, we can expect an insistence on rigor, on theoretically-grounded research questions and careful research design.

Second, we can expect to see a focus on the academic component of students' learning. Edward Zlotkowski has long insisted that if service-learning is to flourish in colleges and uni-

versities, it must win the allegiance of faculty by means of documented evidence that it improves students' mastery of disciplinary knowledge. "Unless service-learning advocates become far more comfortable seeing 'enhanced learning' as the horse pulling the cart of 'moral and civic values,'" Zlotkowski writes, "service-learning will continue to remain less visible—and less important—to the higher education community as a whole than is good for its own survival" (quoted in Wurr 1-2).

Service-learning educators frequently note that, while service-learning is a comparatively new pedagogy and is thus called upon to prove itself, traditional pedagogy is simply assumed to be effective.

With his AAHE-sponsored book series, Zlotkowski has disseminated scholarship exploring the role of service-learning pedagogy in specific disciplines. But there is little empirical work that tests the effect of service-learning on mastery of course content. One of the few such studies presented at the Berkeley conference was Adrian Wurr's investigation of the impact of service-learning on students' writing in first-year composition classes at the University of Arizona. Wurr found that "holistic scores for the essays written by service-learning students were 8% higher on average than those written by students in comparison sections ($p < .025$), and the service-learning students' primary trait scores were 13% higher than comparison section students' scores ($p < .001$)" (17). Though he cautions that these findings are based on a small number of students ($n=73$), Wurr provides an example of the kind of empirical inquiry we'll need in years to come.

Third, we can look forward to studies comparing service-learning to other pedagogies. Service-learning educators frequently note that, while service-learning is a comparatively new pedagogy and is thus called upon to prove itself, traditional pedagogy is simply assumed to be effective. If we are to understand just how much learning and what sorts of learning are being achieved, we need studies that measure both service-learning and alternative pedagogies by clearly defined criteria.

Fourth, we can expect more research investigating the impact of service-learning on the community. Studies of community impact are difficult to design. How is "community" to be defined? Should informants be staff members at community agencies, their clients, or community representatives selected by some other

means? What if members of the community aren't interested in participating? How long does it take for the impact of a service-learning project make itself apparent? How is the impact to be measured? Does satisfaction with a campus-community relationship count as "impact"? These difficult questions notwithstanding, the time for an investigation of community impact has arrived. If we are to continue to claim that service-learning makes a difference, then the positive effects of campus-community partnership must be documented. Service-learning research as a field now appears to have the requisite size, cohesion, maturity, and determination to undertake this work.

Fifth, we can expect further study of the impact of service-learning on faculty and on institutions of higher education. "At a Glance" does list studies of service-learning faculty, but these are few in number and many focus on disincentives to faculty participation, especially a shortage of resources and a reward structure biased toward research in narrowly-defined disciplines (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray 8). Yet the number of faculty participating in service-learning continues to grow. Many faculty members report that, as they settle into relationships with community partners, they gain new perspectives on teaching, new insights into their disciplines, new directions in their research, and a stronger commitment to community engagement. Service-learning researchers recognize the importance of understanding these shifts in faculty perspectives.

Among the most promising developments on the horizon is increased attention to the effect of service-learning on higher education as an institution. There is evidence that service-learning has a positive effect on student retention and on community relations, matters dear to the hearts of university administrators (Astin and Sax; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, and Kerrigan; Gray et al.; Roose et al). Even more important, service-learning initiatives push us to reexamine the broad mission of higher education in a democratic society. Alexander Astin writes, "My many years of involvement as a practitioner and scholar in higher education convince me that *service-learning—perhaps more than any other innovation of which I know—has the potential to transform our institutions of higher learning in positive ways*" (Astin 101; emphasis in original). Specifically, he notes the promise of service-learning to "strengthen the sense

of meaning, purpose, and community on the campus by engaging many more of its faculty, staff, and students in the mission of serving others” (101). It is surely worth documenting whether and how service-learning realizes these aspirations.

An Expanded Role for Qualitative Research

Sixth, and of particular importance for many of us in English studies, service-learning researchers seem prepared to recognize the value of folding both quantitative and qualitative studies into our collective knowledge base. This recognition is by no means universal; the field reflects academia’s traditional bias in favor of large-scale quantitative studies and even, sometimes, the unfortunate tendency to dismiss qualitative work as unscientific (see the exchange between Bringle and Hatcher; Shumer). Given the purposes service-learning research has served in its short life—documenting positive impacts on student learning and identifying program characteristics that predict success—a preference for quantitative analyses of survey data makes sense. But as our research questions grow more complex, we will draw upon a wider array of methodologies.

I have, over the past ten years, seen evidence of tension between the goals of researchers and those of practitioners. Researchers have asked practitioners to fill in bubbles on questionnaires, and in our role as practitioners we have chafed with the knowledge that what’s really happening in service-learning projects, what in our experience matters most to students, teachers, and community partners, remains invisible. At the Berkeley conference, Carol Jeffers presented a paper called “Reading Signs of Joy in Service-Learning: A Semiotic Problem Position.” A teacher educator specializing in elementary art methods, Jeffers developed a service-learning exchange in which pre-service teachers and schoolchildren sent each other emails, letters, and poems responding to works by Chagall. Jeffers analyzed the children’s papers before and after the exchange, ran tests of significance, found “huge positive gains,” and made charts and tables to display the findings. At her session, Jeffers passed around books of poems the teachers and children had composed together. But she didn’t spend time showing frequency distributions or t-test results: these, she insisted, failed to capture what really happened in the service-learning project. Only by telling stories about her students could she begin to ren-

der the authenticity, purpose, engagement, connection—the *joy* that, in her view, was a crucial outcome of the project.

While Jeffers’s expression of this viewpoint was the most emphatic I heard during the conference, many participants observed that reducing a service-learning program to numbers is so drastic a reduction that it can, in the end, constitute a misrepresentation. There can be no doubt that some research questions require quantitative data and analyses; studies designed to test hypothesized relationships between service-learning and specific outcomes must achieve breadth even at the expense of depth. Administrators and program funders are certainly entitled to solid evidence that their investment in service-learning pays off. But other questions require qualitative data and analysis. As we move beyond “Does service-learning work?” to ask “*How* does service-learning work?”, we will want to understand how students, faculty members, and community partners experience service-learning projects and how that experience yields new knowledge. We will have to learn to accept the sacrifice of breadth for the sake of depth, and we will report our findings by telling our stories.

Several conference presenters from English and related fields demonstrated how analytic tools used in our discipline can contribute to service-learning research. My own paper examined the language of two focus group meetings, one discussion among faculty members and the other among community partners, to learn how participants conceptualized the constructs of “learning” and “knowledge.” Roseanna Galindo-Kuhn also analyzed focus-group data, using concepts drawn from communications theory. Joby Taylor examined documents from several historical periods to identify conceptual metaphors for service, from “service is war” to “service is business”; he suggests that service might more fruitfully be viewed as “border crossing.” Taylor’s paper finds an echo in the work of Lorraine Carroll and Shanna Underwood, who offered a reading of service-learning as a “contact zone” between campus and community. In the attached list of references, I have included

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the institutional affiliation of these researchers so that *Reflections* readers can request their papers. In addition, a sampling of papers from the conference will be published as Volume II of *Advances in Service-Learning Research*, edited by Andrew Furco and Shelley Billig.

As service-learning research expands its range of questions and its repertoire of methodological approaches, it promises insights into the processes of teaching, learning, and relationship-building that will have value not just to service-learning practitioners but to anyone with a stake in higher education. Watch for the Second Annual International Conference on Service-Learning Research at Vanderbilt University in October, 2002.

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