

The Small City as Classroom: Academic Service Learning Participants Reflect

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1. Introduction: Context

My involvement in the service learning courses established by my institution was stimulated by my personal perception of declining social engagement – of an increasing disconnection of students from each other and from their immediate (on and off-campus) cultural surroundings. I had previously addressed this concern by designing assignments that required student-to-student and student-to-community contact. Assignments on such topics as local literature and history in their classroom courses did provide students with an introduction to local theatres, museums and archives, and art galleries, but that introduction was not always or even often followed up by any deeper form of engagement.¹ When those assignments were designed for an audience larger than the traditional one, such as an exhibit at a museum or a publication of a book of interviews of local artists and writers, my observations told me students took a greater interest in each other and in their community.

As Robert D. Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), “Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.... A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (p.19). Perhaps because of a combination of factors, including the electronic revolution and the increasing economic demands on the student, the social aspect and function of education appeared to be suffering. The invigorating effect of the community-focused assignments in my classroom-based courses led me to what I saw as the somewhat bolder step of involvement in service learning. As L.S. Vygotsky (1999) maintains,

The entire process of growth, which distinguishes the behavior of the adult from that of the child, reduces to the construction of new connections between the environment and the reactions of the organism, and to the organization of the mutual coordination between the two (p.24).

¹ For an excellent account of the teaching of locally set literature to examine the relationship between individual and community, see Peter Dickinson’s *Cities and classrooms, bodies and texts: notes towards a resident reading (and teaching) of Vancouver writing*.

Although I have additional objectives, such as enhancement of cognitive skills, as I implement academic service learning courses, engagement with community – learning the city – has been integral.

The general service learning model is now quite widely utilized in post-secondary institutions in Canada; I will, therefore, limit my discussion of it to a brief definition, description, and review of its theoretical underpinnings. Service learning is experiential learning that actively engages students in projects that connect them to a community and, significantly, requires them to reflect upon that engagement. R. B. Sipe (2001) identifies three key components to a successful academic service learning project: it meets the needs of both partners, it makes direct connections to the curriculum, and it allows ample for reflection and evaluation, which is integrated into the course work (p. 33). According to Eyler and Giles (1999) the pedagogy of this learner-centred model has been shaped by the principles of John Dewey, specifically his theories espousing active learning and the concept that reflection upon action is requisite for learning (p. 7). Dewey's theory is perhaps nowhere better encapsulated than in *The School and Society* (1958):

Verbal memory can be trained in committing tasks, a certain discipline of the reasoning powers can be acquired through lessons in science and mathematics; but, after all, this is somewhat remote and shadowy compared with the training of attention and of judgment that is acquired in having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead (p. 12).

2. Active learning stimulates distinct learning processes.

The efficacy of service learning courses has been well documented. Eyler and Giles (1999) maintain that the service learning model operates on both the affective and the cognitive levels; in fact, they demonstrate through their quantitative and qualitative study of the model that the two domains “can be closely connected and thereby mutually reinforcing” (p. xi). Furthermore, quantitative studies, such as Lori Simons and Beverly Cleary's “The Influence of Service Learning on Students' Personal and Social Development” (2006) demonstrate “improvements in diversity and political awareness, community self-efficacy, and civic engagement scores from the beginning to the end of the semester” (p. 307).

The general model of service learning is distinguished from volunteerism in two important ways. First, as Simons and Cleary note, its “intention to benefit students and recipients of service equally” (p. 307). Second, as stated earlier, it includes a reflective component; the student must synthesize the learning experience in some demonstrable way – by completing an essay or poster project, for example. Although in the service learning model the altruistic motive is subordinated from its traditional position in volunteerism by being on a more-or-less equal footing with student gain, it is important to note that, while not exclusively, service learning courses have historically tended toward engaging students in service organizations where they confront social issues such as poverty and racism, with the goal of promoting students' understanding of societal issues through their role in alleviating adverse conditions.

Despite the apparent benefits to student and community of the traditional placement, however, professors whose disciplines lie outside of the traditional helping professions may feel ill-equipped to supervise such placements. The service learning model, I suggest, can equally effectively engage and influence students when the placement is with artistic, cultural, and academic organizations, and certainly the need for student assistance in these realms is considerable. Indeed, I have come to learn that academic and arts placements tend to provide university students with a greater variety of work opportunities and a deeper level of responsibility than is accorded the arts volunteer and offer engagement as deeply, although in a different sphere, as the traditional service organization placement.

While still requiring the reflective component that defines service learning and distinguishes it from volunteerism, the model I put forth is differentiated from those that have been most widely researched by centring the active learning on placements in a variety of academic and arts-centred organizations. An additional feature – and a feature intrinsic to the course’s success with engaging students in the city – is a substantial component of academic or practical writing designed for a larger audience than is customary in traditional university courses. Not only does this approach serve as a practical reminder of the importance of tailoring writing to audience and often simulate “real-world” writing; it also allows for a wider engagement. Representative projects have included preparing biographical material on Canadian visual artists for gallery exhibitions, publishing a narrative in a family history publication, writing a research paper assessing the needs of the TRU Writing Centre, preparing historical material for theatre company websites, preparing travel guides on sites of local interest, and writing articles for a local arts magazine. The major academic component of the course, which may or may not overlap with the writing requirement, requires the student to complete a one-on-one research session with a university librarian preparatory to completing a final reflective research project on a topic related to the placement and devised by the student in consultation with the faculty member and, on occasion, the placement supervisor. Thus, students are required to formalize and synthesize their course experiences. An article on neo-colonialism in Kenya, public lectures about research in local archives, a research paper on the history of a theatre company’s engagement with local schools, and a public group PowerPoint presentation on the history of service learning in Canadian universities have been among the results.

Service learning placements can be as brief as a few hours and as lengthy as several years, and many variants have been implemented; however, the most common course models are co-curricular (in which a service-learning assignment, such as working at a food bank, is built into a traditional course) and intensive programs (in which students complete several courses with service learning requirements over several years). Immersion models, such as that offered by St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, which involve students in trips to sites “of historic and political importance” around issues of social justice are becoming increasingly popular. Less common, in part because it can require substantial time commitment from faculty, according to S. L. Enos and M. L. Troppe (1996), is the stand-alone service learning module as a three-credit course onto itself – without formal classroom time (p.161). The more intensive demands on faculty of the stand-alone model can be mitigated by attention to class size and have concomitant benefits, as I will discuss, to faculty.

This paper provides an examination of a discrete, stand-alone Arts course in academic service learning developed by my university to meet the needs of students, faculty, and the larger community in a distinct situation: Thompson Rivers University is a comprehensive, teaching-centred, primarily undergraduate, hybrid institution in a small city located at a considerable distance from a metropolis. Whether individual service learning courses are initiated by faculty, community organizations, or students, they are designed for cohorts of between two and five senior students, each of whom is engaged in a placement for approximately five hours per week over the course of a thirteen-week semester, and the TRU calendar description is intentionally broad to accommodate the varying needs and interests of student, faculty, and communities, each of whom may initiate a course (which must always be under faculty supervision). This model is further distinguished from classroom-based courses by being graded on a pass-fail basis; as students usually appreciate, it would be impractical to apply the standard grade schema to a non-traditional setting in which their professor is rarely present. By no means intended to be prescriptive, my account is offered to demonstrate the adaptability of the academic service learning model to diverse settings.

My adaptations of the Thompson Rivers University model are designed to facilitate transformation through deep engagement. Students are, in effect, thrown into their work with community organizations, which they are required to research prior to beginning their work and which are selected according to their interests. This model proves more practical for my purposes than the intensive model and allows for more sustained engagement than co-curricular and other models. My purpose is re-education, as defined by Vygotsky (1997): “the formation of certain new relations in an already existing system of behaviour” (p. 57). Vygotsky asserts,

Changes occur in the individual without stop throughout his or her lifetime.

Those changes which are usually referred to as growth, however, possess an entirely different biological meaning. Their ultimate purpose and goal consist in the preparation of the young for the complex and multi-faceted activity of life.

The term, “education,” is applicable only to growth” (p. 58).

I look for evidence of growth socially, specifically whether or not the students believe their relationship to the city has been altered by their academic service learning course, and whether or not they perceive a change in their knowledge of and behaviour toward the city as a result of the course.

My inquiry into the efficacy of this particular course model centers on one of the three categories of ethics that Schaffer, Paris and Vogel (2003) identify as especially relevant to service learning. Rule ethics involve questions of morality – of right and wrong actions; virtue ethics emphasize character, and feminist ethics involve restructuring of relationships and society to eliminate power imbalances (p. 148). I will situate my discussion in the second, which Schaffer et al describe as “strength of character and development of an ethical community” (p.149). As it integrates the service learning student into various segments of the city, does the stand-alone model catalyze development of the student’s sense of responsibility to a community? This qualitative assessment will begin by summarizing the observations of personnel with the placement organizations and end with a brief personal response. Greater space will be devoted to the core of the matter – summarizing and analyzing responses to a

questionnaire administered electronically to approximately thirty students individually between one and five years after they completed the course, the rate of response to which was approximately 60%. The questionnaire asks the students to comment on the connection of service learning to community, to describe their participation in volunteer activities subsequent to completing their service learning course, and to discuss how their service learning experiences have impacted on their current situations and career plans.

3. *Placement Organizations' Perceptions of "Learning the City"*

In the reports organizations submit to faculty at the conclusion of a placement, community personnel have been very positive about student performance and the benefits of the course to the organization. However, the question "How did the students learn the city?" framed the placement in a different context. One respondent elected to assess the effects on individual students. She perceived one student's experience with a small arts organization as increasing insight into both the organization itself and its role within the larger community. She also noted that the student's engagement led to publication in a local arts magazine and concluded the student "was able to connect in a concrete way with the flourishing arts scene in Kamloops, and was surprised at how vibrant that community is." The same respondent wrote that another student's experiences introducing the plays and announcing upcoming events at the city's largest theatre not only honed her public speaking skills but also "taught her about the demographic that attends the theatre – that the audiences are truly a slice of Kamloops."

Another respondent, likening the students' experiences to "watching a flower bloom" noticed that they "gradually perceive that their research skills, their ability to assess, analyze and communicate research results are not just valid within an academic context...but, in fact, these abilities can contribute to the growth, development, and stability of an organization within their community....They comprehend that [the arts organization] is intimately involved with the other arts organizations within the City of Kamloops" and appreciate it as "a part of the fabric constructing the quality of life we enjoy in our small city."

These supervisory personnel note both the application of studies to practical situations and the development of a sense of community – specifically an awareness of the complexities of the artistic sector of the community – in the students.

4. *Acknowledgement of Benefits of Social Engagement*

Student responses to the questionnaire would seem to corroborate the findings of the studies of Eyler and Giles, Simons and Cleary, and others: service learners are cognizant of the social benefits – both personal and professional – of their courses. Responses repeatedly referred to friendships established during the course, with "people within TRU as well as the outside community." Networking was frequently cited as an asset; students wrote of enhanced connections to "a variety of professionals in the community" and of making contact with "the local arts community in Kamloops." At least one respondent made that connection more personal and explicit: "Service Learning opened doors for me in the community, and I am a better person because of

that.” Responses reiterated the conviction of one student that service learning, because it places students in the city, “benefits everyone – but especially the student in the long run.”

On a wider level, students wrote of an enhanced understanding of their city. They view the course as “allowing students to embrace all avenues of community life,” promoting “understanding of issues in the community,” exposing the student to “opportunities to get involved in the local and international community,” and introducing the learner to the concept of individual responsibility to the community.

More specifically, the course led some respondents to identify a gap between the university and the larger community and to maintain that service learning bridges that gap. A respondent who had no volunteer experience previous to the course but has since established a pattern as a volunteer wrote, “Before service learning I saw community and academia to be mostly separate. I was apprehensive about how my investment as a student would be useful in finding a related occupation in my community.” “I was able to learn about the intersections of the academy with the small city,” wrote another student, who elaborated:

Until service learning, my educational experience was traditional: my studies were conducted within the academy. But in our postmodern world, this praxis is no longer viable, especially if we need to begin to live and work in an environment where community structures need to become core. Service learning opens up the opportunity for students to recognize themselves as citizens of a community (that which is off the traditional campus.) This means that students become engaged in the world, rather than just in analysis of it. This student, now pursuing graduate studies, would seem to be an advocate for Vygotsky’s philosophy that Ultimately, only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing” (p. 344).

5. *Through the Lens of Elsewhere*

Several service learning students have had the opportunity to broaden their cultural lens and have their city refracted to them through the eyes of citizens from elsewhere. While working in various capacities at conferences, for example, students have connected with seen their city through the eyes of visitors with whom they have connected. The Small Cities conference, held in downtown Kamloops in 2005, is an especially relevant illustration: students offered guest services and handled registration as well as attending sessions – led by academics and community leaders from around the world – devoted to a discussion of a range of cultural, social, economic and political issues facing Kamloops and other small cities.² In addition, many of the students have

² Lon Dubinsky, forum organizer and co-director of the The Cultural Future of Small Cities project of which it was a part, reported that the cohort of five students “performed exceedingly well” and noted that the students’

elected to tutor in TRU's Writing Centre, where a substantial percentage of students seeking feedback on their writing are International students (anywhere from 45% to 95%, depending on the semester), and act as teaching assistants and excursion coordinators in our International Education area. Furthermore, the university's growing student exchange program has led to formal "buddy" situations; for example, in 2003, five Service Learning students from the Kamloops area developed and implemented an excursion program for five exchange students from Germany that found the two groups in weekend travel throughout the region. Another situation led to the service learning student completing an exchange at the German university her "buddy" attended.

As we might expect, student respondents whose course had an international component emphasized a broadened cultural perspective. More unpredictable is how frequently their responses related back to their own community. One student, who was involved in three international projects, found the local in the global: "This service learning experience increased my respect for Thompson Rivers University as an institution of high learning, and also for Kamloops as a city of diverse educational and professional opportunities." A similar panoptic perspective is evident in the student who wrote, "My perception of Canadian citizenship, as well as Canada's presence internationally, was impacted. My relationship to the community was also impacted because I had to interact with people that I would not otherwise interact with. It taught me that I enjoy working with people." Another student wrote,

My service learning experience changed my relationship to my community in several ways. First, I became more aware of the international student presence in my university community. I also developed a better sense of the importance of community involvement in sustaining local culture."

Most direct is the reflection of a student who wrote:

I was able to view my community and its surroundings through the eyes of international students. By doing so, I was able to witness the true beauty of Kamloops as a small city.... Local events and establishments that I once took for granted are now viewed through different lenses.

The fresh perspectives of new residents or visitors generated a broadened sense of the city.

6. Sustained Effects on Community Engagement: Volunteering

One of my motivations in circulating a survey to students after substantial time had elapsed since their completion of a service learning course was to allow for the considered reflection evident in the responses above. I was curious about whether or not the course had a sustained effect and whether any tangible results had accrued in the intervening time. For example, had lifestyle or professional ambitions been affected by the course? Vygotsky maintains that education must transform by direct intercession

contributions "confirmed the value of service learning courses for community-university initiatives." (L. Dubinsky, personal communication, August 23, 2007)

into a student's development: "Only that formation of new reactions will be educational in nature which, actually intervenes in growth processes to one degree or another, and steers those processes" (p.58). The student respondents professed considerable degrees of transformation in their views of themselves as individuals in relationship to their city, but did that transformation translate into behavioural change—into action, into life-altering pursuits?

John Dewey, in a slightly different context, defines "voluntary" as "the free, the self-directed, through personal interest, insight, and power" (p. 149). By Dewey's standards, the students were much more self-directed after the course. They were also much more community-directed. Most of the students had little or no previous engagement in the community in the form of volunteerism, and, if they had, most indicated the demands of university life had resulted in a lapse in community service. Particularly striking was the recollection of one student of the void between individual and community:

I believe that service learning allowed me to think of my relationship with the community as something that is always evolving. Before I started university and while I lived in my hometown, I never really understood the idea of community. I never participated in my community because I honestly did not know how to get involved, and I had no reason to believe that my participation would even matter.

One to five years after having completed the course, all but one reported being currently engaged in volunteerism, and that one, employed in a foreign country where there was a language barrier, planned to begin volunteer work shortly.

Several students indicated they were continuing, in a volunteer capacity, in their course placement setting; most of the students in this category had also taken on other volunteer work. The comment of one student who continues to work in the original placement setting indicates a deeply engrained sense of connection:

I suppose this may be considered volunteer work in a formal capacity, but to me it seems quite informal. I still interact with my fellow students in a formal manner, but being at the place that I spend a considerable amount of time at does not seem like "volunteer work;" it seems like something that I do.

This respondent has certainly incorporated volunteer work into a sense of identity.

Several respondents, including one involved in four volunteer projects, related their current community work specifically to their service learning experience. They perceived the skills and mindset developed in the course as applicable and transferable to their volunteer setting. One student reported two volunteer activities related to an awareness, gleaned from service learning, of "the importance of untraditional pedagogies" and "educational opportunities that engage the public."

7. Sustained Effects on Community Engagement: Professional Applications

All but one of the respondents indicated that their career plans were modified by their service learning experience and that they made direct application in their career plans or careers of service learning principles or experiences. At least one half supplied detailed responses that indicate deep engagement with service learning and an ability

to transfer knowledge and experience acquired to a professional setting. I was struck by the varied approaches the respondents took to the question and by the respondents' ability to synthesize experiences and apply them to diverse contexts. One respondent identified a correspondence between the general model of service learning and current employment in social services in terms of civic engagement: "My job description is linking families up with services in the community, much as service learning links students up with the community." A graduate student indicated that a Writing Centre placement "taught me that I enjoy working with people, and particularly that I enjoy teaching, which has impacted me to pursue a Master's degree." Two students teaching English abroad indicated the international component to their courses had a direct linkage to that vocation. One student wrote:

My service learning course has largely influenced my current activities; those being teaching English as a Foreign Language and immersing oneself in a foreign culture as a linguistic and cultural outsider. This course generated much interest in the impact of the English language on foreign cultures.

Another wrote, "Currently, I am teaching EFL abroad, an occupation for which my service learning course prepared me as nothing else could have done." Additionally, placement in the TRU Writing Centre steered one respondent to a career decision to become an educator in a specific direction: "I enjoyed the experience so much that I immediately became interested in obtaining further training in order to be an Adult Educator." Another respondent reported that service learning demonstrated "how a non-profit organization works" and impacted on the decision to return to school, after a year in the retail sector, in the field of community support. "Service learning has allowed me to appreciate the community and understand what the community has to offer," the student wrote. Finally, one perceived a practical application of service learning to a future vocation as a teacher: "As I learn what my personal teaching credo will look like (because I am a pre-service teacher), I realize that there are plenty of ways to introduce children at a young age to the arts culture in their town or city." Clearly, these students found a variety of levels on which to engage their service learning experience with their employment and career plans. The experience of service learning altered their thinking about their communities; in turn, that thinking resulted in changed experiences within those communities. In many ways, they have internalized the city and thereby strengthened their characters and cultivated a sense of the "ethical community" to which Schaffer et al refer (p.149).

8. Faculty Re-Education

Rarely discussed in the burgeoning literature on service learning at the university level is its effect on faculty. My previous engagement with community organizations made me predisposed to supervising the courses; however, I could not have predicted the personal and professional rewards my work in the courses has reaped. Those rewards go beyond, for example, pride in my students when a general manager of a major metropolitan theatre company expresses envy of the orderliness of the local theatre company's archives, a direct result of student service learning work. By "teaching" a city I thought I already knew, I have learned a great deal about the complexities, of, for example, the day-to-day operations of arts organizations, a situation

that has not only deepened my understanding of the city and citizenship, but also contributed to my involvement in two Community University Research Alliance projects investigating culture in small cities, projects that have resulted in conference presentations across Canada and Europe and publications of articles about arts in Kamloops. My work in service learning has also stimulated considerable reflection on teaching that has made an impact on my classroom-based courses. Even less enamoured of lecture-based pedagogies than previously, I have become more experimental and inventive in my classroom teaching and, especially, in the nature of assignments in those classes.

My professional re-invigoration has been prompted by my knowledge that service learning students emerge from their courses emphatically not “bowling alone.” Their work with their fellow students and the arts and cultural organizations in the Kamloops area has enhanced their knowledge of the city and stimulated their creativity and courage. They are participating in the city and, as a consequence, becoming part of the city: viewing themselves and acting as engaged members of a larger group. Their associations with the organizations with which they work tend to outlast the duration of the course, and their sense of connection to a wider community goes beyond the organizations themselves; they are socially adept and ethically engaged. Through re-education as Vygotsky defines it – by learning the city through academic service learning – my students and I have become re-educated and empowered as citizens.

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