Civic Engagement and Service Learning: Implications for Higher Education in America and South Africa

Robert G. Bringle
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Julie A. Hatcher
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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Introduction

Higher education, regardless of social context and geographic location, undergoes change. The challenge for higher education is to understand its history, articulate and accept its role with regard to diverse constituencies in society, and create an “appropriate future” within its social context (Du Pre, 2003; Thelin, 2004). In what ways are service learning and civic engagement shaped by context, and in what ways do these two trends contribute to higher education’s trajectory for an “appropriate future” as a mature, responsible, and responsive institution within society?

Next to technology, no other source of influence has probably been as dramatic as civic engagement and service learning during the past decade in American higher education. The evidence indicates that institutional initiatives associated with civic engagement and service learning can be sustaining sources of change, and not just ephemeral fads. In addition, they can be aligned with other changes taking place in the academy and produce both broad and deep change that includes individuals (e.g., student, faculty), institutions, and communities. The early signs for a similar pattern are emerging in South Africa (Bender, Daniels, Lazarus, Naude, & Sattar, 2006; Erasmus & Bringle, 2005; Fourie, 2003; Hay, 2003; JET, 2006; Lazarus, 2004) as well as other regions of the world (Annette, 2003; Perold, 2005).

Civic engagement and service learning can provide a mechanism for re-examining the public purposes of higher education and be a basis for institutional change. Civic engagement, as a broader set of campus initiatives that includes and builds upon service learning, can contribute to an expanded view of (a) faculty roles, (b) faculty recognition, rewards, and advancement, (c) institutional accountability to various stakeholders, and (d) standards for assessing work associated with the public purposes of higher education. Service learning has implications for (a) improving pedagogy, (b) shaping research and the scholarship on teaching and applied research, (c) contributing to the academic, civic, and personal growth of students and faculty, and (d) enhancing diversity education and cross-cultural understanding.

Civic Engagement and Service Learning

Boyer’s (1994, 1996) new vision for the scholarship of engagement “means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities” (cited in Glassick, 1999, p. 29). Building upon Boyer’s vision, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis has made civic engagement part
of its mission statement, and defines civic engagement as “active collaboration that builds on the resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of the campus and community to improve the quality of life in communities in a manner that is consistent with the campus mission” (Hatcher & Bringle, 2004). This definition of civic engagement departs from the traditional tripartite division of teaching, research, and service, and clearly states that civic engagement is not merely a substitute for professional service (nor application in Boyer’s, 1990, typology). Instead, the definition incorporates teaching, research, and service (including patient and client services) “in and with” the community (see Figure 1). Moreover, civic engagement has no geographic boundaries and includes university work by staff and students in all sectors of society (e.g., nonprofit, government, business). This definition also distinguishes between (a) community engagement, which is defined solely by the location of the activity (e.g., teaching, research, and/or service in the community), and (b) civic engagement, which is defined as teaching, research, and service that is both “in and with” the community, implying that values of reciprocity, mutual benefit, democratic processes, and community voice are fundamental aspects of civic engagement (Bringle, Hatcher, & Holland, in press).

Figure 1. Civic Engagement of Faculty Work in and With the Community (from Bringle et al., 1999)
Although not a new pedagogy (see Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), service learning gained prominence within American higher education during the 1990s due largely to the shift in focus of Campus Compact (a national organization committed to supporting community service in American higher education; www.compact.org) from co-curricular to curricular service, and institutional development funds awarded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (an agency of the U.S. federal government; http://www.nationalservice.org/). Service learning now has a presence in all institutional types and across all fields of study in American colleges and universities (Campus Compact, 2005; Zlotkowski, 2000). Corresponding growth of service learning is taking place in South Africa, aided by the Joint Education Trust-CHESP initiative (Bender et al., 2006; Erasmus & Bringle, 2005; JET, 2006; Lazarus, 2004), in Australia [see Metropolitan Universities, 14(2), 2003], in Asia (see United Board for Christian Education, 2002), as well as Latin America, Mexico, and Europe (see Annette, 2003; Perold, 2005; Perold, Stroud, & Sherraden, 2003; www.ipsl.org).

Service learning is defined as a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Within the South African context, the Joint Education Trust (Bender et al., 2006; JET, 2006; Lazarus, 2004; Mouton & Wildschut, 2005; O’Brien, 2005) reinforces this definition by stating that service learning is a “thoughtfully organized and reflective service-oriented pedagogy focused on the development priorities of communities through the interaction between and application of knowledge, skills and experience in partnership between community, academics, students, and service providers within the community for the benefit of all participants” (p. 4).

These definitions help to differentiate service learning from other types of educational experiences that take place in the community, and also differentiate service learning from volunteering (see Furco, 1996; Perold, 1998). Unlike many other forms of practice-based learning (e.g., cooperative education, extension service placements, field-education, internships, practicum), service learning is linked to a course and has the intentional goal of developing civic skills and dispositions in students (Bawden, 2000). Unlike other community service programs (e.g., work-study, volunteer, community outreach), service learning represents academic work in which the community service activities are used as a “text” that is interpreted, analyzed, and related to the content of a course in a way that permits a formal evaluation of the academic learning. Thus, in service learning, academic credit is not given for engaging in community service; rather, academic credit is based on the academic learning that occurs as a result of the community service (Bender et al., 2006; Marais & Botes, 2005; Perold, 1998).

**Service Learning and Pedagogy**

There is converging evidence from multiple disciplinary perspectives on the qualities of good learning environments. Depth of understanding is known to be enhanced through learning processes that contain the following elements: (a) active learning; (b) frequent feedback from others (e.g., faculty, service learning coordinators, students, service providers) that is provided in non-threatening ways; (c) collaboration with others; (d) cognitive apprenticeship (i.e., a mentor with whom students can discuss and learn generalization of principles, transfer of knowledge between theory and
practice, how to analyze perplexing circumstances); and (e) practical application in which students are involved in tasks that have real consequences but have a safety net for high stakes mistakes (Marchese, 1997). Well-designed service learning courses will typically contain most of these components of good learning environments.

In addition, Tinto (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) highlight the importance of academic and social integration for students, demonstrated in part by relationships with peers, interaction with faculty, and involvement in active learning. Chickering and Gamson (1987) implicitly referred to these issues in the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education”: good practice encourages contact between students and faculty, develops cooperation among students, uses active learning techniques, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and values diverse ways of learning. Many of these principles are evident in sound service learning practice (Hatcher, 1997). Students in service learning classes are likely to (a) have increased contact with faculty (Eyler & Giles, 1999), (b) interact and collaborate with others as they provide service (Eyler & Giles, 1999), (c) engage in active learning at their service activity and through reflection activities, (d) devote more time to coursework (Sax & Astin, 1997), and (e) participate in diverse ways of learning (Kolb, 1984).

Service learning represents a paradigm shift in higher education (Bender et al., 2006; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Clayton & Ash, 2004; Lazarus, 2004) because it heightens the role that students and communities can assume as constructors of knowledge (Gibbons, 2005). Part of the strength of service learning is illustrated in its compatibility with other pedagogical trends in education, such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and action research. This shift also aligns with transformational changes in higher education in South Africa captured by a shift from “reproductive learning” to “reconstructive learning”: reproductive learning is memorization and knowledge acquisition as compared to reconstructive learning that is “marked by understanding, application of theory in practice, and viewing information in contexts and from different perspectives” (Van Heyningen, under review).

As pedagogy, service learning provides a rich set of opportunities for educators to explore teaching and learning (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Lategan, 2005; Mouton & Wildschut, 2005). One of the promises is that the multiple dimensions of service learning practice can inform all educators about effective approaches to education. Empirical research on service learning is increasing both in America (see Billig & Eyler, 2003) and South Africa (Erasmus, 2005; Erasmus & Bringle, 2005). An annual *International Conference on Service-Learning Research* provides a showcase for the growth in research, as do the associated *Advances in Service-Learning Research* series of monographs (Furco & Billig, 2002; Billig, Davidson, Springer, & Casey, 2006; Billig & Eyler, 2003; Root, Callahan, & Billig, 2005; Welch & Billig, 2004). The *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes both qualitative and quantitative research. A special issue of *Acta Academica Supplementum* (Erasmus & Bringle, 2005) focused on research on service learning in South Africa. Research on service learning is important because of its potential to improve the practice and understanding of service learning worldwide. Service learning provides a powerful test bed that is both convenient and appropriate for evaluating hypotheses from theories about understanding human behavior, improving educational practice, and increasing civic involvement among students (Bringle, 2003; Lategan, 2005).
Research on service learning, particularly research that contrasts service learning with other forms of instruction, provides a means for developing the scholarship of teaching. Thus, the potential and the promise of theory-based research on service learning is that it can lead to a better understanding of (a) scholarly teaching, (b) scholarship on teaching, (c) how instruction can contribute to better academic learning and student development, (d) civic engagement in higher education, (e) campus-community partnerships that have integrity, and (f) how higher education can play an even more significant role in improving the quality of life in communities (Bringle, 2003).

**Service Learning and Civic Learning Outcomes**

Unlike many forms of experiential learning which focus on pre-professional training (Furco, 1996; Perold, 1998), one of the defining attributes of service learning is that, along with academic learning, it also aspires to enhance students' civic growth (Annette, 2003; Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). Thus, in addition to “serving to learn”, service learning intentionally focuses on “learning to serve.” Although developing good citizens is not a new role for higher education, and there are numerous pedagogical approaches for civic learning (e.g., classroom instruction on civics, moderated discussions of current events, student governance and community activities, simulations; see Levine, 2003), the emergence of service learning has heightened attention to the nuances of the civic domain and social responsibility as a set of intentional educational objectives to be addressed seriously in higher education (Astin & Sax, 1998). Even though, as Dionne and Drogosz (2003) note, “citizenship cannot be reduced to service” (p. 25), service learning needs to be better understood as a means for teaching toward civic learning objectives.

In the South African context, civic outcomes have been inextricably tied to service learning pedagogy. As stated in the White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997), a federal policy statement that outlines transformational strategies for higher education in the post-apartheid era, one of the four vital goals is “to promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes” (p. 10).

What kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions should good citizens have and which of these should be the responsibility of institutions of higher education? As Schudson (2003) notes, there are different types of citizenship skills needed for different democracies. Thus, the answers to these questions about civic objectives are context specific, and will likely be different in South Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia, America, and Australia (Annette, 2003).

Within the American context, Westheimer and Kahne (2003) identified three distinct domains: (a) the personally responsible citizen, (b) the participatory citizen, and (c) the justice-oriented citizen. Battistoni (2002) conducted an analysis of the different dimensions of citizenship with reference to the content domains and paradigms of the disciplines and professions. His analysis identifies the following six approaches to civic education as distinctive: (a) civic professionalism, (b) social responsibility, (c) social justice, (d) connected knowing and the ethic of caring, (e) public leadership, (f) public intellectual, and (g) engaged or public scholarship. The potential is that service learning can facilitate the achievement of each of these domains, although how and with what success remains to be explored through further research.
Institutions of higher education in America are increasingly focused on developing infrastructure and programs that produce civic-minded graduates (Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; Langseth & Plater, 2004). From the perspective of higher education, a *civic-minded graduate* is a person who has completed a course of study (e.g., bachelor’s degree), and has the capacity and desire to work with others to achieve public goods. “Civic-mindedness” refers to a person’s inclination or disposition to be knowledgeable of and involved in the community; and to have a commitment to act upon a sense of responsibility as a member of that community. At the college level, qualities of civic-mindedness are developed through curricular and co-curricular involvement in activities such as service learning courses, internships, fieldwork, political involvement, and co-curricular voluntary service either on-campus or in the community. The conceptual domain for a civic-minded graduate is comprised of a set of student knowledge outcomes (cognitive), dispositions (affective), skills, behavioral intentions, and behaviors. This includes seven elements that can be fostered through undergraduate education that includes service learning. The core elements of the civic-minded graduate domain include (see Bringle & Steinberg, in press):

a) **Academic Knowledge and Technical Skills**: In receiving a college education the civic-minded graduate will have acquired advanced knowledge and skills in at least one discipline, which can be applied to help solve problems in the community.

b) **Knowledge of Volunteer Opportunities and Nonprofit Organizations**: Civic-minded graduates will have a conception of the ways they can make contributions to society, particularly through nonprofit organizations.

c) **Knowledge of Contemporary Social Issues**: Civic-minded graduates have an understanding of the complex issues and problems encountered in modern society, both at the local and national levels.

d) **Listening and Communication Skills**: In order to help solve problems in society, civic-minded graduates need to have the ability to communicate well with others. This includes written and spoken proficiency as well as the art of listening to divergent points of view.

e) **Diversity Skills**: Civically-minded graduates have a rich understanding of, sensitivity to, and acceptance of human diversity in the pluralistic society in which they live. This can be fostered by students’ interactions with persons in the community who are different from themselves in terms of racial, economic, religious, or other background characteristics.

f) **Self-Efficacy**: Civic-minded graduates have a desire to take personal action, and also have a realistic view that the action will produce the desired results. Self-efficacy is a key component of personal empowerment.

g) **Behavioral Intentions → Civic Behavior**: Behavioral intentions can be viewed as predictors of behaviors. Civic-minded graduates demonstrate that they value civic engagement by stating intentions to be involved in community service in the future and displaying forms of civic involvement. One of the clearest ways that students can manifest these attributes is by choosing a service-based career or manifesting civic dimensions to a career in any sector.

There are many types of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that are not included in this conceptual framework (e.g., leadership, teamwork, consensus-building, general problem-solving skills). Many of these are implied by the delineated list, or are combinations of those identified in the list. Furthermore, we think that these seven are good representatives for goals associated with most, if not all, service learning courses. There are other outcomes (e.g., moral development, belief
in a just world, political involvement) that are strengths of some, but not most service learning courses. These could be measured outcomes, when appropriate, but fail to be implicated in the breadth of service learning courses and are not included.

Conclusion

The civic agenda of higher education is not without its obstacles and challenges, both in America and in South Africa. In America, Wellman (1999) notes that (a) the civic agenda is poorly defined for campuses and the curriculum, (b) teaching and service are not always high priorities, (c) no one within the academy typically has civic engagement as a job assignment (although this is occurring in America and South Africa with the appointment of executive level administrators), and (d) the civic agenda is laden with values, which are messy and not always acceptable to some. Furthermore, civic engagement disorganizes an institution that is firmly entrenched in the disciplines, and it expects democratic processes from traditionally non-democratic institutions. Mitchell, Trotter, and Gelmon (2005) summarize how the restructuring of South African higher education and other policy decisions distract from focused energy and resource allocation to develop service learning and advance civic engagement (see also Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005; Perold, 2005).

With these challenges, what are the motives for institutions of higher education, in America, in South Africa, or elsewhere, to embark on the institutional change and development that is required to expand the public purposes of higher education? Harkavy (1998) identifies a set of motives that may apply equally well in South Africa as they do in America. First, he contends that taking civic engagement seriously will improve the core teaching and research activities of faculty. Second, by becoming more civically engaged, institutions of higher education will be modeling a socially responsible behavior for their students that they expect from their students. Finally, civic engagement will serve the self-interests of the academy by garnering recognition from external stakeholders such as funders, government officials, alumni, and community leaders.

South Africa provides an important context for understanding the promise of service learning and civic engagement in higher education. Cross cultural studies will provide further understanding of the degree to which (a) history, (b) resource allocation, and (c) implementation strategies matter in achieving institutional change in service learning and civic engagement (Bender et al., 2006; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; O’Brien, 2005; Gelmon, Sherman, Gaudet, Mitchell, & Trotter, 2004; Perold, 2005). Understanding similarities and differences across cultural contexts will be important for both reformers and policy, because these findings will continue to advance the public purposes of higher education. For, as Bringle (2005) noted, the stakes are high and the importance of this work to South Africa and to America provides “a strong reminder of the significance that engaging college students in educationally meaningful service can play not only in their education but also in their communities and their nation.”

References


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Robert G. Bringle
Center for Service and Learning
801 West Michigan Street
Indianapolis, IN USA 46202
E-mail: rbringle@iupui.edu