

# Introduction

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the theoretical underpinning of service learning, groupwork and other relevant pedagogies which together enhance and greatly enrich the learning opportunities for students. Following this the authors describe the development and growth of service learning at the University of Southern Maine. It is the authors' belief that this modality enriches the academic experiences of students and faculty, and benefits not only the university community but also the wider community. The authors provide a number of accounts of how service learning has been infused into the curriculum. Finally, a number of personal narratives are provided which further exemplify the benefits of this approach to one's education and foster a sense of social and civic responsibility. These tenets also coincide with the principles of groupwork and social work.*

**Keywords:** *service learning; pedagogy; integration; experiential learning; groupwork; social work profession*

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## Introduction

Over the past decade at the University of Southern Maine (USM), there has been an attempt by many faculty to integrate service-learning into their teaching. There is a belief that education is not just about what occurs in the classroom, but that one needs to be able to apply those concepts in a practical manner, and that learning and knowledge creation is not limited to the academy. Indeed many professional programs require that their students undertake a practical placement in order to meet the requirements for their degree. For example, social work, teaching, and nursing are three professional programs whose accrediting bodies mandate that students undertake a number of hours in a practicum. Beyond professional programs, there is an increasing number of institutions of higher education that are making service-learning a graduation requirement, preparing students with the knowledge and skills to be fully contributing members of society.

According to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (2012).

Service Learning is an approach to teaching and learning that ‘integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities,’ (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2012).

Service learning benefits students, the community, and the institution by boosting the quality of learning and addressing community needs.

## Relevant pedagogies

Service-learning is informed by certain pedagogical perspectives which emphasize experience, learning outside the classroom, reflection, and shared and democratized knowledge creation. According to Boyer’s (1997) expanded definition of ‘engaged scholarship’ within higher education, Discovery, Integration, Application, and Teaching are the four paramount principles, which underlie the *Profile of a Quality Faculty Member*:

The first element of Boyer’s model, *Discovery*, is the one most closely aligned with traditional research. Discovery contributes not only to

the stock of human knowledge but also to the intellectual climate of a college or university. He stresses that new research contributions are critical to the vitality of the academic environment, and that his model does not diminish the value of discovery scholarship.

The second element, *Integration*, focuses on making connections across disciplines. One interprets one's own research so that it is useful beyond one's own disciplinary boundaries and can be integrated into a larger body of knowledge. He stresses that the rapid pace of societal change within a global economy has elevated the importance of this form of scholarship.

The third element, *Application*, focuses on using research findings and innovations to remedy societal problems. Included in this category are service activities that are specifically tied to one's field of knowledge and professional activities. Beneficiaries of these activities include commercial entities, non-profit organizations, and professional associations.

Finally, Boyer considers *Teaching* as a central element of scholarship. Too often, teaching is viewed as a routine function and is often not the focus of professional development. Many professors state that they are primarily interested in teaching, but they feel that their institutions do not value or reward excellence in teaching (Borra, 2001). The academic community continues to emphasize and assign high value to faculty members' involvement in activities other than teaching (Royeen, 1999).

Service-learning can be further understood in the academic pedagogy of Malcolm Knowles' (1980) and his theory of Andragogy. Knowles emphasized that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Adult learning programs need to accommodate this fundamental aspect.

Andragogy makes the following assumptions about the design of learning: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something (2) Adults need to learn experientially, (3) Adults approach learning as problem-solving, and (4) Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

Additional academic pedagogies, that have considerable relevancy and implications for service-learning are based on the works of Freire and Giroux.

Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) revolutionized pedagogical approaches more than forty years ago by bringing to the fore the debate over

European-centered versus multicultural pedagogy. He asserted that classical pedagogy disempowers students by, among other things, assuming that students can only acquire knowledge, not produce it. This pedagogical approach or what Freire (1970) refers to as 'banking education,' comprehends the curriculum and pedagogical practices with White, all Western culture at the center, while marginalizing diverse student cultures and histories.

In multicultural pedagogy the teacher refuses to assume ahead of time that he or she has the appropriate knowledge, language, or skills; instead, he or she engages students in a contextual practice in which he or she is willing to risk making connections, drawing lines, mapping articulations between different domains, discourses, and practice, to see what will work, both theoretically and practically.

Crossing the boundaries of educational discourse, Henry Giroux (2005) deepens and transcends the possibilities of learning opportunities by invoking the engagement of students and teachers in the production of knowledge. Giroux's critical analysis of the politics of possibilities (which he refers to as 'border pedagogy'), relates to education and democracy and informs a broader discourse of critical pedagogy. In his book *Border Crossings*, Giroux (2005) posits that culture is a foundation for pedagogical and political issues and thus must be central to schools' functions in the shaping of particular identities, values, and histories by producing and legitimating specific cultural narratives and resources.

Border pedagogy points to the need for conditions that allow students to write, speak, and listen in a language in which meaning becomes multiaccultural and dispersed and resists permanent closure. This is a language in which one speaks *with* rather than exclusively for others. (Giroux, 2005, p.21).

A significant educational practice which has implications for service-learning is social groupwork. From its origins in the settlement house movement, groupwork has reflected an understanding of, and a respect for, the power of collective participation in activity. It can be applied in work with service users with the opportunity for education, recreation, socialization, and community involvement. Unlike other social work or service methods, which assume that talking, and /or individual action is the highest form of interaction, groupwork understands that 'doing

in interaction with others can have wonderful outcomes for individual group members, for groups, and for the society of which the group is part' (Greif, Ephross, 2011, p.6).

The emphasis on collective action, in groupwork, offers opportunities to respond to a broad range of needs in a collective, participatory, user-led, and empowering manner. In this sense it is perfect for service-learning which seeks to contribute to a vibrant democracy by encouraging citizens to come together to solve their problems. It lends itself to a groupwork approach in which the people experiencing an issue are defining how it should be addressed (Mullender and Ward, 1991). Groups can be facilitated by students in service-learning activities to promote insight, learning, support, social action, personal development, social change, intergroup dialogues, and finding common ground.

In the groupwork process the teacher/ facilitator becomes an internal participant in the whole group experience. He or she is a member with a role and function, who participates and shares in all that takes place in the group experience, while in the traditional classroom setting the teacher/facilitator has the choice to enter or not to enter into a particular interactional exchange. The teacher activates his or her professional contribution selectively as needed. The relationships are not characterized by mutuality or collaboration, as they are in many task and social change groups, and which is a core value of service-learning.

In service-learning, the dynamics of groupwork will reflect how the teacher participates in the entire group/class experience, and engages in particular moments of group interaction that require assistance to resolve. If the class/group can be helped to function well, it is more likely to be successful in its outcomes such as its effectiveness and sustainability. Further, every member of the class has the potential to influence the entire class; the teacher's actions are only one of many contributions, differentiated by his/her professional role and function. Groupwork principles of practice encourage establishing a reciprocal relationship within the group and developing the capacity for the members to feel at ease and enjoy social interplay (Murphy, 1959). 'The group is the best means for achieving understanding and for helping to make their problems easier to cope with' (McDermott, 2002, p.23).

Hence, the authors would assert groupwork, is service learning 'in action.' In that by participating in service learning, students, teachers/ facilitators and service users within the community have reciprocal

encounters. Pappell and Rothman (1962) point out that what is important, in service-learning, is that the emphasis is on the reciprocity that exists between group members and society, and that the learning is a mutually shared experience. Not only are the students bringing their academic knowledge into the community, but they are gaining knowledge and insight from those community service projects and service users with whom they are interacting. There is a convergence of service learning and groupwork in which many of the educational concepts that groupwork espouses are operationalized through service-learning.

## **The proliferation of service learning**

Service learning is an engaged teaching strategy, premised on experiential education as the foundation for intellectual, moral and civic growth. Service-learning has a rich history in the transformative educational and social ideas of those such as John Dewey and Jane Adams. In the last two decades there has been a proliferation of service learning on campuses across the country (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents and a leading proponent of service-learning, has grown from three institutions in 1985 to over 1,100 in 2009, representing more than a quarter of all higher education institutions.

This educational innovation has achieved a widespread foothold in a relatively brief period of time. The passion that fueled service learning's growth came from fervor among its proponents that the practice could link to the core work of colleges and universities with higher purposes, namely: transformative learning, education for democracy, and research to better understand and improve the world (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Moreover, service-learning has also succeeded for a more practical reason; it effectively provides contextual learning and real-world application of theory. This aligns with the assumptions of andragogy, namely that as an individual matures one's perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly one's orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness. Like other forms of experiential education, an andragogical approach

to teaching, service-learning as a teaching strategy allows students to test skills and facts learned in the classroom, sharpen problem-solving capacities, work collaboratively with diverse groups of people and learn from the community as well. This appeal to both idealistic and practical learning goals has helped make service-learning adaptable to a variety of disciplines and institutional settings.

This philosophical outlook resonates with that of groupwork. From its origins, groupwork practice supports the significance of experiential education. Learning does not happen in a vacuum, but rather one's education is enhanced by meaningful participation with others. The group experience provides all parties with a greater sense of community, interaction with one's peers, and a more profound practical education.

## **Service learning at USM**

The University of Southern Maine (USM) is a public, regional, comprehensive university, situated in Northern New England. USM is uniquely situated at three campuses in Portland, Gorham, and Lewiston-Auburn, and offers baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral programs, providing students with learning opportunities in the arts, humanities, politics, health sciences, business, mass communications, science, engineering, and technology. USM's mission statement expresses its support for its faculty, staff and students' community involvement. More than ever, the civic realm matters, as USM supports its students in learning opportunities that equip them for the most pressing challenges now and in the future.

An expression of the University's commitment to the community and its students' was the creation of the Office of Community Service Learning (CSL) in 2006. The institution determined that learning opportunities outside the classroom had to be integrated with classroom academic learning. Indeed, the demographic of USM students is one in which individuals must be earning academic credit, or financial resources, for the time they spend in their service-learning roles.

In July, 2010 the CSL's organizational home at USM moved to the Division of Student Success, increasing emphasis on service-learning as a support to student learning and success in both academic and community settings. According to USM's Office of Community

Service Learning 2011-2012 a substantial amount of service hours stemmed from students enrolled in 44 service-learning courses taught in 21 departments. Through such courses, 927 students completed 19,602 hours of service benefitting over 75 nonprofit partners (USM Community Service Learning, 2012).

An outgrowth of the Office of Community Service has been *Civic Matters*, USM's symposium of community-based projects and research. Many of these projects are connected to service-learning courses, student co-curricular work, and community based research conducted at or outside of USM. The highlight of *Civic Matters* is the community conversation portion which brings together faculty, students, administrators and representatives from community organizations.

The narratives in this special edition of *Groupwork* provide the reader with the rich experiences of service-learning and further reinforce the position that interaction with others can have positive outcomes for individual group members, for groups, and for society (Greif & Ephross, 2011).

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