

Principles Of Good Practice For Service-Learning Pedagogy

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The following ten principles were created by Jeffrey Howard for the Michigan Journal of Community Service in 2001. Howard believes that in order to fully understand and authentically integrate service-learning into coursework, that faculty must adhere to each of these principles equally.

Principle 1: Academic Credit is for Learning, Not for Service

This first principle speaks to those who puzzle over how to assess students' service in the community, or what weight to assign community involvement in final grades. In traditional courses, academic credit and grades are assigned based on students' demonstration of academic learning as measured by the instructor. It is no different in service-learning courses. While in traditional courses we assess students' learning from traditional course resources, e.g. textbooks, class discussions, library research, etc., in service-learning courses we evaluate students' learning from traditional resources, from the community service, and from the blending of the two. So, academic credit is not awarded for doing service or for the quality of the service, but rather for the student's demonstration of academic and civic learning.

Principle 2: Do Not Compromise Academic Rigor

Since there is a widespread perception in academic circles that community service is a "soft" learning resource, there may be a temptation to compromise the academic rigor in a service-learning course. Labeling community service as a "soft" learning stimulus reflects a gross misperception. The perceived "soft" service component actually raises the learning challenge in a course. Service-learning students must not only master academic material as in traditional courses, but also learn how to learn from unstructured community experiences and merge that learning with the learning from other course resources.

Principle 3: Establish Learning Objectives

It is a service-learning maxim that one cannot develop a quality service-learning course without first setting very explicit learning objectives. This principle is foundational to service-learning. While establishing learning objectives for students is a standard to which all courses are accountable, in fact, it is especially necessary and advantageous to establish learning objectives in service-learning courses. The addition of the community as a learning context multiplies the learning possibilities. To sort out those of greatest priority, as well as to leverage the bounty of learning opportunities offered by community service experiences, deliberate planning of course academic and civic learning objectives is required.

Principle 4: Establish Criteria for the Selection of Service Placements

Requiring students to serve in any community-based organization as part of a service-learning course is tantamount to requiring students to read any book as part of a traditional course. Faculty who are deliberate about establishing criteria for selecting community service placements will find that students are able to extract more relevant learning from their respective service experiences, and are more likely to meet course learning objectives. We recommend four criteria for selecting service placements:

1. Circumscribe the range of acceptable service placements around the content of the course (e.g., for a course on homelessness, homeless shelters and soup kitchens are learning-appropriate placements, but service in a hospice is not).
2. Limit specific service activities and contexts to those with the potential to meet course-relevant academic and civic learning objectives (e.g., filing papers in a warehouse, while of service to a school district, will offer little to stimulate either academic or civic learning in a course on elementary school education.)

Principle 8: Rethink the Faculty Instructional Role

If faculty encourage students' active learning in the classroom, what would be a concomitant and consistent change in one's teaching role? Commensurate with the preceding principle's recommendation for an active student learning posture, this principle advocates that service-learning teachers, too, rethink their roles. An instructor role that would be most compatible with an active student role shifts away from a singular reliance on transmission of knowledge and toward mixed pedagogical methods that include learning facilitation and guidance.

To re-shape one's classroom role to capitalize on the learning bounty in service-learning, faculty will find Howard's 1998 model of "Transforming the Classroom" helpful. This four-stage model begins with the traditional classroom in which students are passive, teachers are directive, and all conform to the learned rules of the classroom. In the second stage, the instructor begins to re-socialize herself toward a more facilitative role; but the students, socialized for many years to be passive learners, are slow to change to a more active mode. In the third stage, with the perseverance of the instructor, the students begin to develop and acquire the skills and propensities to be active in the classroom. Frequently, during this phase, faculty will become concerned that learning is not as rich and rigorous as when they are using the more popular lecture format, and may regress to a more directive posture. Over time homeostasis is established, and the instructor and the students achieve an environment in which mixed pedagogical methods lead to students who are active learners, instructors fluent in multiple teaching methods, and strong academic and civic learning outcomes.

Principle 9: Be Prepared for Variation in, and Some Loss of Control with, Student Learning Outcomes

For faculty who value homogeneity in student learning outcomes, as well as control of the learning environment, service-learning may not be a good fit. In college courses, learning strategies largely determine student outcomes, and this is true in service-learning courses, too. However, in traditional ~~100-level~~ courses fit in the classroom. 238T*0.