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An Adventure in Service-Learning: Developing Knowledge, Values and Responsibility

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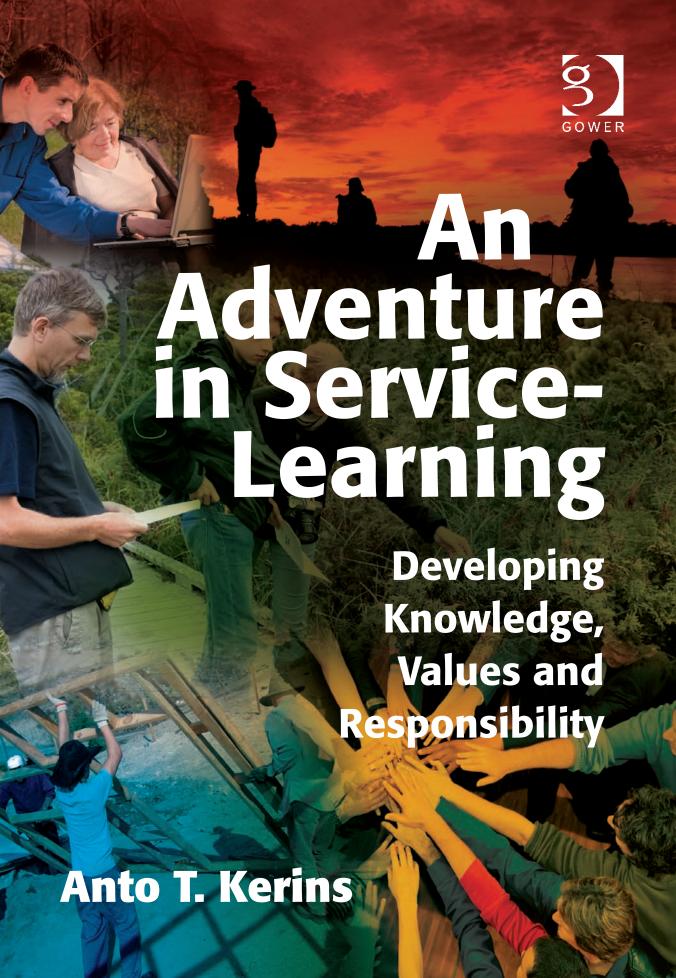
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An Adventure in Service-Learning

Developing Knowledge, Values and Responsibility

Anto T. Kerins

An Adventure in Service-Learning: Developing Knowledge, Values and Responsibility (2010)

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An Adventure in Service-Learning

To Margaret, Sinéad, Cormac and Eoin

An Adventure in Service-Learning

Developing Knowledge, Values and Responsibility

ANTO T. KERINS

GOWER

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Introduction

Did you ever sit in class when you were a student and wonder how it could be different? How the teaching, note-taking and endless study requirements could somehow be changed? How learning could be made more interesting and engaging?

Did you ever consider how you could use your college learning usefully? How you could help others? So rather than just sit and swot for some test or other, you could help people with your knowledge and skills.

Many students find the standard classroom and study method challenging. Although some of them eventually get used to it, and a few may tell you they like it, the vast majority find it hard going.

However, things can be different. There is a teaching method called service-learning that can increase the level of interest, engagement and enjoyment in learning. Although hard work and effort are still needed, service-learning strengthens the quality of our learning because we become personally involved in the process and interested in the results.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is like any other teaching method, it facilitates subject learning. However, it differs in that it requires students to use their subject learning to help others. In this respect, students are given the opportunity to use their subject knowledge or skills to carry out an activity, project or task that benefits others.

Service-learning contains two parts – service and learning. The service part refers to the activity of helping others by, for example, working in an old

people's home, fundraising for a charity, helping children with their homework or running a drugs or alcohol awareness campaign. Here students use their subject knowledge or skills to help them perform the service.

The learning that occurs in service-learning includes the normal subject or knowledge learning that occurs in any other teaching method. It also includes the development of skills and values that arise from the service activity.

The acquisition of knowledge, skills and values is enhanced by having the student reflect on the service activity and the subject theory. This reflection can occur by students, for example, writing a report, essay or analytical diary that helps to improve and connect the different types of learning.

In applying subject content to community needs, students can connect their classroom learning to real life. Service-learning is therefore like a bridge that helps to connect the academic to the outside world.

USE

This teaching method can be used in any subject. One source provides syllabi examples in a large number of different disciplines ranging from archaeology to management, from engineering to law and from politics to urban planning. There are also several studies showing how to use it in a wide variety of different subjects ranging from accounting to women's studies, from biology to philosophy, and from history to nursing.[1]

The method can be used to improve the quality of subject learning in a discipline and can thereby strengthen the learning of both theory and concepts. It can also improve the quality and range of skill learning. In addition, it can help to develop civic and social justice values and encourage social responsibility. The ability of service-learning to encourage subject, skill and values learning all in one package is rather unusual.

Service-learning empowers students in a way that is not possible in an ordinary class. This is because students are responsible for the service element of the activity as they go about helping others with their subject knowledge and skills. It responds to a need in students to be out in the world using their

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1 See examples of syllabi at www.compact.org/syllabi/syllabi-index.php and the *Service-Learning in the Disciplines* 21-volume set at http://styluspub.com/Books/BookDetail. aspx?productID=117882.

education to help others. The altruistic dimension of the method provides them with a rich source of personal learning and development. Finally, the method can breathe new life and energy into the routine and sometimes tedious nature of university learning.

We discuss service-learning in Part 1. We introduce the topic in Chapter 1 and discuss the learning element in Chapter 2.

Learning

You can learn much in a service-learning class. As mentioned above you can acquire new knowledge, skills and values and on occasion you can develop new insight and meaning.

The range and variety of learning in service-learning is potentially broader than the standard teaching method because of its mix of classroom and experiential activity and also because of its altruistic nature. The learning locations are also varied and contain not just the formal classroom but also the situated learning locations of the charity, old people's home, local school, and so on. In these environments the students have to deal with more than just the symbols, concepts and theories of the classroom. They also have to learn on the run and under pressure working with and through other people, many of whom they may have never met before.

RESPONSIBILITY

When students are responsible for a charity fundraiser, an awareness campaign or people needing help, the buck stops with them. This is real life and if they fail they have to take the consequences. One student said that 'if you go into an exam and you bomb at it, there's no one there looking at you'. However, if you fail in the service activity there is no hiding place.

The nature of learning in service activity is different to classroom learning: ideas are grasped or apprehended rather than acquired or comprehended. The student has to deal with and manage the whole phenomenon rather than just the textbook and teacher talk element.

This is not the synthetic learning of the classroom where you are asked to imagine real phenomena through a particular subject lens. The learning here

includes the reflected learning from the felt experience which is integrated with, and strengthened by, the subject learning of the classroom method.

CHALLENGING

The experiential element of service-learning can contain challenging and conflict-filled situations that need to be dealt with. Experiential learning can sometimes feel like white water rafting with unexpected difficulties and problems coming out of nowhere. Running charity fundraisers, school support projects, old people's parties and drug awareness campaigns can produce considerable and unexpected pressures. All of this is very different to doing supervised lab work, case study analysis, poetry essays or management reports.

Learning however, is never an automatic process even for the most gifted of students. Our universities can provide great teachers and attractive subjects. They can also provide interesting teaching methods such as service-learning. However, we still need willing, responsible and motivated learners to succeed. Students must be willing and capable of travelling the long hard road of college learning.

They must also be what we call 'personally centred' so they have the energy and capacity to face the challenges of learning. Although interest and excitement can encourage and support learning, they may not be there when most needed. College learning can be tough going and students need the capacity for the hard work involved.

SOLITARY ACTIVITY

Learning can be a solitary activity. Even though students sit in large classes or tackle team assignments, much of it involves many lonely hours sitting at a desk reading books, articles or notes. And while we may frequently read other people's ideas we rarely get to talk to any of them and cannot therefore benefit from the stimulation of one-to-one conversation.[2]

Much of what we really learn and deeply feel is socially experienced and happens with and through others. Service-learning is strong on the social aspect of learning and encourages students to work with and help others and this engagement improves the quality and depth of learning.

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2   Despite this point it must be admitted that the world of books, articles, web sources and libraries is a very efficient information transmission system.

College life is generally a relatively sheltered environment. Demanding as it can sometimes be, we have to admit that studying in classrooms, libraries or work rooms is a comparatively safe and almost genteel activity. However, running a charity fundraiser, a high school support event or a drug awareness campaign can be a challenging, sometimes exhausting and at times even risky activity as we see later. Service-learning can bring some of the difficulties of the outside world into the college environment. We discuss service in Chapter 3.

Service

The service part of service-learning allows students to run activities or projects that help others. How can students help others as part of their course? Students taking a project management course, for example, can use their subject knowledge to help manage a fundraising project for children in need. Similarly, accountancy students can help with a charity's accounts, environmental science students can use their knowledge to help a community with environmental issues or chemistry students can help check such things as lead levels in house paint or river sediment. Finally, all students, from whatever discipline, can inform school pupils of their subject area. Therefore, service-learning students need to know their subject well so they can use it to carry out their service.

But what is service? How do we identify it and why would we want to encourage students to do it as part of their course?

CONTENTIOUS CONCEPT

Service is a contentious concept and has been much debated. Some feel that students should undertake service for the experiential learning benefit it brings. However, this does not tell us why students should undertake service activity rather than any other type of activity.

Some argue that students should do service because it can encourage them to be good citizens. Being a good citizen can mean obeying laws, paying taxes and supporting a charity. It can also mean participating in civic life by being an active member of a community or being a reforming citizen who works to change things.

However, using citizenship as the benchmark of service is not always useful. The good citizen in one country is not necessarily so in another; citizenship

in one place can mean something different elsewhere. Important as it is as a service objective, citizenship is not an adequate measure of the possibilities of service. We should be looking at what drives real and enduring citizenship to ensure that what it stands for in any particular place is good.

Others feel service should be about social reform.[3] After all our graduates are meant to be our brightest and best and should we not prepare them for a more advanced role in society than simply helping others?

Social reformers are needed today. However, social reformers need not necessarily be good neighbours or kind colleagues. Indeed social reformers may sometimes introduce change that creates hardship. Reforms to reduce unemployment by cutting unemployment benefit may, for example, cause a lot of hardship. Service needs to be defined by something more compelling than social reform, otherwise it may face similar challenges to citizenship.

CHARITY

Service is best defined by relating it to kindness, love or care for others. It does not matter whether we do this in London or New York, Cairo or Beijing, caring for others and kindness means roughly the same thing everywhere. One relatively challenging benchmark of kindness, love or caring for others is the Christian concept of charity. This concept is used later as the benchmark for service so as to help us understand and evaluate the service component of service-learning.[4]

To help us to interpret the service in service-learning we introduce the concept of a service spectrum in Chapter 3. This allows us to gauge the service impulse by having a spectrum of intentions going from helping others because we deeply care about them to helping others because we are mainly concerned about ourselves and getting a good grade.

When students carry out service voluntarily they can be classed as volunteers. This type of volunteering can be categorised as formal volunteering since it is organised within the curriculum.

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3   For example, Morton and Saltmarsh (1997: 138) state that Dewey's legacy includes 'an abiding faith that education leads to social reform' and articulates 'public and civic roles for ordinary people that would lead them to social and political activism'.

4   It is important to clarify that we are using this concept as a convenient standard or benchmark of service and nothing more. Other religions and beliefs have concepts and standards that are similar to charity and we discuss some of these similarities later.

Service is always a relational activity in that it is done for and often with others. It is frequently carried out in the college's external community. Here it can be carried out in the local neighbourhood or further afield. However, it can also be carried out in the college's internal community.

The community where students provide service can be defined territorially – for example, the Dominic Street community in Dublin or the Garfield Park community in Chicago. A community can also be defined relationally where people do not necessarily reside in the same area but are linked by a common factor; for example, the AIDS or homeless communities.

Sometimes, however, a community may be used by others as a device. For example, a homeless community close to a college might end up being used by students solely for grade purposes rather than for charitable reasons.

UNDER PRESSURE

Some students may first experience volunteering in service-learning. Volunteering is not a significant part of our modern culture. The service reflex is under pressure because of certain social trends. For example, the decline in social capital and the influence of the enterprise, market and entertainment culture all tend to discourage the service impulse.

The service reflex is also under pressure in the university. This is partly due to the fragmentation of the college community and the weak level of social interaction on campus. Many students today limit their college activities to study and related activities and do other things elsewhere.[5]

Despite this, community involvement is important for personal growth and development and being part of a caring community is an essential ingredient of normal development. Philosophers and others warn us that there is a great longing for community in people and we ignore this need at our peril.[6]

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5   This is at least partly due to part-time work. A recent European study found that 'more than half the students in eleven countries work alongside their studies' and in some countries such as the Netherlands and Estonia more than two-thirds work. See Orr, Schnitzer and Frackmann (2008: 15).

6   See our discussion of community in Chapter 3.

Educational Role

Why bother with service-learning – why use it? To answer this we look at the role of higher education in Chapter 4 so as to provide service-learning with an overall context.

Our discussion here suggests that higher education has two distinct roles. First, it prepares students for the world of work. After all, if college does not help prepare them for the world of work why should they bother going? We refer to this as the dominant role of education.

Second, some regard it as having a role in preparing students for society and life after college. Many students travel non-stop through the education system from a very young age. When they graduate they often enter society beyond education for the first time. Therefore they need some preparation for this change. This is the ancillary role of education. Although preparation for the work world is dominant, preparation for participating in society is also important.

MARKET TURMOIL

The ancillary role has become more important in recent times with the turmoil in the market system. This turmoil has led to questions about our fixation on markets and individualism which, in turn, has led to concerns about the role of higher education.

Business schools, for example, have recently come under fire because of their strong commitment to market forces. Some feel they should cease selling education solely as a way to make more money and should address the 'corrosion of character' that is evident in certain management practices. They should avoid producing 'critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts, and shrunken souls' and a lack of 'moral muscle' by providing wise graduates who are 'true professionals with true character'. In short, they should have a moral mission.[7]

Adam Smith, the father of economics, says we have a moral responsibility to others and that the moral precedes the economic. Smith refers to the 'corruption of moral sentiments, which is occasioned by [the] disposition to admire the rich and great' in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published shortly before he died

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7   See Patriotta and Starkey (2008: 323–326) on the above points. Also see Fagan (2008: 34).

in 1790.[8] Smith would surely have been comfortable with the ancillary role of education as a counterbalance to the power of the dominant role.

Therefore service-learning has two roles – the dominant role of preparation for the workforce and society and the ancillary role which now becomes even more important with recent developments in the economy. Any evaluation of service-learning must therefore take account of both objectives.

Service-Learning in Action

How does service-learning operate on the ground? What does it look like in action? In Chapter 5 we look at an example of service-learning in action. This contains three integrated management modules: project management, leadership and management consultancy.[9] They are integrated in that the student must take project management before they can take leadership. In addition, the learning and teaching methods are similar.

MANAGEMENT EXAMPLES

Students study project and risk management along with networking and negotiation in the project management module. They learn the theory so as to enable them to manage a volunteering project of their choice over the period of the module. Having successfully completed this module they can opt to take the leadership one. Here students study leadership, management coaching, and business ethics and these subjects help prepare them to lead a volunteering project. Finally, the consultancy management module includes the theory of management consultancy which students use to carry out a consultancy project for a charity or similar organisation. Each module is assessed by a report.[10]

The modules usually start in the third week of September in any year. The first few weeks are used to introduce the relevant course theory. Students are also briefed on how to organise and manage a volunteering project and are given examples of possible projects. Finally, they are advised and helped with their project proposal.

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8   See Patriotta and Starkey (2008: 325) for the above points.
9   The three modules operate within the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Faculty of Tourism and Food, Dublin Institute of Technology. See Chapter 5.
10 Service-learning has been running since 2001 in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Faculty of Tourism and Food, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland.

The proposal is normally submitted and approved by the middle of October and the project runs from then to the last week in November – approximately seven weeks in total. So while they take their other five subjects they are running a project management, leadership or consultancy project over a seven-week period. This is generally a very busy time for them.

During class, students complete any outstanding theory or, where necessary, review material from an earlier service-learning module. Much of class time is used to monitor and support project progress. The project is completed by the end of November and they then have two weeks to prepare and submit their reports.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

How effective are these service-learning modules? To answer this question we discuss the results of an investigation into the modules in Part 2. These are dealt with in Chapters 6–9.

Here we find that students indicate that they acquire, for example, the following types of knowledge and skills: communication, teamwork, organisational, management, time management, event management, interpersonal skills, negotiation, project management and networking skills. On values and personal effectiveness they learn confidence, responsibility, understanding, and caring for others. Some students also develop insight or meaning.

One of the more unexpected findings is the number of students who find service-learning both challenging and enjoyable. Many also find its practical nature an interesting change from the standard teaching method. Finally, some find that their service experience has a significant impact on them.

The average service-learning grade was found to be higher than other grades. This finding may be due to the challenging but enjoyable nature of the modules leading to a strong determination to do a good job. Overall, we found that the service-learning modules met the needs of higher education by providing a mix of subject, skills and values learning that are relevant both to preparing for the world of work and society.

When we look closely at the evidence we also discover much about human nature and the real pressures of student learning and life in general. For some,

the service-learning experience was nothing less than high adventure. For others, it was a significant challenge in a life already full of other responsibilities and activities. In all the study provides a valuable insight into student learning today with all its pressures, distractions and possibilities.

The Future

The final part of the book looks to the future. It indicates that service-learning can contribute to any higher education course. In particular, it discusses how our three service-learning modules can enhance business and management courses as well as a wide variety of other disciplines.

Service-learning changes the boundaries of learning. It does so by its capacity to enhance not just knowledge and skills learning but also values. It this context, it can generate new insight, meaning, and on rare occasions, metanoia.

In all of this it makes an important contribution to preparing students for the changed economic and social landscape that we inhabit. Now that the global economy has had its first significant experience of weakness in recent times it can help graduates better prepare not just for the economy but also for society whose well-being in many ways precedes and supports it.

Finally, doing service allows students to exploit a latent capacity to help others and may also fulfil a human need. Therefore, rather than just seeing service as a task or duty we may also see it as a way of becoming fully human and meeting our potential.

The Reader

This book will be read with interest by teachers, researchers, managers, and policy makers throughout education. It will particularly benefit those involved in the business and management, service-learning, community based learning and education areas. It will help policy makers, teaching and learning staff and those concerned with the citizenship role of education. Finally, it will benefit those in government, state bodies and elsewhere who are interested in education and how it can be improved.

READING THE BOOK

You will find the book varies somewhat in presentational style. Much of Part 2, for example, records in narrative form the views of students. By contrast, Parts 1 and 3 mainly use the normal presentation style in a book of this nature.

A professor of mine once admitted he had to read a new book as many as three times before he understood it. That is not to say readers will need to read this book more than once to be at ease with its content. However, this, like many other books, is a multi-layered phenomenon.

Readers may respond to the book in different ways. Some may find it interesting, challenging or just plain different. Others may find it helps clarify certain topics, concepts or theories. Then there are those who will read it to see how it might improve their teaching. Finally, some will look to see how it might clarify their perspectives on education so as to help with their administration, management or policy activities.

I wrote this book to talk about the things I learned so I could help others in their work and efforts. I did not write it to add to the theoretical body of knowledge that resides in any of the disciplines it impinges on. What I really wanted to do was get my experiences and findings out there so they could help others. Although I am interested in theoretical developments, I have relatively little interest in theory that does not help us either do things better, or improve our understanding of things that are important.

The book has been informed by my reading, teaching, and research activities. It has also been influenced, however, by my biography. My life experiences have facilitated the development of certain insights and perspectives that might otherwise have been different had I been someone else.

To take an example, the discussion later on the nature of service is a contentious one. In the end, having taken everything into account I came up with charity or love as the core of service. This for me passes all tests including biographical.[11] Those, for example, from the Islamic tradition may reach roughly the same point through the impact of Sufism or Islamic mysticism, which encourages selfless love. Others from an Eastern tradition may arrive at a similar point through Confucianism and the concept of 'ren'. Those with no

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11 By this I am referring to my experiences and background which has had some influence on my understanding of things.

such beliefs may reach it through the principles of humanism or from a general belief in the decency of people and the importance of helping others.[12]

REVIEWING THE BOOK

Some of you may review or comment on the book. Well written reviews can help the development process that arises from any work. People may find weaknesses in this book. After all, some of the fun in reading something new is to catch up with it and at some stage move ahead.

Getting reviewed is like being graded. However, while reviews are important I sympathise with MacIntyre. He says that 'disagreement on fundamental issues is taken to be the permanent condition' of his discipline. Reviews, he says, can be based on the quality of 'analytic and argumentative skills, especially in their negative use to expose failures in the distinction-making of others or gaps in their arguments, together with an ability to summon up telling counter-examples'. This type of review is, in the end, incapable of providing a decisive resolution to any central issue under dispute.[13]

Therefore, although I might have been tempted in this study to try and 'knock down disagreeing thinkers by the sheer force' of my argument, Lewis tells me 'it cannot be done'. This, he says, is due to the fact that 'once the menu of well-worked-out theories is before us', one's position 'is a matter of opinion'.[14]

Despite agreeing with Lewis on the arguments between theories, I feel we can improve the lot of others by telling them about things we have discovered. Definitely, if we tout a particular philosophical theory, Lewis is probably correct. When we analyse from the perspective of a particular theory we may be limited in what we can do about our detractors.

However, if we are engaged in practice we need not feel as constrained by particular theories. Although they may snap at our ankles, the real test for ideas that wish to influence practice is whether they are aligned with our own views on things and whether or not they can work and how and under what conditions. We do not really need to win the theoretical argument – whatever particular one that happens to be.

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12 See our brief discussion of these points in Chapters 3 and 10.
13 See Gillespie (2009). MacIntyre was speaking at 'MacIntyre at 80: A Conference on the Life and Work of Alasdair MacIntyre' hosted by the School of Philosophy, University College Dublin, 6–8 March 2009. See www.ucd.ie/philosophy/macintyre/programme.html.
14 See Lewis (1983: x–xi). Both Lewis and MacIntyre are philosophers.

However, some of you may ask 'what about theory'? This question reminds me of a meeting between academics and business people some time ago. The director welcomed everyone and encouraged us to work together. He then said that academics may inadvertently deal with problems by making them more complex whereas business people had no choice but to simplify them. Business people have to get to where they can act whereas academics have to try and explain things. Being on the academic side of the table I was a little put out by his comments but his advice has since kept me from getting too serious about theory.

ADVENTURE

Some who read this book may look to see if it is in harmony with their perspective on things. If so, they may continue reading, if not they may put it down. This book was not written from a particular perspective. Its preparation was originally based on a certain view of things but the discoveries made during the research and write up changed me considerably.

Writing this book was an adventure of the mind. I had to travel far and wide to learn new things about what was just beside me. This was not a journey to distant lands but an adventure in understanding.

I have been a student and teacher for years and knew it all. What hubris!

The endless reading, research and discussion, the watching, listening and learning that went into this study has in some ways turned me inside out. If I had read it ten years ago I would have been much changed. Clarity is everything.

Every book we read is eventually put aside while we move ahead renewed and reinvigorated and ready for something better. In the meantime enjoy where it takes you.