Service learning in reflection

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Authors Note

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Abstract

Over the past decade, service learning has emerge as an essential part of higher education across the globe and the implementation of service learning as a form of experiential training has had a great impact on education. The importance of service learning is reflected in countries across the globe, such as the Learn and Serve America project when, in 1990, the American government made grants available to integrate community service with curricula through service learning. This grant fosters, amongst other, collaboration between institutions of higher education to meet immediate community needs. This discussion paper deliberate the role of service learning in South Africa with a specific focus on Universities of Technologies. At the 2010 South African Society for Cooperative Education (SASCE) conference, the development of the youth was foremost in most of the discussions and presentations. When the development of youth and the theories for successful youth development merge, the importance of service learning through community and practical projects, emerge. This discussion will reflect on the current projects within Universities of Technologies, and indicate whether these projects are monitored and reflected on effectively. Service learning can only be fully successful within higher education if student can reflect and place their learning. Theorists John Dewey and David Kolb both agreed that service learning should incorporate both individual participation and the engagement in reflective thinking. Only in this way, a student will develop a greater understanding of himself and the content he is engaging.

Keywords: Service learning, reflective thinking, WIL
Globalization has given newfangled focus and meaning to higher education in today’s world (Pink, 2005). The rapid changes in socio-economical, technological and information sectors of society has prompt recent challenges to higher education institutions to deliver suitable and appropriate answer to an essential such as learning opportunities to all. These learning opportunities do not include students alone, but cut across the bigger community as well. The circulation of knowledge to a local community is considered the most effective means of developing and uplifting a community (Jones, 2006). The sharing of knowledge can increase local empowerment and contribute to the assurance of improved levels of life quality.

According to Arredondo & De la Garza (2006), the ”improvement of local capacities at less privileged communities means to promote individual and collective self-managed skills” they also highlighted the fact that self-esteem would facilitate the needed conditions to assure accepted standards on health, nutrition, productivity, family and community integration, and sound environmental indicators. This is also relevant within South Africa and the requirements of community engagement within the South African environment are embedded into various educational policies (CHE, 2006). Therefore, the Founding Document (2001) of the Higher education Quality Committee (HEQC) in South Africa identified knowledge based community service as one of the three areas, along with teaching and learning, and research, which are needed for accreditation and quality assurance in higher education (CHE,2006). The inclusion of service learning has therefore channelled higher education within South Africa on a new path.
References to Relevant Literature

Over the past decade, service learning has emerge as an essential part of higher education cross the globe and the implementation of service learning as a form of experiential training has had a great impact on education. The importance of service learning is reflected in countries across the globe. According to the web site Learn and Serve America, in 1990 the American congress passed, and President Bush signed the National and Community Service Act of 1990. According to this legislation, authorized grants would be paid to schools to support service learning and demonstration grants for national service programs to youth corps, nonprofits, and colleges and universities. This grant fosters, amongst other, collaboration between institutions of higher education to meet immediate community needs (US Gov).

Julie, Daniels & Khanyile (2007) stated that there is an emerging global movement of universities, which strive towards greater community engagement. At the end of 2000, the Department of Education in South African commissioned an education service organization with the task of developing a policy framework for community service in higher education. During the same year, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) instructed for the development of a discussion document on the role of community service in higher education (Lazarus, 2000). Five years prior to the South Africa initiative, a consortium of California organizations sponsored a conference entitled “The Education of the New California workforce.” The discussions at this conference were aimed at discovering new insights into what will be needed in a new educational system (Deruosi & Sherwood, 1997). The discussions highlighted that Community Service programs have multiple goals which includes amongst others:

- The enhancement of student learning by joining theory with experience and putting thought with action.
• Doing these projects to fill unmet needs in the community through direct service, which is meaningful and necessary.

• This will enable students to help others, give of themselves, and enter into caring relationships with others.

• This action assists students to see the relevance of the academic subject to the real world.

• Participation in Service learning projects enhances the self-esteem and self-confidence of your students.

• These projects help to develop an environment of collegial participation among students, faculty, and the community.

Over the past years numerous organizations has developed criteria for successful service learning programs. In 1995, the California State University, Fresno published a paper setting out their “Model for Enhancing Curriculum” (California State Univ., 1995). Similarly Howard (2001) and Stacey, Rice and Langer (2001) refer to the same criteria for service learning. The South African Council of Higher Education (CHE) has also adopted the same criteria and states these as:

• Relevant and meaningful service with the community;

• Enhancing academic learning;

• Purposeful civic learning (social responsibility); and

• Structures opportunity for reflection.

(Service learning in the Curriculum: A Resource for Higher education, P25)

In view of the short literature review, it is clear that Service learning, as a prescribed activity, has only emerged into the South African higher education system during the past years. In the discussion that follows the focus will be on the structures that are in place in higher education that offers opportune reflection of service learning.
Discussion of Important Issues

Early theorists such as Dewey (1963) and Kolb (1976; 1984) both agreed that service learning should incorporate both individual participation and the engagement in reflective thinking. The engagement in reflective thinking was described as the only way in which student will develop a greater understanding of himself and the content he is engaging. It is through reflective enquiry that a student can make the connection between “thought and action, theory and practice, knowledge and authority, idea and responsibilities” (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 18). This discussion paper deliberate the role of service learning within the Universities of Technologies of South Africa with a specific focus on learning outcomes and the evaluation thereof. The CHE document (Service learning in the Curriculum: A Resource for Higher education, p. 40, 41) set clear guideline for formulating both the critical cross-field outcomes, and the specific learning outcomes that is defined in the module descriptors.

At the 2010 South African Society for Cooperative Education (SASCE) conference, the development of the youth was foremost in most of the discussions and presentations. It is when the development of youth and the theories for successful youth development merge, that the importance of service learning through community and practical projects, emerge. Although Service learning is included in, the new curriculum, there are limited evidence of the existence of structures of reflection, assessment, and evaluation according to the standards that is set out in the CHE document. The analysis of fifteen projects that were probed into shows that current projects are mostly done as an add-on to the current syllabus. For higher education in South Africa to embrace Service learning as an integral part of the curriculum a comprehensive implementation of the reflection and assessment activity should be implemented. Students should engage into a structured reflection process. Possible tools to implement this process could include the Three-stage model of Toole & Toole (1995). Through this process student could reflect on their experiences by asking questions such as
What?, So What? and What now? (Toole & Toole, 1995). Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) established that service-learning methodologies, which featured cognitively challenging activities and reflection, were linked with students being more likely to value their learning experience, students also felt more successful, engaged in learning and enjoyed subject matter, and obtained more community knowledge and more positive community dispositions.

For the successful use of the power of reflection so that students can engage in social-emotional learning a strong and rich social-emotional vocabulary and an ardent storage and retrieval process for communication should be developed. The ability for students to reflect on service learning experiences demand a vocabulary that enable them to express themselves, and describe the complexity of the interaction of thoughts, feelings and behaviours inherent in human relationships.

Chapter four of the CHE document (Service learning in the Curriculum: A Resource for Higher education) is allocated to the explanation and guidance on how to successfully guide reflection and evaluation of Service learning. It is fundamental that these processes are incorporated into all Service-learning projects in future. The CHE document states that it is the role of academic staff (i.e. the lecturer of the module) to design the reflection, coach students during reflection; and monitor reflection and provide feedback (CHE, 2006).

According to Toole & Toole (1996) service learning is a form of experimental learning where students apply their academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to address real community needs. This process should include the three stages as indicated in Figure 1; before service learning (analysis), during service learning (critical thinking) and after the service learning experience (decision making) (Toole & Toole, 1995).
Figure 1  Reflection Cycle in Service learning  
(Toole & Toole 1995)

Implications and recommendation

Although the Council of Higher education has published a 223-page document on Service Learning in the Curriculum, very little evidence were found in the current structures of Universities of the required reflection and evaluation processes. Julie, Daniels & Khanyile (2007) confirm this when they stated that although community service and co-operative education are an integral part of most nursing and medical curricula, the predominant focus has been on the service itself and the community that benefits from this service. There could be numerous reasons for this situation. One of these reasons is that service projects have traditional being seen as a ‘social service’ and the learning process was not a significant part of the focus. Community projects were seen as an outreach program and student-learning reflections were mostly left to the individual lecturer to engage either in or not. Service learning, now formalized in South African Higher education programs, will require a
dedicated effort and plan from all higher education institutions to implement. The implementation will have to incorporate the processes as it is laid out in the formal document from the Council of Higher Education. It is however only through the exchange of knowledge and through a well-planned and coordinated effort, that higher educational institution will be able to contribute to, not only the development and uplifting a community, but also to ensure a structured learning process takes place at the same time.
References


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