Community-based learning is now more than a variation on community service. It is now a powerful pedagogy that can be used to enhance the common good. This pedagogy has proven itself to be an educational resource whose time has come.

Two Decades of Community-Based Learning

Edward Zlotkowski, Donna Duffy

In March of 2009, thirty-two individuals from higher education as well as the corporate and nonprofit sectors met in what the event’s organizer, Richard Freeland, Jane and William Mosakowski Distinguished Professor of Higher Education at Clark University and Commissioner of Higher Education for Massachusetts, described as an “extended seminar.” According to Freeland, the seminar’s focus was the relationship between “learning experiences . . . predominantly academic exercises in traditional classroom settings” and long-term goals such as “preparing engaged citizens, effective professionals, and, more broadly, adults equipped to make significant contributions to society” (Freeland, 2009b). From a more exclusively pedagogical perspective, one could characterize the event as investigating the role of action-based, off-campus experiences in developing liberally educated individuals—the kinds of individuals one traditionally associates with a liberal arts education. Hence one of its primary sponsors was, quite appropriately, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). As the association’s president, Carol Geary Schneider, noted (2009): “a good liberal education should take pride in preparing students for ‘effective practice.’ And how well it actually does that needs to become one of the hallmarks of excellence in this new global century.”

Such an “establishment” that covens around and recognizes the potential academic significance of experiences that had until fairly recently been regarded as peripheral to “real” learning has great significance. Indeed, Freeland himself has called such a yoking of traditional academic
concerns to effective practice a “necessary revolution” (2009a) because it challenges long-held assumptions about both the dominance and the sufficiency of purely conceptual classroom-centered learning. Furthermore, in calling for a reassessment of the role that contextualized learning experiences and unstructured problem solving could and should play in undergraduate education, the seminar participants took an important step toward acknowledging that the gap between what cognitive science and empirical research tell us about effective teaching and learning, and what actually happens in most academic programs, must be closed.

Although the Clark seminar was not focused specifically on community-based learning, it provides an excellent introduction to the latter for two interrelated reasons. First, as Freeland himself notes,

The most prominent attempt to introduce practical activity into liberal education is the civic engagement movement, through which students are encouraged to participate in off-campus community service, sometimes in connection with credit-bearing service-learning courses, sometimes outside the formal curriculum. (Freeland, 2009a)

Second, precisely because the civic engagement movement, or more specifically, the pedagogical strategy most often referred to as service-learning, has played such a prominent role in raising the kinds of issues the Clark seminar explored, it is impossible to trace the recent history of community-based teaching and learning without understanding its symbiotic relationship to a broader set of developments in the contemporary academy.

To appreciate the importance of this relationship, one need look no further than Don Hill’s “Death of a Dream Service Learning 1994–2010: A Historical Analysis by One of the Dreamers” (Hill, 1998). In this piece, Hill, at the time a member of the Service Learning 2000 Center at Stanford, offers ten (although the text reads “11”) “distinct but related reasons” why by the year 2010 one will be able to pronounce service-learning “unofficially dead” (p. 1). To be sure, Hill’s focus is K–12 education, not higher education. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to adapt almost all of his reasons to an academic context. This is especially true of his first reason, namely, “Service learning never became an appealing possible classroom strategy to ‘mainstream’ teachers” (original emphasis) (p. 1). This item goes on to explain that for too long “[s]ervice learning looked and smelled like an add-on fad that would in all due time pass from the scene” (pp. 1 and 29).

But in higher education this in fact did not happen, though it might well have, for the mid-1990s—probably just when Hill was writing his article—turned out to be a pivotal period for academic service-learning. Thanks to Campus Compact organizing, Ford Foundation funding, and a persuasive position paper written by Stanton (1990), then acting director of Stanford’s Haas Center for Public Service, the first half of the decade saw
an increasing focus on the faculty role in community-based work. Faculty, Stanton noted, had an essential role to play “in supporting student service efforts” (Stanton, 1990, p. 1). Indeed, without their participation it was unlikely the current service movement would ever gain traction.

But what exactly should faculty do? How should they utilize their now acknowledged importance? Some faculty, strongly motivated by social values and a commitment to underserved populations, believed it would be better for service-learning to remain the fringe phenomenon Hill describes rather than risk sacrificing its social efficacy to more academic ends. Another group argued that nothing in the long run could be achieved unless a way was found to lend community-based work the academic legitimacy that would broaden its appeal. It was the work of this second group that helped usher in a new stage in the development of the civic engagement movement, a stage characterized by intensive resource development, especially in and through the academic disciplines and their national and regional associations.

Probably the single most visible manifestation of this new interest in academic resource building was what eventually became the American Association for Higher Education’s twenty-one-volume series on service-learning in the academic disciplines (Zlotkowski, 1997–2006). However, that series was quickly complemented by a host of other discipline- and institutional-type specific resources (Zlotkowski, 2000, 2001, 2005). Because more than half of Hill’s ten reasons for service-learning’s projected decline involve some kind of failure to develop resources or support structures, this surge of activity effectively served to save service-learning in higher education from the decline Hill predicted for K–12 programs. Indeed, over the years that followed more than one service-learning proponent has felt compelled to caution that academic values and interests may, if anything, be too much in evidence, thereby eclipsing other social and civic concerns and undermining the principle of academy-community reciprocity (Harkavy, 2000; Saltmarsh and Hartley, forthcoming).

But it was not just charges of social and/or civic neglect that a rapidly developing civic engagement movement had to contend with. As community-based work became more popular with college and university faculty with each passing year, it came under increasing pressure to demonstrate its effectiveness, especially its academic effectiveness. A new academic journal, the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, helped meet this demand with peer-reviewed articles on, among other things, the assessment of learning outcomes in service-learning courses and programs. At the same time, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA began to take an interest in assessing service-learning’s contribution to student growth in all areas—academic, personal, and civic—and reported promising results (see, for example, Astin, 2000). Finally, in 1999 Eyler and Giles (1999), faculty researchers at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College of Education and Human Development, published their Where’s the
Learning in Service-Learning? Based on an extensive qualitative and quantitative research, the book made it clear that, implemented in a thorough and skillful manner, service-learning was indeed a “powerful pedagogy,” able to contribute substantially to student growth in a wide variety of ways.

By this point, service-learning was poised to enter the growing national conversation on what constituted appropriate educational methodology in general. A decade earlier Chickering and Gamson (1987) had formulated seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education focusing on processes that support learning across all content areas. Discussion about these principles encouraged faculty to recognize that teaching involves more than having proficiency in a subject area and led to campus conversations regarding what is needed for truly effective teaching. Angelo (1993) proposed fourteen principles that focus on how learning takes place in the classroom, and the American Psychological Association (1997) formulated a set of fourteen learner-centered psychological principles. The first of these learner-centered principles states that “successful learners are active, goal-directed, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning” (American Psychological Association, 1997, p. 3). The disconnect between viewing successful learners as necessarily active while acknowledging the passive setting of most college classrooms is clearly articulated in the Barr and Tagg (1995) influential call for a paradigm shift from teaching to learning. Their article set the stage for major changes in higher education from administrative procedures to classroom practices to assessment of student learning outcomes. The current focus on student success echoes their suggestion that “the faculty and the institution take an R. Buckminster Fuller view of students: human beings are born geniuses and designed for success. If they fail to display their genius or fail to succeed, it is because their design function is being thwarted” (Barr and Tagg, 1995, p. 23).

The Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council addressed the challenges of understanding the design function of learning in its book, How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000). Studies support the importance of helping students to think more like experts in a field and suggest that “transfer across contexts is especially difficult when a subject is taught only in a single context rather than in multiple contexts” (p. 62). Here, as also in the case of all the other studies just cited, service-learning aligns effectively with the guidelines proposed. Students participate in community settings with different types of experts, and they reflect on how course concepts fit into a range of contexts.

Of special relevance in this regard is the work of Halpern and Hakel (2003), who emphasize the importance of applying empirically based research to find ways to enhance the transfer of learning from the classroom to other settings. Their principle that “varying the conditions under which learning takes place makes learning harder for learners but results in
better learning” (p. 39) can be seen in service-learning settings when students struggle to understand why a clear-cut concept from their textbooks is hard to recognize in the complicated environment of a preschool classroom or homeless shelter. Another of the Halpern and Hakel principles, namely, that “experience alone is a poor teacher” (p. 40), serves as a key reminder of the importance of preparing students adequately for a service-learning experience and ensuring that ongoing reflection is central to the process. Students need to assess their background knowledge as they begin a project and monitor how it may change over time. As Halpern and Hakel state, “what professors do in their classes matters far less than what they ask students to do” (p. 41).

This shift from an instructional to a learning focus has also led to new conceptualizations of how to define and assess what actually happens on college campuses. The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), begun in 1998, has sparked widespread interest in the ways in which students are involved in activities both in and outside of the classroom. Shulman (2002) has proposed a “new table of learning”—with engagement and motivation, knowledge and understanding, performance and action, reflection and critique, judgment and design, and commitment and identity as key elements. He recommends that these elements serve as heuristics, as a language for playing with ideas about learning in students and institutions. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) and Fink (2003) have also created taxonomies for learning and have proposed concrete ways to design courses in order to address more holistic models of how people learn. Huber and Hutchings (2005) note that “the need for students to understand their own learning—to ‘go meta’—is increasingly on higher education’s radar screen” (p. 113).

Similarly, more faculty are “going meta” in examining how students learn through the scholarship of teaching and learning. They are exploring the kinds of conditions that help students move beyond superficial facts to a deeper understanding of subject matter. Perkins (1998) describes understanding as the ability “to perform flexibly with the topic—to explain, justify, extrapolate, relate and apply in ways that go beyond knowledge and routine skill. Understanding is a matter of being able to think and act flexibly with what you know” (p. 42). Taking the risk of venturing into an unknown community setting is one kind of activity that gives students this kind of opportunity “to perform flexibly with a topic.” Because there are few “right” answers in responding to community settings, students have to make inquiries, try multiple solutions, and persevere. Such an option may be especially important for learners who are less successful in dealing with the structures of a traditional classroom environment, where the skill of performing flexibly may not be assessed or valued (Duffy, 2000, 2004). Hence it is not surprising that Kuh (2008) cites service-learning as one of the ten high-impact educational practices effective in increasing student engagement and retention—issues of critical importance on most campuses.
today. Similarly, Bean and Eaton (2002) list service-learning as one of the approaches that correspond to their psychological theory of retention, and Simonet (2008) demonstrates the ways in which service-learning connects to behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social frameworks of engagement.

Academics exploring questions related to student learning focus closely on how, when, and why students do or do not “get” concepts within certain learning contexts. Tagg suggests that

we have to see that learning—deep learning, learning that matters, learning that lasts—is not something that instructors do to students or even that students do for themselves. Rather, it is the product of action in a context shaped by goals, performance, feedback, time horizon, and community—all of the principles that define the cognitive economy, acting to create an environment that empowers and engages students. (Tagg, 2003, p. 322)

Creating such contexts for learning and self-authorship is the theme of Baxter Magolda's book on constructive-developmental pedagogy. She states that “self-authorship is impossible unless students are able to connect learning with their lived experiences; self-authorship requires making meaning of one's own experience” (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 13). As students reflect on their experiences in various community settings, they need to struggle to make sense of their experience when what they see and hear does not fit in with their existing worldview. This necessary adjustment may then prompt them to a new visioning of reality. A recent book by Werder and Otis (2010) expands on the importance of self-authorship and provides concrete examples—including service-learning examples—of ways in which students and faculty can collaboratively engage in collaborative meaning making and together discover the types of settings that engender significant learning experiences.

However, it is not just with regard to self-authorship and ownership of the learning process that service-learning has something important to offer in the area of student efficacy. Over the past few years, more and more service-learning programs have been experimenting with new forms of student academic leadership. In 2006 Campus Compact published Students as Colleagues: Expanding the Circle of Service-Learning Leadership (Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams, 2006), an edited volume containing several dozen examples of programs in which students play key organizing, facilitating, and knowledge-generating roles. In these roles students often work alongside faculty and professional staff more as colleagues than as subordinates, hence the title Students as Colleagues.

Just as discipline-specific service-learning represented a logical extension of the more generic approaches to community-based work that had prevailed until the mid-1990s, so students as colleagues represent a logical
extension of the active learning emphasis inherent in the very nature of this approach to teaching and learning. As Bunn, Elansary, and Bowman (2006)—a student-staff collaborative team—write in “Penn’s West Philadelphia Partnerships: Developing Students as Catalysts and Colleagues”:

... service-learning is a pedagogy that emphasizes democratic development ... and thus is a natural fit with a course that employs a democratic learning process from course creation through implementation. The goals of both service-learning and democratic development are met to a greater extent when the two are employed together in the same course than when employed individually. (Bunn, Elansary, and Bowman, 2006, pp. 199–200)

To be sure, not all service-learning courses and programs utilize students in this manner, and for the foreseeable future, the concept will probably remain more exceptional than normative. Still, it offers still another indication of the way in which service-learning continues to anticipate and contribute to important new trends in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

There remains one other aspect of community-based work that deserves to be recognized as a possible harbinger of broader concerns. One of the most detailed, empirically grounded contributions to the Clark seminar was a paper by Robert Sternberg, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University. Sternberg, a former president of the American Psychological Association, has developed a tripartite understanding of intelligence that places creative and practical abilities on a par with the analytical skills so long privileged by academics (Sternberg, 1985; Sternberg, 1997). In his Clark paper, Sternberg rehearses concepts and examples (already familiar to readers acquainted with Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002) that clarify why traditional analytical skills, when developed to the exclusion of creative and practical skills, hardly presage professional success, whether inside or outside the academy. It is the examples under “teaching practically” that should especially draw our attention, for they consist primarily of the kinds of experiences routinely offered in service-learning courses: planning for a financial problem created by changing life circumstances, using a foreign language in the field, implementing a business plan, adapting an architectural design to specific environmental circumstances.

And yet, as compelling as these examples are in arguing for the merits of community-based teaching and learning, it is Sternberg’s (2009) discussion of what he calls “wisdom” that adds something of special significance to our understanding of this approach. For up until now our discussion has focused almost exclusively on the academic and the cognitive. And yet, one could argue that what makes service-learning truly distinctive is its elevation of the civic to a place of equal importance. Indeed, when one reviews what George Kuh has called the “high impact practices” most relevant to the Clark
seminar (Freeland, 2009b)—study abroad, undergraduate research, internships, co-op placements, and service-learning opportunities—it is primarily service-learning that insists upon the importance of civic learning, civic awareness, and civic experiences. And although many of the learning benefits we have identified can be effectively delivered through a variety of pedagogical approaches, the same cannot be said for civic development.

It is not unusual for service-learning advocates to encounter polite stares when they turn directly to this subject. To be sure, faculty increasingly recognize the importance of civic development within the overall frame of undergraduate education. Some are even willing to concede their own responsibility for contributing to this development. Nevertheless, the civic remains by and large one of the least well developed features of service-learning programs and community-based work (Colby and others, 2003; Saltmarsh and Hartley, forthcoming). Far too often it is seen as an add-on or perhaps an ideal rather than an essential feature of community-based work. Therein lies the significance of Sternberg’s (2009) identification of wisdom—a quality that “builds on but goes beyond intelligence and creativity” (p. 2)—as “the most important attribute to seek in future citizens and professionals” (p. 20).

For what Sternberg understands by this concept is something very close to what service-learning advocates might call civic vision:

A person could be practically intelligent, but use his or her practical intelligence toward bad or selfish ends. In wisdom, one certainly may seek good ends for oneself, but one also seeks common good outcomes for others. If one’s motivations are to maximize certain people’s interests and minimize other people’s, wisdom is not involved. In wisdom, one seeks a common good, realizing that this common good may be better for some than for others. (p. 22)

From a variation on community service to a discipline-specific strategy to a powerful pedagogy to a vehicle of democracy and the common good, community-based learning has proven itself to be an educational resource whose time has come.

References


EDWARD ZLOTKOWSKI is a professor of English at Bentley College and in 1990 founded the Bentley Service-Learning Center. He received his B.A. in English and his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Yale University. He writes and speaks extensively on a wide range of service-learning and engagement-related topics, and served as general editor of the American Association for Higher Education’s 21-volume series on service-learning in the academic disciplines. He also served as editor of Successful Service-Learning Programs, published by Anker in 1998, Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience, published by the University of South Carolina in 2002, and as co-editor of Students as Colleagues: Expanding the Circle of Service-Learning Leadership, published by Campus Compact in 2006. A collection of his essays will be published in 2010 by Temple University Press. Dr. Zlotkowski is a senior associate at the New England Resource Center for Higher Education.
DONNA DUFFY is professor of psychology and coordinator of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Middlesex Community College, Bedford and Lowell, Massachusetts. She is the coauthor, with Janet Wright Jones, of Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester, and the coeditor, with Robert Bringle, of With Service in Mind, a monograph on service-learning and psychology. She earned her doctorate from Washington University and received the Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service-Learning in 1999 for her work connecting service in the community to student learning in classrooms.