Enacting Service Learning across HE disciplines: An exploration of pedagogical principles

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**Abstract**

The Community Service Learning Lab Project (the Lab) was established in response to issues raised by academic staff and community partners. It builds on existing service-learning practice and research to facilitate innovative project based multi-disciplinary service-learning opportunities within the curriculum across the institution. The paper articulates pedagogical principles that are emerging from research into this service-learning initiative. Through the Lab, academics, students and key community organisations have collaborated to identify, implement and evaluate interdisciplinary Service-learning projects that support student learning and the needs of our partner organisations. Each Lab project and partnership evolved with its own unique characteristics however a number of pedagogies, learning resources and assessment strategies were shared across all Lab projects. These approaches enacted the underlying principles of service learning; diversity, reciprocity and collaboration within the curriculum. A Participatory Action Research framework (PAR) informed the collaborative design of the curriculum. Through the PAR process participants have considered service learning strategies that best prepare students to work with community organisations and develop students’ understanding of privilege and disadvantage, intercultural competence and professional capabilities. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the key challenges and future implications of an institution-wide approach to service-learning.

**Keywords:** Service-learning, community-based projects, participatory action research, interdisciplinarity

**Introduction**

Service-learning is a well established pedagogy in North America and is of growing interest across higher education in Australia. The success of service-learning as a powerful strategy to teach and encourage engaged citizenship is well-documented and there is consistent evidence that participating in service-learning enhances students’ ‘work, career and future ready’ skills, such as leadership, career decision-making, communication skills, teamwork and intercultural competency (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Harris, Jones, & Coutts, 2010; Kenworthy-U’ren, 2008; Milne, Gabb, & Leithy, 2008; Prentice & Robinson, 2010). Service-learning recognises and engages the whole person in learning, including their embodied and emotional responses and uses shared reflective strategies to help make sense of experiences. Personal and social transformations become intertwined in the learning process by engaging the head, hands and heart (Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2008). As Meyers, (2010, p. 380) states – “it provides students with an opportunity to use their experience to discover who they are capable of being and what they are capable of doing”.

How service-learning is enacted varies greatly across institutions and disciplines. However, what appears to unify the pedagogy is an underlying values-based framework. Butin (2003) articulates this framework as the four R’s of service-learning: respect, reciprocity, relevance and reflection. Respect for members in the service-learning organisation; reciprocity, where the server interacts positively creating mutual outcomes; relevance where the service-learning pathway adds to academic learning and reflection that enables the participant to make pertinent meaning of the experience(Carrington, 2011).

**The Community Service-Learning Lab**

The Community Service Learning Lab (Lab) is a university-wide service learning initiative at one Australian University. Through the Lab, academics, students and key community organisations work together to develop and implement interdisciplinary service-learning projects that both support student learning and the needs of our community partners. Community partners invite students to inquire into real and complex issues facing their communities.
The projects are purposefully designed to allow for student input into the project focus, process and outcomes. This more open approach to projects came from student advice provided in the stakeholder roundtable discussions, which informed the design of Lab’s curriculum and pedagogical approaches. In the spirit of collaborative inquiry the community partners couched their issues as a broad framing questions rather than directives for outcomes. For example: instead of “make a website” the project brief would read “How can we best communicate around this issue?” The projects are designed so that each semester student teams contribute a component of an ongoing inquiry. At the end of the semester each student group reflects on their processes and outcomes and identifies areas for future investigation by student teams.

The Lab curriculum is shared by a number of service learning units across the University. The learning goals for the Lab and associated units have focussed on adding value to the established discipline-based curriculum. Learning goals for the Lab include:

- Identifying and applying engagement strategies which support students as emerging professionals to work sensitively and appropriately with diverse communities and individuals
- Building awareness of the complexity of issues associated with privilege and disadvantage and social injustice as it pertains to questions being explored with community partners
- Developing approaches to inquiry that values diverse perspectives and leads to mutually beneficial outcomes for stakeholders
- Exploring interdisciplinary ways of working when investigating real and complex issues facing communities

Disciplines involved in the Lab include law, justice, business, psychology, social work, creative industries and design disciplines such as performing arts, fashion, interior design and interactive design. Academics have collaborated with community partners in the development of the shared curriculum. This collaboration has enabled the design of the Lab to draw on a diverse range of discipline expertise, pedagogical approaches and professional practices. Academics and community partners co-facilitated shared service-learning events which engaged all student teams. Curriculum and assessment resources were also shared across units and projects. Additionally each project employed a range of specific strategies relevant to the nature of the student group and project focus. A Community Liaison role was created in the university Learning and Teaching Unit to facilitate project connections between community organisations and relevant discipline areas. This role was also responsible for promoting projects to students, managing applications and disseminating resources through community service-learning websites.

This paper articulates some of the pedagogical principles that are emerging through this university-wide service-learning initiative and reflects on some of the strategies that have been employed through the Lab to enact Butin’s (2003) values-based framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance and reflection. The paper concludes with a discussion on key challenges and future implications of an institution-wide approach to service learning.

**A collaborative inquiry approach**

**Principle 1:** *The Community Service-learning Lab is underpinned by an inquiry approach to collaboration between stakeholders, leading to mutual beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders.*

Establishing the Lab required multilayered collaboration. Collaboration across discipline boundaries within the university, collaboration with the community partners and with and between the many layers of staff at those organisations, collaboration between academics, community partners and students, and finally students working together in interdisciplinary teams. Early discussion with the academic team and Lab advisory board explored a number of frameworks that could guide the development of the Lab and provide reciprocity of outcomes that were founded in mutual respect and understanding of each other’s needs.

To support the collaboration Participatory Action Research (PAR) was selected as the inquiry framework for the two levels at which the Lab operates. Firstly the Lab as a whole which investigated the big picture questions around how stakeholders work together at a strategic level to support service-learning and secondly, the process of collaboration and inquiry for individual projects (Crane, Smith, & Shaw, 2011). The principles of collaboration and reciprocity underpin both service-learning pedagogy and PAR. Both acknowledge that there are a range of stakeholders: students, organisations in the community, academia, university administration, and the community at large and that all parties have the potential to learn from, and contribute to the experience (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009). PAR also supports an inquiry project-based approach to service-learning. The pedagogy that emerged from the interdisciplinary curriculum team was informed not only by PAR but also discipline-based inquiry approaches such as design thinking.
A number of strategies were employed to support this collaborative inquiry approach. For the Lab as a whole this was achieved through interviews with community partners, curriculum team meetings and a roundtable event where students, community partners and academics brainstormed ideas around possible designs for the Lab and discussed their needs and expectations of the Lab. At the project level, a range of curriculum and assessment strategies were employed to enact this principle of collaborative inquiry. The shared Project Planning Day which was co-facilitated by academics and community partners introduced the four R’s values framework of service-learning. There was also structured time in the day to identify stakeholder’s needs and values. Community partners share their values and ways of working including person centred practices and strength based philosophies that underpinned their work with community (O’Brien & O’Brien, 2000). Students and academic staff were also asked to reflect on and share some of their own values and reasons for engaging in the Lab. The Community Service-Learning PAR workbook and planning day presentation provided strategies for engaging, acting and reflecting; with critical points of connection identified within the cycles of inquiry. Additionally a proposal template was developed to assist student teams to clarify with the community partners the project scope of inquiry, key stakeholder engagement processes and proposed outcomes.

The three assessment tasks focussed students’ attention on the processes of inquiry. Firstly, the project proposal required students to identify stakeholders and explicitly plan strategies for engaging these stakeholders throughout project. Secondly, as part of their reflective blog assessment students were also asked to consider the relevance of the PAR process to their discipline practice. Thirdly, in the final presentation assessment to community partners, students were asked to share insights into the collaborative inquiry process and strategies for engagement employed as well as project outcomes and future directions for the project. While there was a shared assessment framework and criteria there was room for each academic lead to adapt the task to suit their discipline focus. For example, in some projects the reflective tasks were quite open to interpretation and others were more directed to particular topics and informed by readings related to the topic.

An embedded student liaison role was also piloted for two of the projects at one organisation. A third year social work student who was undertaking their professional practicum within the organisation was given the responsibility of being the liaison between the student team and the organisation. This role served two purposes: firstly, the social work student could mentor the project team in respectful and appropriate ways to engage with community service agencies and secondly, it enhanced the capacity of the organisation to take on student projects in a resource poor environment. Initial feedback from students and partners about the value of this embedded role has been very positive.

**Interdisciplinary approach to real world issues**

*Principle 2: The Community Service-learning Lab is intentionally designed to enable students across the university to engage in interdisciplinary teams to solving complex and real issues facing communities*

Challenges facing our communities require new ways of thinking about problems at the boundaries and intersections between disciplines. To acknowledge the complexity of the issues facing our communities an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in a Participatory Action Research framework was developed. Both community partners and students embraced this interdisciplinary approach. The community partners recognised the benefit of interdisciplinary student teams and the range of knowledge and perspectives that this approach would bring to an exploration of their issue. For the students the interdisciplinary approach made them more conscious of their own discipline knowledge and skills and helped them develop a greater awareness of and respect for other perspectives. It required students to communicate their own discipline specific knowledge, skills and processes in ways that are accessible to others. It also required all participants to develop a level of intercultural competency that values diversity, promotes equity and strives for inclusion.

This interdisciplinary approach to service-learning challenged student thinking and optimised students’ creative capacity to engage with others around issues and activities important to the community. However, the collaboration around the open project design in interdisciplinary teams while enhancing opportunities for creativity, can also foster uncertainty. Research into student experiences of service-learning acknowledges that at times, particularly in the initial stages, service-learning can be frustrating as students face ambiguity and uncertainty (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006). Uncertainty is not necessarily a negative and can in fact provide the impetus that can lead to new levels of understanding and exploration. Rather than reducing or removing the ambiguity, strategies were implemented to manage the level of student anxiety.
Strategies fell into three broad categories; academic support, shared curriculum resources and shared experience. Students had two key academic contacts throughout the project, a project lead and a discipline mentor. The project lead had a curatorial role in shaping the project brief and guiding student collaboration while the discipline mentor met with students from their particular discipline across all projects a number of times throughout the semester to advise on discipline related issues. An important aspect of these academic roles was to normalise student feelings of disquiet, to build trust in the process, contextualise issues arising in an interdisciplinary team environment. The academic staff also participated in specifically designed service-learning facilitators training, which aimed to enhance their skills to support and mentor the interdisciplinary student teams. Shared curriculum resources and online team learning modules provided students with key strategies for working in diverse interdisciplinary teams. As part of the Project Planning Day academics also shared with students the challenges of working in the interdisciplinary curriculum team in developing the Lab; revealing some of our own head and heart issues associated with the uncertainty of exploring unfamiliar territory and that there were many of unknowns (Sipos, et al., 2008).

By taking on a more complex interdisciplinary project based approach to service-learning it was recognised that there is learning for all parties which, hopefully, result in an enriched form of reciprocity in which authority is shared and transcends self interest to create greater meaning and relevance (Enos & Morton, 2003; Mitchell, 2008). Students’ final reflections on their project, an assessable component of their final presentation to peers, community and academics, strongly endorsed the value of working in interdisciplinary team. They valued the opportunity to explore issues from different perspectives; to identify and articulate the discipline knowledge and skills which they might contribute; and finally, to work across discipline boundaries to explore solutions to issues in ways that challenge their frameworks and ways of thinking and working.

Reflection as an enabler of transformative learning

**Principle 3: The Community Service-learning Lab recognises and engages with the whole student and their experiences; including their embodied and emotional responses. It uses shared reflective strategies to help students make sense of their experiences.**

Engaging in service-learning can be a transformative experience for a student that includes their embodied and emotional responses. It assists students make connections between the cognitive (head), psychomotor (hands) and affective (heart) domains of learning. This can facilitate profound changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes (Sipos, et al., 2008). The academic reflection which forms a core component of assessment provides the vehicle for students to make sense of their experience and examine both the historical precedents of the social problems addressed in their service placements and the impact of their personal action/inaction in maintaining and transforming those problems. This critical service-learning pedagogical approach allows students to connect their own lives to the lives of those with whom they work in their service experiences (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54).

The curriculum is intentionally designed to challenge students to critique justice and injustice, privilege and disadvantage and its impact on community. A workshop on recognising the “baggage” that we all carry and exploring how this influences the way we understand and interact with and “other” those around us was included in the Project Planning Day in week one of semester. However, the most powerful and valued strategy employed throughout the Lab projects has been guided reflection. Throughout the semester project groups were provided with readings specifically related to social justice issues relevant to their project. These readings informed student reflective blogs. Other topics for reflection related to their role as future professionals and their potential to contribute to a more socially just society (D. Butin, 2010). The action/reflection dynamic of this critical service-learning pedagogy is enhanced by the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework employed by the Lab, as it encourages contemplation of both personal and institutional contributions to social problems and measures that may lead to social change (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

Challenges and implications

Initial analysis of data collected from student assessment, focus groups, interviews with community partners, and evaluation of events from the first cycle of Community Service-Learning Lab projects indicates this initiative has lead to beneficial outcomes for community partners and students. Students valued the opportunity to apply their discipline skills and knowledge to real community issues that matter and in some cases spoke of how their experiences of the Lab have been transformational both personally and professionally. The community partners embraced the opportunity to explore their issues with young people and academics from different disciplines and reported they valued the fresh new perspectives and insights provided by the interdisciplinary approach to this collaboration.
This interdisciplinary inquiry-based approach to service-learning also brought with it a number of challenges which have implications for the design of the next phase of projects. With students and academics coming from a diverse range of disciplines experiences of and preferences for pedagogy and assessment approaches vary. While some disciplines naturally embrace creative problem solving, open-ended inquiry and loosely structured project briefs other disciplines are more comfortable with strongly scaffolded learning environments that have clearly defined outcomes. Finding an appropriate balance in the structuring and framing of the curriculum needs to continue to allow space for diverse discipline perspectives to be explored and where relevant be integrated into the service-learning curriculum.

A second challenge for the Lab is to provide further opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge and skills particularly as in areas that relate to the learning goals of the service-learning curriculum. For the next cycle of Lab projects, in addition to the planning workshops, students will be encouraged to engage in a shared seminar series that further explores topics such as social justice, interdisciplinarity, project management and reflective practice.

The institutionalisation and sustainability of community service-learning are complex and challenging on a range of levels. Appropriate workload models and reward and recognition schemes that value the impact of this work are two significant areas of challenge for academics. Another issue is sustainability for the organisations that chose to partner with the University to continue to be involved as the number of students participating grows. Service-learning partnerships with community are typically dependent on the capacity of higher education institutions to provide academic guidance and support to student work, follow up on any issues and maintain communication (Rosing & Hofman, 2010, pp. 226,227). Strategies, such as social work students on placement in liaison roles, and a centralised university role that supports and facilitates the engagement between community, academia and students are two approaches that are planned to be integrated as core components of the Lab.

A key objective for today’s educators is preparing the next generations for meeting challenges of the future. The Labs approach to service-learning embraces, active engagement, inquiry based learning, creativity and interdisciplinarity. This learning prepares graduates with skills enabling them to work in, guide and challenge a diverse and complex world. The three pedagogical principles developed as part of Community Service-learning Lab have informed the strategies that assist students meet these challenges. Our hope is that students embrace these engagement strategies and integrate them into their own emerging professional practice. As Henry and Breyfoyle (2006, p. 28) state: “When students problem-pose, they can unveil reality and search for more humane ways of living”.

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References


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