



teaching learning committee  
Montana State University Bozeman

**Service Learning: Learning by Doing and Doing What Matters**

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Service learning is a means to teach problem solving skills, it assist students in learning more about themselves and their capacities, it fosters collaborative learning and civic responsibility while it enhances relationships between an educational institution and the surrounding community. Definitions abound but the informed movement toward an expansion of service learning on the MSU-Bozeman campus is based on the following ideas: “Students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of the community. It is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum and includes structured time for the students and participants to reflect on the service experience.” (Corporation for National Service, 1994, 12) This teaching technique positively influences student learning of course material and has proven to be an effective vehicle for the holistic development of students.

“Service learning is a form of experiential education, deeply rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology, pragmatic philosophy, and democratic theory. It shares a common intellectual history with organizational development and participatory action research. Service learning has no singular or simple definition. It is informed by a range of intellectual traditions and values systems, many of which seem to contradict or compete with one another. Service learning theory begins with the assumption that experience is the foundation for learning; and various forms of community service are employed as the experiential basis for learning.” (Morton & Troppe 1996, 3)

As a form of experiential education service learning is distinguished from among other forms of service by its intention to benefit equally the provider and the recipient of the services as well as the assurance of equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that occurs as a result. The experiential learning model we know today has been shaped over time by John Dewey (1938), Kurt Lewin (1951) and Jean Piaget (1952) and with more recent contributions by David A. Kolb (1984). Kolb developed an Experiential Learning Model that outlines the learning experience as a constantly revisited four-step cycle. The model’s four steps begin with the abilities attained by the student through concrete experience, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Students are engaged in a circular cycle in which community settings serve as the venue for the concrete experience and form the basis for written or oral reflection. With the guidance of an instructor, work is

used to form the abstract concepts and hypotheses, which then guide the student into further concrete experiences. This model has helped service learning practitioners develop an awareness of the role reflection plays in relating the world of concrete experiences into abstract theories. A challenge to service learning educators is to grasp a clear understanding of how experiences instruct and how important it is that educators make use of the reflective process.

As higher education is being challenged by uncertainty and disagreement the time may be more right than ever to explore the power of the service learning pedagogy. As legislatures and our national leaders voice vague concerns about the values being fostered in today's universities and colleges and question the value of returns to our states and our communities against the funds invested in higher education we have the opportunity to address these questions by clearly articulating a vision for the role higher education plays in preparing citizens for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This vision like all others require strategies and action plans to bring them to fruition and service learning is a key strategy to develop a sense of responsibility, skills and an understanding of an array of societal problems. "Service learning fosters the development of personal and interpersonal knowledge grounded in an interdisciplinary perspective that illuminates self-understanding and provides the basis for effective teamwork. Service learning encourages students to be more self-reflective about who they are, what they value, and the reasons for their values. It promotes the development of interpersonal and communication skills related to effective and cooperative problem solving." (Bonar, Buchanan, Fischer & Wechsler. 1996 14-15.) In the case of Montana State University-Bozeman this can help our community to understand the value of this institution and understand the role we play in fostering the development of citizens who will be active, involved and contributing members of our society. At the same time we are giving faculty the opportunity to explore and demonstrate to their students the relevance of their discipline in a social context.

Best practices in service learning include a combination of classroom instruction through which students gain the necessary foundational and professional skills, and experience and action on genuine community needs. Through this combined approach students are able to take their knowledge bases and apply them to address an array of societal problems. The application of this pedagogy includes the offering of structured time for students to step back and reflect on their hands-on experience in the community setting and consider their roles and responsibilities as citizens of a society. And finally, this teaching technique requires that the faculty and students welcome community experts into the role as teachers. Faculty must be willing to view themselves as co-teachers with their community-based counterparts and students must be willing to shed their traditional style of learning to become active rather than passive learners in the service learning setting. It is essential that faculty engage the community-based experts in all aspects of course development. Indeed these community leaders are very interested in helping to shape and achieve learning goals and experiences for our students. This three sided partnership between faculty, students and community members creates a dynamic unique to service learning and one that forges essential links between our university and the citizens of Montana and the citizens we educate.

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