

## **Conceptualization of service-learning as an educational approach in the curriculum: A case study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigated how the University of Zululand (Unizulu) has set out to conceptualize and institutionalize service learning as an educational approach in the Curriculum. The University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012) and Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) indicate a paradigm shift towards academically based community interaction where service-learning is an integral part of the curriculum. Despite the existence of these policies, service-learning is still a peripheral activity in the institution.

Keywords: Service learning, Community Engagement and Work integrated learning

## INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, in line with the global trend, universities are embracing service-learning as a teaching methodology because it gives status to the notion of scholarship of engagement that suggests interaction with communities as a scholarly activity involving both educators and learners (Smith -Tolken, 2005). Since 1999, service-learning was established in South African Higher Education Institutions through the leadership of the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative of JET Education Services. In 1999, service-learning was still a new and untested concept in South Africa. Yet, the continuous efforts and keen interest of academic and community leaders contributed to the success of establishing service-learning thus far (Stanton, 2006).

The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) laid the foundations for making service learning an integral part of higher education in South Africa. It states that one of the goals of higher education is to promote and develop social responsibility and awareness among students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes. National Plan for Higher Education indicates that community engagement should not be viewed as an option in South African Higher Education, but as a prerequisite.

Community Engagement (CE) and, together with Teaching and Learning and Research, form the three core functions of a university (and should be treated as such). These core functions are not isolated silos but should complement each other in an integrated service to the country, the region and the world of scholarship. CE enhances social awareness that should be reflected in the teaching at the university whilst CE projects lead to research topics and research outcomes are implemented to improve the quality of life of the population. ([www.uj.ac.za](http://www.uj.ac.za))

In recent years, several higher education institutions in South Africa have developed institutional policies, guidelines and strategies for community engagement (CE) and service-learning (SL). Generally, these address diverse issues such as the institution's interpretation of community engagement and service-learning; objectives to be achieved through the policy; mechanisms for implementation; staff promotions and rewards pertaining to community engagement; organisational structures and staffing required for implementation; risk management in terms of student placements; and the allocation of resources towards implementation.

## SERVICE LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND

The University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012) and Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) indicate a paradigm shift towards academically based community interaction where service-learning is an integral part of the curriculum. The following commitments are made to the community engagement endeavour in the University's Institutional Operating Plan (2006-2010) are reflected in and by the policy:

- Community engagement initiatives will be formalised.
- Policy and procedures will be developed for the quality management of community engagement.
- The concept of community and "outreach" need to be defined. Departments will be required to plan, as a unit, for community engagement interventions.
- Community engagement will be constructed as part of the curriculum and will be integrated into teaching and learning strategies where possible.

- Adequate resources will be allocated to facilitate quality delivery in community engagement.
- Community Engagement will involve students.
- Community Engagement will involve research.
- The institution will engage in regular review of the effectiveness of quality-related arrangements for community engagement.

More specifically, the overall purpose of this policy is to ensure that respectful, democratic negotiations with the local community enable effective community engagement, which is both developmental and responsive. It is stated that the outcomes of such engagement will be aligned with the following institutional goals as stated in the Strategic Plan (2008-2011) of the University:

**GOAL ONE:** To provide formal, non-formal and informal learning programmes of high quality, which are relevant and responsive to the needs of students and of society.

**GOAL TWO:** To conduct research appropriate to a comprehensive University in partnership with the local, national and international community.

**GOAL THREE:** To build a positive image of the University through high quality academic outputs, and partnerships with business/industry, civil society, other HE institutions, and both national and international research foundations and bodies.

A Draft Community Engagement Policy (2009) was developed by a Community Engagement Working Group (CEWG). The policy aligns the University's community engagement with South African higher education imperatives (White Paper on Higher Education: 1997). The Draft Community Engagement Policy (2009) defines 'Service Learning' (also referred to as academic or community service learning) as an educational approach that provides curriculum-based, credit-bearing, and assessed learning experiences for students. Setting out to find a balance in the benefits to both students and communities, lecturers negotiate with community and service sector partners to find appropriate service activities for students that are aimed at achieving jointly identified community goals. Through structured critical reflection, students are afforded opportunities to reach academic, personal and generic developmental outcomes, in particular that of good citizenship (of the mission statement). Service learning requires a respectful, democratic partnership environment that allows for reciprocal teaching and learning.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The study aimed at the following objectives

- To determine how service learning is conceptualized at this institution
- To ascertain how students and lecturers view and understand service learning as an approach to teaching and learning.
- To determine what has been done to implement service learning
- To propose recommendations on how to institutionalize service learning.

## THE THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by the following concepts and theories:

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

#### Community Engagement

Community Engagement (CE) is defined as: "initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community." (Council on Higher Education: 2006). Community engagement enables the University to share its knowledge resources with its surrounding community and encourage an ethos of community service within its staff and student body.

#### Service learning

According to Eyler & Giles, 1999, Service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. Service-learning is: a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students:

- Participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community goals.
- Reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004)

#### Work Integrated Learning

Work-integrated learning is the term used to describe educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace. These educational activities provide *a meaningful experience of the workplace application* that is *intentional, organised and recognised by the institution*, in order to secure learning outcomes for the student that are both transferable and applied (Griffith University Strategic Plan 2006-2010).

### MODELS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Heffernan outlined six different models for incorporating service-learning into various disciplines (Heffernan, 2001):

**Discipline-Based Service-Learning Model:** where students work in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding.

**Problem-Based Service-Learning Model:** where students work with community members to understand a particular community problem or need. This model presumes that the students will have some knowledge they can draw upon to make recommendations to the community or develop a solution to the problem.

**Capstone Course Model:** where students in the senior year are asked to draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their course work and combine it with relevant service work in the community.

**Service Internship Model:** where students working as many as 10 to 20 hours a week in a community setting with on-going faculty-guided reflection to challenge the students to analyze their new experiences using discipline-based theories.

**Undergraduate Community-Based Action Research Model:** where students work closely with faculty to learn research methodology while serving as advocates for communities.

**Directed Study Additional/Extra Credit Model:** where students make special arrangements with the instructor to complete additional work or explore a subject in more depth.

## **RATIONALE FOR SERVICE LEARNING**

Service-learning involves students in community service activities in addition to class time. Course objectives are linked to meaningful learning through service. Course activities such as lectures, readings, discussions, and reflection inform the student service, and in turn the service experiences are brought back to the classroom to inform the academic dialogue and student comprehension. The students work on real community problems that make academic learning relevant while simultaneously enhancing their social skills, analytical ability, civic and ethical responsibility, self-efficacy, and career development. Service-learning as pedagogy, departs from the traditional lecture-driven, faculty-focused curriculum. It requires student participation in developing learning goals and confronting real life in a way that challenges their assumptions and forces critical thinking. It requires faculty to share control over learning outcomes while affording them a closer relationship to students. Service-learning pedagogy is commonly described as a continuous learning cycle, fostering meaning and comprehension through:

- Concrete experience
- Reflective observation
- Abstract Conceptualization
- Active Experimentation

## **THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICE-LEARNING**

According to the National Commission on Service learning, service-learning:

- Links to academic content and standards
- Involves young people in helping to determine and meet real, defined community needs
- Is reciprocal in nature, benefiting both the community and the service providers by combining a service experience with a learning experience
- Can be used in any subject area so long as it is appropriate to learning goal

Service-learning is *not*:

- An episodic volunteer program
- An add-on to an existing school or college curriculum
- Logging a set number of community service hours in order to graduate
- Compensatory service assigned as a form of punishment by the courts or by school administrators

- Only for high school or college students
- One-sided: benefiting only students or only the community

In general, authentic service-learning experiences have some common characteristics (Eyler and Giles 1999).

- They are positive, meaningful and real to the participants.
- They involve cooperative rather than competitive experiences and thus promote skills associated with teamwork and community involvement and citizenship.
- They address complex problems in complex settings rather than simplified problems in isolation.
- They offer opportunities to engage in problem-solving by requiring participants to gain knowledge of the specific context of their service-learning activity and community challenges, rather than only to draw upon generalized or abstract knowledge such as might come from a textbook. As a result, service-learning offers powerful opportunities to acquire the habits of critical thinking; i.e. the ability to identify the most important questions or issues within a real-world situation.
- They promote deeper learning because the results are immediate and uncontrived. There are no "right answers" in the back of the book.
- As a consequence of this immediacy of experience, service-learning is more likely to be personally meaningful to participants and to generate emotional consequences, to challenge values as well as ideas, and hence to support social, emotional and cognitive learning and development.

## **THE SERVICE LEARNING CYCLE**

Service learning is best thought as a cycle where each step in the process leads to the next (NYLC, 2002) as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix). There are three steps in the service learning cycle: pre-service reflection, reflection during service and post service reflection

### **Pre-Service Reflection**

- The community and the students work together to identify community needs.
- Students explore issues, assess resources, and seek out the thoughts and concerns of those served (community)
- Students make connections between service activities and their studies to deepen their understanding of curricular material, how it is applied and why it is important.
- Students assess needs, collect all relevant information, engage in the necessary training and develop an action plan

### **Reflection during Service**

- Students engage in meaningful service experience by investing themselves in service activities that address genuine community needs, students then find meaning in the project and grow to understand its value.
- In the process students exchange ideas with peers and community partners, they look at the cultural and diversity issues or viewing the project in the community and political terms.
- Students assess their own learning and the impact of the project on the community being served.
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### **Post Service Reflection**

- Involves evaluation and new understanding.
- Students discover new perceptions of themselves and world around them through evaluating the whole exercise.
- Students then celebrate their achievements and reflect on their shortcomings.
- Celebrating reinforces the positive achievements, sense of accomplishment, and personal growth attained through the service learning experience

The service learning cycle is not terminal. As the diagram (Figure: 1) illustrates, the service-learning process doesn't end when a service activity is complete. A project may be finished, but service-learning is a transformational process where young people, practitioners, and communities continue to grow as they discover the root causes underlying the needs.

Every part of the cycle is rich with learning and growth opportunities, many of them happening as young people are guided through the process of identifying, planning, and carrying out service activities. It's important for practitioners to recognize the learning potential in each phase of the process and get students reflecting so that real learning takes place.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Sampling**

The study used a purposive sampling technique. The purpose of using this sampling technique is not only to assure representativeness in statistical terms, but also to ensure that data on perceptions and experiences of those directly involved in SL implementation is collected. The study targeted 4 lecturers that went through short course on SL drawn from 4 faculties, 4 lecturers representing their respective faculties in the universities community engagement committee and the chairperson of CEWG and 4 Student Representative Council (SRC) members presenting their respective faculties as subjects for the study. These participants were chosen because they are in a better position to know. The power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information rich-cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied and can be used with both quantitative and qualitative studies.

## **Instrumentation**

This study used a questionnaire, focus groups interviews and document analysis as media for gathering the data needed. These methods we used together to complement each other. The questionnaire gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. On the other hand the focus group discussion focused mainly on collecting qualitative data. Documentary analysis (i.e institutional policies) were used to establish fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose.

### **The questionnaire**

There are basically three ways of administering a questionnaire: the face-to-face interview, the telephone interview and the self-administered questionnaire (Corbetta, 2003:142). In this study the last option was adopted. Advantages of self-administered questionnaires according to Corbetta (2003:146) are:

- considerable saving on cost (the only immediate costs being those of printing and mailing);
- filling in of questionnaire can be done at leisure, even at different times;
- greater guarantee of anonymity than in a face-to-face interview (the returned questionnaire does not contain any means of identification);
- no bias due to the presence of an interviewer; and
- living far away or in isolated areas makes no difference.

Corbetta (2003:147) gives the following disadvantages for the self-administered questionnaire:

- low percentage of returns (often well below 50%), partly because there is no interviewer present to urge compliance;
- sample bias due to the self-selection, since those who respond tend to be different from those who do not (e.g. more educated, etc), therefore it is unlikely that we will have a random sample of the entire population;
- the level of education of the population studied has to be medium-high, in that subjects must have certain familiarity with the written communication;
- no control over completion of the questionnaire, which might be filled in by some other member of the family, or by a secretary;
- questionnaires must not be too complex; both questions and instructions must be simple (e.g. filter questions such as: 'if you answer 'yes' go to the next question; if you answer 'no', go to question 25, etc. should be avoided); and
- fewer questions can be asked than in face-to-face interviews.

The questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from both the students and lectures. There are eight sections in the questionnaire, consisting of Section A: Demographic information, Section B: Role of Community Engagement Working Group in promoting Service Learning, Section C: Policy on Service Learning, Section D: Institutional service learning mechanisms and structures, Section E: Students' perceptions about institutionalization of service learning, Section F: Lectures' perceptions about institutionalization of service learning Section G: Barriers to the institutionalization of Service Learning and Section H: Recommendations.

### **The focus group interview**

The purpose of the focus group discussion is to produce qualitative data to provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants (Krueger: 1994). The focus group interview schedule to guide the discussion with participants covered the eight areas similar to those covered by the questionnaire.

The focus interviews were conducted with 4 lectures that went through short course on SL drawn from 4 faculties, 4 lecturers representing their respective faculties in the universities CEWG and the chairperson of CEWG and 4 SRC members presenting their respective faculties as participants for the study. Consent to tape record the interview was established with the participants. Participants were assured that the study was confidential and that they will not be individually identified in any information or reports produced from the interview. The audiotapes were transcribed for the purposes of analysis. The qualitative data collected from the focus group discussions were categorized into themes.

### **Documentary Analysis**

Documentary Analysis was important to supplement as well as to compensate for the limitations of other methods. Documentary evidence acts as a method to cross validate information gathered from interview given that sometimes what people say maybe different from what people do. The documents consulted include:

- The University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012)
- Institutional Operating Plan (IOP)
- A Draft Community Engagement Policy (2009)
- White Paper on Higher Education (1997).

### **Data collection techniques**

The use of combined research methods (qualitative and quantitative) provided multiple levels of triangulation to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness. Data collection took place in three phases:

Phase 1: Collection of quantitative data using questionnaires sent to lectures and student representatives

Phase 2: Collection of qualitative data using: focus group interviews with lectures and student representatives, including,

Phase 3: Documentary analysis (e.g. of institutional policies) to establish fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Role of Community Engagement Working Group in promoting Service Learning**

CEWG is a committee comprises representation from each of the four faculties (Faculty of Commerce Admin & Law, Faculty of Science & Agriculture, Faculty of Arts, and Faculty of Education) and Administration (Academic Development, Quality Promotion Unit and Experiential Learning Unit and Public Relations office). With representation from all Faculties, key non-academic departments and Administration its major functions are to:

- Produce a University Policy to enable Community Engagement which is both developmental and responsive, and to set out guidelines and procedures for its enactment.
- Ensure inclusion of CE activities along with research activities in Faculty annual reports.
- Create and ongoing maintenance of an on-line data base of CE activities.
- Include a bus tour of the local community in the orientation programme for new staff members.
- Offer a Rector's Distinguished Community Engagement Award on a par with the Rector's Distinguished Teaching Award.
- To allocate funding for community engagement projects.

The mandate for promoting Community Service-Learning (CSL) as the preferred form of engagement between University and Community lies in the Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) 2006-2009, which makes the following commitment:

“Service learning, combining community service with credit bearing learning is to be introduced between 2007 and 2009; all programmes will be required to develop a credit based service learning component in line with Council for Higher Education (CHE) requirements and the fundamental national goals of development”

To assist in achieving the target set out in the IOP, the Community Engagement Working Group (CEWG) has secured funding for 8 pilot projects (2 per Faculty), at R20,000 per project, to be established in 2009. The following are types of projects currently funded:

- Chemical Education for Science Educators & Learners at High Schools
- Youth Development through Sports in the Kwa-Dlangezwa Community
- Kwa-Dlangezwa Secondary School's Newspaper & Visitation Program
- Unizulu School Outreach Library
- Mission Green Earth
- Educating the community of their role in social integration of ex-offenders back into the community
- Collaborative health support for HIV/AIDS in the rural northern KwaZulu Natal province
- Orphans and Vulnerable Children

As an additional incentive to get staff members involved in service learning, funding was also granted for a Distinguished Community Engagement Practitioner Award (along the lines of the already established Rector's Distinguished Teacher Award). These awards, each worth R 5,000, will be made twice a year. The CEWG has embarked on a number of advocacy campaigns in the institution by conducting workshops in the institution and sometimes inviting experts in the field of service learning to address stakeholders on the importance of service learning as an educational approach.

Funding has been made available to encourage faculties to introduce a credit bearing component of service learning in their programmes and to undertake community engagement projects. Existing CE activities tend to be individually generated, informal and *ad hoc*, and restricted to certain disciplines (“those which more readily lend themselves to this sort of activity”, such as Nursing Science). Not much has actually been done to implement CE at Faculty level, owing to a lack of time, human and financial resources, and the time-consuming activity over the past year of converting degree programmes to double majors.

Furthermore the CEWG also funded 5 staff members, four of them drawn from (4) four faculties of the institution, the chairperson of the CEWG and the manager for Cooperative and Experiential Learning division to enroll for a short learning programme on service learning at the University of Free State which is one of the renowned institutions on service learning. In spite of all these initiatives service learning as an educational approach has not seen the light of day in the institution.

### **Policy on Service Learning**

Although the University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012) and Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) indicate a paradigm shift towards academically based community interaction where service-learning is an integral part of the curriculum. The subjects in the study indicate that a policy on service learning to guide its institutionalization has not been developed at the university. The only policy that exists is Community Engagement Policy in which service learning is mentioned in passing. Without significant policy support, service-learning will remain an unrealised dream in the institution. The policy is needed to provide context within which service learning will operate. According to the participants the policy will provide guidelines on the following issues:

- understanding of what constitutes service learning at this particular institution
- student placement in the communities
- integration of service learning component into the curriculum
- Risk management during placement
- Service level agreement with the communities in which students will be placed
- Roles of stakeholders ( students, lectures and the communities)

The participants feel that policy efforts can expand service-learning to a common and critical component of all students' educational experiences.

### **Institutional service learning mechanisms and structures**

The study reveals that service learning activities at the institution are not centrally coordinated, which hinders the process of institutionalizing service learning as an approach in the curriculum. Hinck and Brandell (2000) suggest that the institutionalization of service learning is facilitated by an adequately staffed and funded central office, preferably within the division of academic affairs. The Service Learning is necessary to provide a central location for information about service learning in the institution. This may include providing support and advice to faculties interested in enhancing and developing service learning courses, developing new opportunities for students, and serving as a liaison with community partners interested in exploring new service learning connections with the University.

### **Students' perceptions about institutionalization of service learning**

Students had no idea of what service learning is, but after the concept was explained to them the majority of them said they would like participating in it. Students were asked to indicate if they would benefit from engaging in community service learning, most of them felt that they would. One student pointed out that service learning has potential of increasing awareness of community challenges that can be addressed through working together by all the stakeholders involved. Most students believe that through service learning they would

develop problem solving skills. Students foresee the following as possible challenges in the process of implementing service learning:

- Lack of co-operation from the community
- Lack of knowledge in the community
- Lack of resources (human, physical & financial)
- Students not understand the module requirements
- Getting mixed messages about service learning at institutional level
- Getting the buy in of the community into the service learning idea.

### **Lecturers perceptions about institutionalization of service learning**

All the lecturers consider service learning to be of value to students. Reasons given by one lecturer why students would benefit were for the application of theory, interdisciplinary nature and inclusivity. They also hope that students will increase their understanding of the topics that are dealt with in class and as well as gain hands-on experience. Students will also learn more about social issues and their root causes. Lecturers foresaw the following challenges in the process of implementing service learning:

- Community may demand more than we can give
- There may be difference of opinions regarding community priorities
- Communities may not accept students and lecturers to conduct service learning
- Language and cultural differences may be a barrier
- Accessibility e.g. bad roads
- In some communities most people cannot read or write
- Availability of time and resources to undertake service learning

### **Barriers to the institutionalization of service learning**

Although the participants recognise that there are many benefits to service-learning, but they also identify some challenges that lecturers and students face when attempting to implement service-learning program. These challenges amongst other things involve lack of support from the management, lack of resources, differences on conceptualization of the concept of service learning, lack of rewards and the workload of the academics. This is consistent with Bringle et al. (1997) who observe that often faculties are reluctant to take on the additional responsibility due to the time and coordination demands, lack of support from the administration, the extra work involved in preparing/training students, and inexperience with non-traditional teaching methods. McCarthy & Tucker (1999) argue that academics are discouraged from implementing service learning programs because institutions do not support service learning with the same credibility and respect as their duties of teaching and research.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are made to institutionalize of service learning in the institution:

- Include engagement in service learning as one of the promotion criteria for academics
- Develop a policy on service learning that is different from the current policy on community engagement
- Hold advocacy for service learning at faculty board level

- Capacitate more lecturers on service learning
- Incentivise lectures and students engaging in service learning (Rewards & Recognition)
- Resource commitment for the institutionalization of service learning
- Involve Executive Deans & Heads of Departments in the policy implementation
- Establish an office responsible for service learning

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell the institution under investigation embraces service-learning as a teaching approach that integrates academic instruction with community service that engages students in community responsibility, critical and creative thinking, and structured reflection. This is reflected in the following policies: University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012), Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) and a Draft Community Engagement Policy (2009). Despite the existence of these policies, service-learning is still a peripheral activity in the institution. Recommendations of this study will have to be taken into consideration if service learning has to be the DNA of this institution.

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University of Zululand Strategic Plan (2008-2012) and Institutional Operating Plan (IOP)

## APPENDIX

Service learning is best thought as a cycle where each step in the process leads to the next (NYLC, 2002) as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix)

