

Best Practices for Service Learning in the Agricultural, Environmental, and Life Sciences

Exemplars

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*Principles of
Therapeutic Riding*
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*Urban Forest
Management*
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What is Service Learning?

Service learning is a teaching approach that engages students to learn and develop through thoughtfully organized community service (Brown, 1998; Swick, 2001). Service learning approaches focus on students' understanding of the culture and context in neighborhood-based environments outside of the classroom (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bordelon & Phillips, 2006; Conrad & Hedin, 1995).

Why Use Service Learning?

Education not only helps students gain knowledge and skills, but also prepares them to be responsible citizens. Learning through active participation in service experiences provides structured time for students to reflect on their learning as well as an opportunity for them to use their skills and knowledge in real-life situations. By extending student learning beyond the classroom and integrating service experiences into the curriculum, service learning enriches learning and enhances service to the community (adapted from the National and Community Service Act of 1990).

Service Learning 'Best Practices'

The following are examples of strategies, philosophies, and approaches utilized by exemplary professors who participated in the National Case Study on Learner Centered Teaching. Each professor customized service learning methods and selected suitable activities to yield positive outcomes for students while simultaneously benefiting communities at large.

“To insure students understand what’s going on [in the real world] and not just [be] bystanders, they are active participants and they understand what real situations are.”

-Heidi Brady

Classroom Practices

Reflection and feedback

- As an important component of service learning, Dr. Heidi Brady asks students to reflect their service learning experiences through weekly write-ups and then provides them with feedback. She also conducts end of the year surveys to give students an important opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences.

“To make sure that students understand what reflection really is, they need to think about those things that they have observed them, and then ask themselves ‘What does this mean?’”

-David Knauft

- Dr. David Knauft asks his students to submit a reflective journal each week, then during class discussion shares his impressions with students about their writing.
- Dr. Tracy Hoover encourages her students to bring their experiences into the classroom, has them talk about what they plan to do, explores how they are going to apply information they have learned during their service experiences, and discusses afterward what they could have done differently and what they learned.

Using case studies

- Dr. Tracy Hoover uses many case study examples by viewing the service learning class as ‘a laboratory in a community.’

Utilizing problem-solving strategies

- Dr. Tom Green teaches his students how to solve real-world problems that occur as they go through the process of selecting a rural grade school and conduct an Arbor Day planting with a third grade class as a requirement of his class.

Working in teams

- Dr. Tracy Hoover requires students to work as a team by asking them to collectively develop a website or a poster.

Student as an active participant

- Dr. Heidi Brady points out the importance of ensuring that students understand that because they are active participants enrolled in a service learning course, they, therefore, need to be highly self-motivated.

Social and communication skills

- In order to improve communication skills, Dr. Tom Green teaches students how communications play a vital role in justifying actions such as convince a community of the necessity of removing a diseased yet venerable tree. He emphasizes the development of communication skills every step of the way during students’ engagement in service activities.
- As an outcome of the class, Dr. Tracy Hoover motivates students to socialize outside of classroom and to have hands-on experience of working with diversity of people in the community to build interpersonal skills.
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“A teacher should not speak for more than 3-4 minutes without asking a question, receiving a question, injecting humor, moving about the classroom, or engaging in some type of stimulus variation.”

-Gary Moore

Recommendations

A clear understanding of service learning

- Service learning is different than volunteer work or community

“Teaching this class is the most rewarding thing that I do of all the classes that I teach because it goes beyond just helping students in the classroom.”

-Tom Green

service because it involves students’ reflection as a learning process.

- Dr. Heidi Brady made the point that a service learning class is a different experience than students absorbing the curriculum or just volunteering in the community; students need to understand that a service learning class is an integrated learning experience.

Plan ahead for preparing a service-learning course

- In order to reduce many logistical issues and avoid time constraints, Dr. Tracy Hoover stresses the importance of a pre-planning stage when designing a service learning course.

Enhance self-discovery of learning process

- Regarding the difference between service learning and volunteer work, Dr. Tracy Hoover emphasizes students’ learning is often self-discovered, and specific goals and in-place structure often enhance their learning.

Integrate content knowledge into the service activity

- All of our service learning exemplars stress how significant it is to connect what students have already learned to their current service learning experience and apply the content knowledge and skills learned in the service learning course to respond to the actual community’s needs.
- Engagement in a well-organized and planned service learning course helps students apply learned knowledge and skills to varying situations and improve their real-life problem solving capability.

Connecting with the community

- Dr. David Knauft suggests that growth of students’ understanding of the community can be enhanced by encouraging students to develop the habit of working in and with the community.

For more detailed information on the above exemplars and their courses, please visit: [Service Learning Exemplars](#)

Additional Resources

For an excellent source of service learning information, please visit the [National Service-learning Clearinghouse \(NSLC\)](#)

References

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