

Principles of Good Practice

Source: *Praxis I: A Faculty Casebook on Community Service Learning* by Jeffrey Howard

Principle 1: Credit is for learning, not for service

Credit in service-learning courses is assigned to students for the demonstration of academic learning. Academic credit is for academic learning. When service is integrated into a course, the course credit is assigned for both the customary academic learning as well as for the community learning which occurs as a result of civic engagement. The student's grade is for the quality of learning and not for the quality (or quantity) of service.

Principle 2: Do not compromise academic rigor

Academic standards in a course are based on the challenge that readings, presentations, and assignments present to students. These standards should be maintained when adding a service-learning component. You may choose to offer students additional points or some other form of compensation for their participation in service-learning, but not by lowering academic learning expectations. Integrating service-learning into a course, in fact enhances the academic rigor because, in addition to having to master the academic material, students must also learn from community experiences and merge that learning with their academic learning, and then demonstrate an increased knowledge of course material through their reflection activities.

Principle 3: Set learning goals for students that drive the selection of community opportunities

Establishing learning goals for students is a standard to which all courses ought to be accountable. The establishment of these goals is especially advantageous with service-learning courses. Deliberate planning of the course learning goals is essential in order for students to take full advantage of the rich bounty of learning opportunities offered by the community. To optimally impact student learning from service in the community on behalf of course learning requires more than merely directing students to serve at a community organization. Faculty who are deliberate about establishing criteria for selecting community organizations to partner with will find that the learning that students extract from their respective service experiences will be of better use on behalf of course learning than if criteria are not established.

The range of possible service opportunities ought to be circumscribed by the content of the course; homeless shelters and soup kitchens are learning-appropriate opportunities for a course on homelessness, but generally opportunities in schools are not. VCU's service-learning staff will be happy to recommend some appropriate community opportunities for your students. However, you must communicate to us the types of learning experiences you expect for your students. We will work with you to ensure as best we can, that the desired types of service opportunities are available to your students.

Principle 4: Provide a course environment that incorporates community learning

Learning in any course is realized by a mix of learning contexts and assignments. However, maximizing students' service experiences on behalf of course learning in a service-learning course requires more than appropriate service opportunities. Course assignments and discussions must be developed to facilitate the students' connection of their community service experiences to the course materials. Having students serve at a community organization, without any means to connect that learning with the learning that takes place in the classroom is insufficient to contribute to course learning. Community experiences, in and of themselves, do not consummate learning, nor does a mere written description of a student's service activities.

To enhance academic learning through community learning, students must engage in critical reflection on and analysis of their service experiences. Therefore, discussions, presentations, and paper assignments that provoke analysis of service experiences in the context of the course learning and that encourage the blending of the experiential and academic learning are essential to ensure that the service does not underachieve in its role as an instrument of learning.

Principle 5: Minimize the distinction between the student's community learning role and the classroom learning role

Classrooms and communities are very different learning contexts, each requiring students to assume a different learner role. Historically, classrooms have provided a high level of teacher direction, while the students have been expected to assume a largely passive learning role. In contrast, communities provide a low level of teaching direction, with students expected to assume a largely active learning role. Though there is compatibility between the two learning roles within each of these learning contexts, students oftentimes find it difficult to shift between the active and passive learning roles, a situation which can hinder student learning.

Expecting students to alternate between the passive learner role in the classroom and the active learner role in the community places yet another learning challenge on students and is inconsistent with good pedagogical principles. Active learning is consistent with active civic-participation, a fundamental value that service-learning seeks to foster. In a classroom that values the active learner, students bring information from the community to the classroom that can be utilized on behalf of others' learning. Therefore, we recommend fostering a classroom atmosphere where the active learner is valued.

Principle 6: Re-think the faculty instructional role

Service-learning students acquire course-relevant information and knowledge from their service experiences. At the same time, as we previously acknowledged, students also are being challenged by the many new and unfamiliar ways of learning inherent in service-learning. Because students carry this new information and these learning challenges back to the classroom, it behooves service-learning faculty to rethink their instructional roles. The instructor that is most compatible with fostering an atmosphere for active student learners shifts away from the role of information transmitter towards the role of learning facilitator or guide. Exclusive or even primary use of the traditional instructional model interferes with the promise of learning fulfillment available in service-learning courses. Mixing of pedagogical methods leads to an increase in active student learning and strong academic and civic learning outcomes.

Principle 7: Be prepared for uncertainty and variation in student learning outcomes

Research has shown that learning strategies and class assignments largely determine student outcomes. This holds true for service-learning courses. However, in traditional courses, the learning strategies (i.e. lectures and readings) are generally constant for all enrolled students and occur under supervision of the instructor, leading to a comfortable predictability and homogeneity in student learning outcomes.

In service-learning courses, variability in student experiences necessitates less certainty and more heterogeneity in student learning outcomes. Even when service-learning students are exposed to the same presentations and the same readings, instructors can expect that the content of class discussions will be less predictable and the content of student papers will be less homogeneous than in courses without a community component.

Principle 8: Maximize the community responsibility orientation of the course

One of the objectives of a service-learning course is to cultivate students' sense of community and social responsibility. Designing classroom norms and learning strategies that not only enhance academic learning but also encourage civic learning are essential to purposeful civic learning. Course learning formats and assignments then, should encourage communal rather than individual learning orientation. This conveys to the students that they are resources for one another, and this message contributes to the building of commitment to community and civic responsibility. Service-learning instructors should consider employing learning strategies that will complement and reinforce the civic lessons from the community experience. For example, converting from individual to group assignments, and from instructor-only to instructor and student review of student assignments, re-norms the teaching-learning process so that it is consistent with the civic orientation of service-learning.