

# **Constructive community engagement within the Curriculum**

**Ginny Saich**  
**University of Stirling**  
**Scotland**

Service learning has a long history, particularly in the U.S.A., where it has been explored as a means of engaging universities in their wider communities. Initially introduced at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies Tennessee in 1960, service learning is conceptually rooted in the U.S.A. Land Grant movement of the 1860s (Stanton, 2000), which was based on ‘a set of beliefs about the social role of the university in society’ (Bonnen, 1996). It focused on the most disadvantaged groups in society and attempted to improve their welfare and social status. This resonates with the more recent widening participation agenda within the UK, where we are grappling with our own conceptions of this.

A form of experiential learning, service learning incorporates the key principle of learning through an experience. Coupling this with an element of service within a community distinguishes it from other forms of experiential learning such as paid internships, field studies and applied research. The core of the experiential learning cycle is the critical stage of reflection in which learning takes place through examination of experiences, enabling them to be (re)conceptualised to generate new perspectives, modified behaviours and new skills (Kolb, 1984).

Based upon similar concepts to service learning in the U.S.A., the University of Stirling recently introduced a Community Service Learning (CSL) course, as part of its portfolio of personal and professional development units. In line with the characteristic flexibility, and accessibility, of Stirling’s programmes of study the CSL course is open to all undergraduate students and can contribute to any degree (except those that are precisely prescribed by professional bodies such as nursing and midwifery).

The CSL course, developed through an inclusive partnership with members of the local voluntary sector and the Students’ Union, places emphasis on action undertaken by students rather than tutors focusing on learning rather than teaching (Biggs, 1999). The course enables students to integrate and build upon three sources of knowledge: discipline-based knowledge, their own knowledge and experience; and the community’s knowledge and experience. Community projects require students to develop and apply skills and academic learning to address real social, economic, health, educational and environmental needs. Students work on a real community problem defined in collaboration with a community partner. This process culminates with students conceptualising and presenting their work in both oral and written formats that are useful and persuasive to both academic and community audiences.

Key characteristics of the course, identified during its development, were that it should:

- engage students in responsible and challenging action to meet genuine community needs;
- provide structured opportunities for critically reflecting on experiences;
- articulate clear goals for both learning and service;
- enable those with needs in the community to define them.

## Community Engagement

The term *community* is frequently defined as a geographical area such as a place of residence, with common descriptors including rural/urban, population and ethnic majority. In a University town or city, the off-campus geographical area and population is often referred to as the *community*, as if the university campus exists in isolation outside any greater community inclusive of both. University students and staff are members of this greater community through location as a common point of reference, just as they are part of the academic community through shared activities and interests.

The University of Stirling's geographic location has more than a metaphorical significance, since it lies on the outskirts of the city, bordering an affluent village. The most renowned architecture on the campus is that of Airthrey Castle, symbolising the embodiment of an *ivory tower* and the University's separation from the realities of local community issues. Recognising the impediment of its physical location for integrating with the local community and responding to its needs, the University strives to build and strengthen bridges within the locality. This ongoing process focuses on developing community engagement as a mutually beneficial two-way relationship, based on the core key principles of sustainable development and partnership.

Stirling's CSL course was envisaged as an innovative curricular contribution to community engagement efforts at the University, enhancing links with the not-for-profit sector of the local community whilst enabling students to broaden their perspectives and experience of the University's local environment. The development of service learning at Stirling was both educationally and socially driven. Making volunteering a central element of structured reflection places value on students' experience, recognising it as an additional source of learning within the University context. The service learning approach provides a synergistic model, encouraging students to participate actively in the learning process by involving them in connecting theory with practice. By removing the artificial constraints, normally inherent within academic study, the CSL course enables students to gain an awareness of the innate ambiguity, diversity and lack of structure in the real world. Students face unfamiliar challenges and encounter diverse individuals on their placements. This contributes to fostering and developing their flexibility and skills that will benefit them in their current and future roles of student, employee and citizen.

Traditionally, the most common community involvement by universities relates to working with local schools and Further Education colleges as part of recruitment and retention. Increasing calls for commercialisation of research have led Universities to strengthen their commitment to, and investment in, relations with businesses and industry. Alongside such developments, however, Stirling has sought opportunities for working with, and for, groups and individuals that have historically benefited least from the presence of a University in the area. This full range of engagements aligns with the recommendations of the Higher Education Review Phase 2, published on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2003. Commenting on this Review, the then Lifelong Learning Minister Iain Gray stated that: 'Greater collaboration between institutions, and with other stakeholders, including in business and the public sector, is a cornerstone of the new Framework.' (Scottish Executive, 2003)

## Learning through service

In order to prevent superficial experiences of service, students engage intellectually with structured reflection on the broad social and environmental dynamics underlying particular situations or activities they encounter. Service learning that engages students in this way makes them think about themselves as learners as well as the broader context within which they are learning. In the short term, service learning may increase the amount of social participation by students but longer-term engagement requires students to develop their competence and inclination for exercising citizenship. In order to learn from their experience students need to discover its meaning, or relevance, and to develop skills of enquiry and reflection enabling them to (re)interpret and synthesise their experiences.

The complexity of supporting students in critical reflection became visible on the CSL pilot, when students ranged from first year to fourth year across many different programmes of study. Individual feedback and support both online and in class became particularly important. Students' reflective journal entries and other ongoing email communications were critical to the learning process, enabling students to begin to apply reflective learning processes and to obtain rapid feedback on their progress. Experience on the CSL course appears to support Fisher's claims that reflective journals give students some control over their learning, motivating them to apply course concepts to real world experiences and encouraging them to move from passive to active learning (Fisher, 1996).

Parker Palmer (1987) argues that knowing and learning are communal activities which require interaction, discussion and debate on issues and events to interpret them and identify their meaning. He defines this process as one of a *community of scholars*. Within the CSL pilot students confirmed this, showing a preference for moving from individual to collaborative reflection. Feedback on the unit identified that students valued this collaborative element of the course and would like to see it strengthened through the establishment of formal peer support groups early in the unit.

Successive governments have called upon universities to focus on preparing students for the workplace in a complex, global and increasingly technical society. The need for universities to develop graduates equipped with the skills needed for life and work was identified as far back as the Dearing and Garrick reports (NCIHE, 1997). A potential danger for the CSL course is that students may view the unit simplistically as an opportunity to obtain work experience and to develop skills for their C.V. In the course review, it became clear that these *were* the top two reasons for choosing the unit, although others included providing a service to others and forming links with the local Stirling community. The course attempts to combat this by emphasising the need for students to look beyond the service they provide to the broader social and environmental structures within which they volunteer, in order to understand the root causes of the problems they are encountering.

Arguably, the values inherent in higher education, however, conceptualise students as reflexive and critical citizens as well as employable graduates. This suggests that learning should be perceived 'as having the potential to create, or have an impact on the citizen, or at the very least, illustrating if not proving the ways in which she or he can make a difference' (Mellor, 1996). Research by the charity Tearfund, identified that among the UK's top 200 businesses, three quarters of employers prefer to recruit those with voluntary work on their C.V. (BBC News, 2002).

## **Community service learning and citizenship**

The citizenship agenda has rapidly gained impetus, and permeated the learning arena since the Crick report (FEFC/DfEE, 2000) recommended an entitlement to citizenship development for all young people aged 16-19. Different approaches have emerged across the UK. In Scottish Universities, funding has not been earmarked specifically for community initiatives or promoting active citizenship. This has largely been subsumed under other remits such as personal and professional development planning, employability, skill development and widening participation, including community engagement.

Stirling's approach to citizenship education has been to associate it with the practices of being a citizen (Lister, 1997). Students learn and develop through active participation in service experiences organised around projects that meet real community needs. Placements for the CSL pilot were cultivated largely by the course team, but organisations have begun to contact the course team directly requesting students for future placements. The course team identifies the placement organisation's requirements and outlines an appropriate project with specific learning outcomes and activities. Students apply for the placements that interest them, by completing an application form that is sent to the organisations concerned. All students are interviewed by the placement organisations. Any student applying for a placement to work with vulnerable adults or children undergoes police checks as required by Disclosure Scotland. Following acceptance onto a project, students are responsible for setting up their initial meeting with their on-site placement mentor to clarify their tasks, arrange deadlines, agree schedules and periodic meetings as required. If students are working collaboratively, they also decide on how to divide the tasks and responsibilities.

Personal development, in areas such as social responsibility, ethical judgement and critical thinking, is promoted through integrating academic learning with hands-on community experience. The particular focus depends upon the service placement. Students take on the role of collaborative problem-solver, working with community partners and developing intercultural competencies for working with diverse groups. The course provides students with an opportunity for community participation and an inside look at potential career interests. This is particularly pertinent within the context of increasing competition in the graduate job market.

During the CSL pilot, some of the projects bridged traditional voids between the University and the community by involving students within communities that have traditionally low participation rates for higher education. Projects included contributing to youth support work, assisting classroom teachers and working with other disadvantaged groups on befriending schemes or volunteering at a youth counselling centre. Other placements contributed to the local environment through conservation and environmental projects.

Student interest in the CSL pilot was strong and registrations very healthy, particularly given that the unit did not gain its accreditation until three months before it was due to run. The pilot course ran with a cohort of 23 students. A small number of initial registrations on the unit were withdrawn due to Disclosure Scotland police checks not being completed in time. In a survey of students on the community service learning course, 90% of students indicated that they would continue to volunteer or would resume volunteering at a later date. At least two students have elected to participate in the Millennium Volunteers, completing 100 hours of volunteering.

A totally unanticipated outcome from the introduction of the course was a general awareness raising among students and an increase in student volunteering. At least ten students, for whom a half-credit was not a priority, elected to spend their time on volunteering rather than on the unit of study. In addition, the positive reception of this course by placement providers has been reflected by six paid internship placements being offered as a direct result of work undertaken by student volunteers on the course. This reflects the high calibre of students who took the unit, and the successful ambassadorial role they played within the local community for the University.

This initiative was essentially a reactive development, arising from the presence of a mutual need within the University and the local area. The CSL unit provides the opportunity to react to community needs and requests. The next stage is to make the transition to a proactive approach, enabling community needs to be sought actively and relevant responses generated. Such developments will need to build upon existing practices, partnerships and progress with the local community and align with the University's strategic objectives. Exploring the potential for recruiting members of the general public and further part-time and international students will link with the University's widening participation strategy. In addition, there may be scope for identifying specific projects, mentored jointly by community partners and university staff, to explore issues within the local community such as youth counselling provision, or childcare facilities.

A balancing act is required between the potentially conflicting requirements of students, tutors and placement providers. Placements must draw upon the expertise within the placement organisation, without over-burdening it. Students' contributions through service must be worthwhile and of value without becoming too intrusive on their academic studies and other commitments. For course tutors the challenge lies in safely releasing control of the learning process to the inherent unpredictability of students learning derived from reflection on their own experiences and from interactions with their placement mentors.

During the course, students moved out of their comfort zone to face less familiar or predictable situations. Several students commented that their experiences opened their eyes to diverse groups that they had not previously encountered, making them aware of unconscious mutual stereotyping within the University and the local community. One particular student told of her flatmates horror on hearing that she was regularly meeting with a group of youths from a region of the City regarded widely as a 'no-go' area by university students. She had been embarrassed to realise that before taking the course, and meeting individuals living in this area, she might have reacted in much the same way. Overall, her description of the placement was as 'a thoroughly humbling experience that was immensely worthwhile'.

## **Conclusion**

Review of the completed pilot has incorporated extensive feedback from students, tutors and placement providers. Several improvements to the programme are envisaged and, given the organic nature of community engagement this is envisaged to be an ongoing activity.

Service learning appears well suited to preparing students for participation in a society that increasingly requires adaptability, lifelong learning and problem solving skills (Davis & Meyer, 1998). It is uniquely suited to enabling students to confront issues and problems in complex natural circumstances, to develop a practical knowledge of decision-making processes and to transfer problem-solving skills to new contexts.

Although in its infancy, Stirling's CSL course is establishing and reinforcing a bond between the University and its community in a mutually beneficial relationship that enables students to

participate in the role of citizen within the *real world*. Within the CSL pilot, the classroom expanded to include the community and its diverse concerns, students learned by doing and reflecting and the tutors engaged in a shared facilitation role with community mentors, who contributed to the educational experience.

## References

- BBC News (2002), 'Gap year of volunteering 'pays'', *Monday 5 August 2002*, [online] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2173689.stm> (accessed on 29.05.03)
- Biggs, J (1999), 'What the student does: teaching for enhanced learning', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18, 1, pp.57-75
- Bonnen, J T (1996), '*Land grant universities are changing*', Seminar presented in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Michigan State University, 21 October 1996, [online] <http://www.adec.edu/clemson/papers/bonnen1.html#asterisk> (accessed on 29.05.03)
- Davis S & Meyer C (1998), '*BLUR: The speed of change in the connected economy*', Massachusetts, Addison Wesley
- FEFC/DfEE (2000), '*Citizenship for 16-19 year-olds in education and training*', Crick Advisory Group
- Fisher, B J (1996), 'Using journals in the social psychology class: helping students apply course concepts to life experiences', *Teaching Sociology*, 24, 2, April, pp.157-165
- Kolb, D A (1984), '*Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*', Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall
- Lister R (1997), 'Citizenship: Towards a feminist synthesis', *Feminist Review*, 57, p.29
- Mellor S (1996), 'What can History contribute to the development of a citizenship curriculum?', *Unicorn*, 22, 1, p.74
- National Committee for Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) (1997), '*Higher Education in the Learning Society*', London, HMSO
- Parker, P (1987), 'Community, conflict and ways of knowing: ways to deepen our educational agenda', *Change*, 19, 5, September/October 1987, pp.20-25
- Scottish Executive (2003), '*National priorities in Higher Education*', News Release SEET320/2003 [online], 20 March 2003, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/pages/news/2003/03/SEET320.aspx> (accessed on 29.05.03)
- Sharkey S R (1990), 'An approach to organising the undergraduate social science major around learning outcomes', *Teaching Sociology*, October 1990, pp.482-487.
- Stanton T K (2000), '*Linking service with academic study: Stanford's lessons in service-learning*', University lecture, Vanderbilt University, 10 February 2000, [online] <http://www.el.uct.ac.za/sl/resources/tim-vdbyl-paper.PDF> (accessed on 29.05.03)