

SERVICE LEARNING IN COLOMBIAN AND US SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS: GUIDELINES FOR CURRICULUM PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Experiential service learning is widely used in a variety of disciplines but is especially appropriate for sociology because the field places emphasis on connections between theory and the real world. There is also a strong tendency in sociology departments to stress community service and social justice. This article explores guidelines for planning and implementation of service learning in the sociology curriculum. Using examples from Colombia and the United States, it is demonstrated that the service learning component varies depending on the social and institutional context and that it can be carried out successfully in very different ways.

Key words: *service learning, sociology, Central Washington University, Universidad de Nariño.*

EL SERVICIO DE APRENDIZAJE EN DEPARTAMENTOS DE SOCIOLOGÍA EN UNIVERSIDADES DE COLOMBIA Y LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS: PRECEPTOS PARA PLANEACIÓN CURRICULAR

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RESUMEN

El servicio de aprendizaje experiencial se usa ampliamente en una variedad de disciplinas, pero de manera especial en la Sociología porque este campo enfatiza las relaciones entre la teoría y el mundo real. También existe una fuerte tendencia en los departamentos de Sociología a enfatizar el servicio comunitario y la justicia social. Este artículo explora los preceptos para la planeación e implementación del servicio de aprendizaje en el currículo de Sociología. Por medio de ejemplos tomados de Colombia y Estados Unidos, se demuestra que el componente de servicio de aprendizaje varía según el contexto social e institucional, y que además se puede desarrollar con éxito de diferentes maneras.

Palabras clave: *servicio de aprendizaje, sociología, Universidad Central de Washington, Universidad de Nariño.*

INTRODUCTION

There are many types of experiential learning from outdoor, wilderness experiences to volunteer service and formal internships. In sociology classes, experiential, community based learning has been used extensively. As a discipline, sociology has had an emphasis on grounded theory, i.e. application of theoretical concepts to real world situations, a history of community activism and a focus on social responsibility. As a result sociology has tended to incorporate a specific subset of experiential learning—service learning in a community setting—. Consequently, sociologists have a long history of using service learning and community based learning in a wide variety of contexts¹.

This article explores guidelines for planning and implementation of service learning in the sociology curriculum. Examples from Colombia and the United States will demonstrate that the service learning component varies depending on the social and institutional context and that it can be carried out successfully in very different ways.

SERVICE LEARNING IN SOCIOLOGY

Proponents of the utility of experiential learning have a long history, beginning with John Dewey in the early 19th century who provided the philosophical foundation for the method. From Dewey's perspective the dichotomies of knowledge/experience and doing/knowing were artificial and counterproductive in education. Experiential learning, combining knowledge with practice, is the logical outcome of this philosophical assumption. More recently, during the decades of the 1980's and 1990's proponents of experiential learning focused on the ways in which the method enhances student learning particularly in the area of critical thinking². Experiential learning has been advocated as a way to enhance motivation, understanding and retention of material³.

Within sociology, community based service learning has been incorporated in many types of courses. Everett (1998) describes using service learning in courses on social stratification; Marullo⁴ presents a discussion of service learning as a tool for teaching race and ethnic relations and; less typically, Roberts⁵ et.al, describe using the construction of a pit latrine as a service learning project in an introductory sociology course.

As a general rule, service learning is intended to link theory with practice, provide opportunities for active learning and supplement the classroom experience. Depending on the nature of the class it is linked to, service learning may serve more specific pedagogical objectives. Meyers-Lipton⁶ sees service learning

as a means to develop civic responsibility, Lewis⁷ as a way to promote social activism, and Pestello⁸ sees the goal as the creation of citizen scholars.

The literature on service learning is so diverse that it is difficult to reach a definite characterization of exactly what service learning entails. Most writers are in agreement that some kind of structured reflection, usually in the form of journals and/or final reports is an essential component of service learning. Moony and Edwards⁹ have developed a hierarchy of Community Based Learning (CBL) which ranges from “out of class activities” at the “low” end of the hierarchy to “service learning advocacy” at the “high” end. Moving up the scale requires more complex and structured activity. In their model, “service learning” requires activities in the community, that a service be rendered, curricular credit be gained, that skills be applied/acquired, and that structured reflection be integrated. The final step in the hierarchy “service learning advocacy” requires the addition of social action to the previous criteria. In contrast “internships”, a step below service learning in the hierarchy, do not require structured reflection in their model.

A substantial body of literature on the subject of service or community based learning focuses on the planning and implementation of service learning. These writers treat topics such as how to organize programs, as well as problems and pitfalls and how to avoid or minimize them. Carter, Cadge, Rivero and Curran¹⁰ discuss the questions that must be addressed in the planning and design of a community based learning project. They present five questions that they consider central to the design of a project: 1) Among the goals of the project are there primary and secondary goals, or are the goals given equal weight? 2) Is participation in the project mandatory or voluntary? 3) Should the CBL component of a course be concentrated in one site or dispersed across many sites? 4) How similar or different should each student’s individual participation in the project be? 5) How central should direct client/community interaction be to student’s activities? To their questions I would add a sixth: How should student participation be assessed and evaluated?

While most authors on the subject of service learning feel that the involvement of student in community activities is a means to enhance the learning experience, many note potential dilemmas in their execution. McKinney, Medvedeva, Vacca and Malek¹¹ see learning outcomes from out of class learning as generally positive, but note some frustrations with the experience, particularly with the problem of evaluation. Lewis¹² points out the issues of coordination in group activities and uneven participation among group members. Other authors note problems with student attitudes such as selective perceptions leading to stereotyping of program participants, and the “white knight syndrome”¹³ Jakubowski and Berman¹⁴ discuss instances of student resistance and skepticism as well as complaints about workload. Similar issues are cited by Marullo¹⁵ in a list of potential problems: reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudices, students

“dis” community members, students don’t want to work in diverse groupings, students lack interpersonal skills to work together, intra-group discord, and group vs. community discord.

SERVICE LEARNING IN SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS IN THE US AND COLOMBIA

Based on the literature on the topic of service learning two general areas of concern can be identified: issues related to planning how and why to include service learning in the curriculum and issues related to the implementation of service learning experiences within the curriculum. The first concern is related to the purposes and desired outcomes of the experience and the second is related to the way in which the planned experience is carried out. Both involve careful thought for student success, although the decisions made may be quite different depending on the chosen purposes and the educational context where they will be put into practice. In the following discussion I will refer to two sociology departments, one in the United States (labeled CWU) and the other in Colombia (Udenar) as examples to illustrate the planning and implementation of service learning in the sociology curriculum. The United States department is located at Central Washington University, a state university in the Pacific Northwest with approximately 9000 students. The sociology department, in operation since the 1960’s has eight full time faculty and graduates 40-50 students per year. Within the department students may major in sociology or concentrate on social services. The goals of the department as stated in the catalogue are:

The sociology department provides opportunities for students to understand the conceptual and methodological tools used by sociologists to understand society. Students will be encouraged to 1) see society as concrete day-to-day behavior of human beings; 2) grasp the relationship between history, society and the individual’s life; 3) realize that social patterns are tools for the accomplishment of human ends and not necessarily unalterable facts of life; and 4) develop the ability to critically analyze social phenomena¹⁶.

The Colombian department is found at the Universidad de Narino, also a state university, with approximately 12,000 students located in southern Colombia in the city of Pasto. The program has 5 full time faculty and graduates cohorts of 25-40 yearly. The department is relatively new, founded in 2000. The department provides the following profile of the program:

Theoretical/practical preparation for the interpretation of society and its transformation through planning and implementation of projects and strategies that promote national and specifically regional development¹⁷.

Although the content of core courses for both departments is similar —sociological theory and research methodology— the organizational context of the programs is quite different. The Colombian university requires students to apply for entrance to the university within a specific major so that sociology majors begin from the first year of study. In addition the program is designed for graduation after five years. This allows student to take more sociology courses over the course of the major. The program is run on a cohort system. The United States university requires students to take a series of general education courses in their first two years; most students enter a major around the beginning of their third year of study. Consequently, their time in the department is much shorter than the Colombian students. Students do not take courses as a cohort; outside the core courses they may choose courses according to their interests. Their class work is much more varied both in class content and the timing of their courses than the Colombian students. Although both departments place emphasis on the value of practical experience and use service learning in their curriculum, differences in departmental mission and organization lead to different patterns of utilization.

SERVICE LEARNING: GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING CURRICULUM

The central question in planning for the use of service learning is that of purpose. What is the desired outcome or outcomes of the service? Any given program can have multiple goals for service learning and these goals will affect the organization and context of the service. Some of the desired outcomes can be social, to be of benefit to the community or society at large. This is a program goal for the Colombian department and consequently informs the integration of service learning in the curriculum. On the institutional level, universities may see service learning as a way of fostering connections with the community. When the university is committed to service the institution may provide organizational support for the activities, taking some control from the department but also streamlining the process for faculty supervisors. CWU has an Office of Cooperative Education which manages service learning and a Center for Civic Engagement which provides students with information about possible placements. These offices make the process more complicated for individual students, but allow for the management of large numbers of internships every year, allow many individualized placements and provides oversight for students and agencies. The CWU Sociology Department benefits from their access to these services allowing them to place individual students more readily and reducing the time and stress for faculty supervision.

Of course, one of the most important issues related to the purpose of service learning is that of student development —what do we want the students to take away from the experience?— Often there are several goals for a single

placement. As we have seen, many proponents see experiential learning as a way to develop broad skills and attitudes such as critical thinking, or interest in civic engagement and social justice. Specific job related skills can also be a focus, such as the application of interviewing techniques or research design. Teamwork skills can also be a goal, particularly in group placements. Desired learning outcomes can even be quite basic; for example, the Introduction to Social Service course at CWU has a service component which is meant to acquaint students with the reality of working in social service since many of them do not have direct experience in the field. Other goals can be to apply class material in a real world setting, this goal is clearly reflected the Udenar program where students take courses in community development and social planning in the 5th and 6th semesters followed by field work in social planning in the 7th semester and field work in community development in the 8th semester.

SERVICE LEARNING: GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

When service learning has been incorporated into the curriculum, planners then turn to a variety of issues related to implementation, i.e. how can the experience be best carried out in this context? This involves such decisions as whether or not to require service of all students. Udenar has put two semesters of field work and one semester of internship in the required curriculum. CWU requires an internship of students in the social service concentration, but makes it optional for other sociology majors. Students may do more than one quarter of serve, but this is not required. When should the service learning be done? Udenar has fixed the required service in later semesters, while CWU allows students to choose when to do their internship. Although most students do it in the later quarters, it is possible to choose to intern at any point in the major. Should the placements be group projects or individual placements? Udenar has two semesters of group projects and on individual internship while CWU has almost exclusively focused on individual placements. What is the role of the faculty supervisor? At Udenar since the field work is set up as a course the faculty supervisor is far more involved than the CWU faculty member who receives reports from the student and the workplace supervisor and may have little “hands on” contact with the student. The Udenar internship semester is organized similarly to the CWU model. Both departments require student reflection as part of assessment.

Once again, there is clearly no one “right” way to implement service learning, it is a product of the social and institutional context where it is carried out. In the Colombian setting the major curriculum is longer, 5 years and starts from the first year of study. This allows for more coursework in the major specifically preparing students for field work and more extensive service requirements. The cohort system facilitates group fieldwork and team projects. The department goals direct the service toward the projects in social planning and community

development. The US setting favors individual placement for a variety of reasons. It is not a cohort system so students may take their internships at any time. The university provides institutional support for individualized placements through the Offices of Cooperative Education and Civic Engagement. Students are encouraged to do service learning in a field of personal interest to them related to their career goals. It provides more flexibility for students, but is far less extensive preparation than the in Colombian setting.

From looking at the many possible directions for curriculum planning and implementation of service learning experiences for sociology students the variety of options is obvious. From our contrasting examples in the US and Colombia it is clear that these decisions are made in context and that service learning can be a successful and productive for sociology students under very different circumstances.

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