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Program Planning Theory in Service-Learning: A Relational Model

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Keywords: service-learning, program planning, adult education

Abstract: This paper introduces the relationship between program planning theory and service-learning in graduate education and the development of a relational program planning model for service-learning. A case will be made regarding the value of the relational program planning model for guiding and enabling more democratic forms of service-learning practice.

Although service-learning research continues to document the impact on undergraduate students, faculty, institutions, and communities (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001), it falls short of capturing the process dimensions that lead to diverse programmatic outcomes (Kiely, 2005). This void results from two omissions. Foremost, service-learning research is neither theory informed nor theory generating (Bringle, 2003). Service-learning researchers lack robust theories to direct important program and learning processes, and as a result they will continue to equate research with assessing program outcomes in order to prove that service-learning courses and programs really do make a difference in the lives of students, faculty, and communities. Instead of building from a theoretical foundation, research is swayed by political influence, including institutional leaders who control funding sources and demand program accountability. Evaluations conducted to prove that a program has met predetermined goals and objectives often satisfy funding agencies, but such evaluations have a limited impact on the service-learning field in terms of advancing theory or offering new knowledge that is useful to communities.

Our review of the literature revealed the absence of program planning theory (see Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Caffarella, 2002) from service-learning research. Even though service-learning has distinguished itself in the literature as a problem-based experiential alternative to dominant classroom-based, subject-centered pedagogies, the dearth of program planning theory in service-learning is noteworthy. Radical differences in teaching and learning processes distinguish service-learning from dominant pedagogies; however, faculty trained in traditional teaching methods who involve themselves in service-learning are expected to facilitate a very different experiential learning process without a well-tested program planning model to inform practice.

Additionally, a review of program planning literature found a continuum of approaches ranging from technical rational using classroom-based practices to adult education using interactive and democratic practices. In general, our review found program planning in service-learning to be fundamentally relational, but not informed by relational theories that focus on context, social relations, and stakeholder power and interests. Thus, there is a need for program

planning theories that provide guidance on how to foster relationships and negotiate each stakeholder's needs, interests, assets, and power.

Service-Learning Program Planning Model

Based on an integrated literature review of service-learning and partnerships as well as program planning theories in adult education and case study data from eight service-learning graduate courses, we developed the Service-Learning Program Planning Model (SLPPM) (see Figure 1).

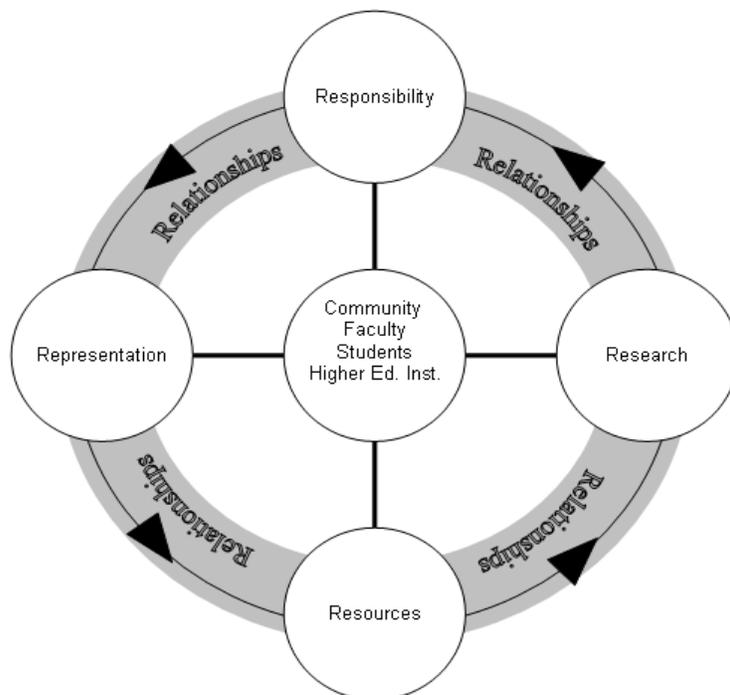


Figure 1
Service-Learning Program Planning Model

The SLPPM centers on four partners balancing the demands of five dimensions that influence service-learning. These partners are community, faculty, students, and the higher education institution; the dimensions are responsibility, research, representation, resources, and relationships. Because these partners and dimensions are all integral components to service-learning program planning in graduate courses, they are foundational to our understanding of sustained partnerships and student learning.

The dimensions are interconnected in the model and with the partners to illustrate how they are interrelated in the process necessary for program planning in a graduate-level service-learning context. The partners hold a stake in the success of the service-learning program; all have influence over the process, as well as interests to maintain and cultivate. Mabry and Wilson (2001) described this interconnection as foundational since the strategic actions of program planners vary according to the specific context and their perceptions of stakeholder involvement. It is critical that the partner stakeholders are included, recognized, and incorporated in addressing each of the dimensions within the program planning process.

Partners at the Center

The SLPPM involves four partners: community, faculty, students, and higher education institution. Although each has differing levels of involvement and commitment in the partnership, each is vital to successful service-learning endeavors since they bring resources to the planning, implementation, and sustainability of the service-learning function. The community partner is usually a larger nonprofit, governmental, or community-based organization. Originating from both student and faculty relationships, partners are identified because they have sought the help of the university in addressing a preexisting problem or because of a link to the course content. Students are often directly involved in identifying and negotiating their student-community partnerships, with support from faculty. Partnerships vary in their goals, and are negotiated by the community stakeholders, but tend to support existing processes or projects or assist in the development and design of future projects or goals. Individuals in this partner group most often include those serving in an administrative role, but ideally include stakeholders at all levels of the organization.

Faculty partners are scholars who have incorporated the service-learning function into a course or operate in a sphere of engaged scholarship (Sandmann, 2006). Faculty members often serve as facilitator and intermediary with the other partners. They are the face for the college or university, an advisor for students in the service-learning course, and a point of contact within the higher education institution for the community. Faculty must balance these roles in order to meet the demands of the university, the needs of students, and the interests of community partners, while satisfying their own research, teaching, and service obligations.

Students are those who take part in service-learning to fulfill a program or course requirement, and their involvement and commitment can range from attaining course credit to pursuing specific academic, personal, or professional interests. In order to achieve the desired outcomes, students work with faculty and community partners within a university context in order to negotiate their role and meet agreed-upon objectives.

The higher education institution is the final partner; it includes those departments, agencies, and schools having an interest in the service-learning function, or influences the work of the other partners taking part in the endeavor. Moreover, the college or university partner administers those policies and procedures other partners must adhere to in order to meet institutional requirements for research, graduation, and tenure.

Dimensions

In addition to the partners, the SLPPM includes five dimensions: responsibility, research, representation, resources, and relationships. Each of these is influenced by each of the partners in the overall process, and is foundational to service-learning program planning and to ensuring the success of service-learning endeavors.

The dimension of responsibility considers the negotiation of responsibility for the components of the overall program, and includes the instructional plan and student learning, both of which are grounded in adult learning education theory. Striving for a democratic balance of power and inclusiveness, this dimension encompasses partners' short- and long-term goals, needs, and interests. Partners must consider their individual and collective roles and contributions, as well as their responsibilities in the planning, decision-making, and action of the service-learning, while balancing partner resources, the scope of the service-learning function, and long-term relationships.

The research dimension of the model focuses attention on who has a stake or interest in the success of a program or partnership and what the partners are hoping to accomplish in order

to further theoretical understandings and ensure practical application of the service-learning. When partners address the dimension of research, it is necessary to consider the nature of the problem being examined, the context in which the research is to occur, the implications of the research, and how each of those issues affects all those involved in the work. Therefore, research in the service-learning setting builds on and yet differs from more traditional scholarship, which is perceived to be disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led, supply-driven, hierarchical, peer-reviewed, and almost exclusively university-based knowledge generation. Rather, it is similar to Gibbons et al.'s (1994) engaged knowledge generation, which is applied, problem-centered, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial, and network-embedded. It is important that prior to or during the service-learning course all partners learn and appreciate the unique skills required for this type of community, collaborative research. Community partners, students, and faculty alike must learn to express their interests, negotiate the questions being asked, understand data collection and analysis procedures, and clarify the utilization and dissemination of findings.

The representation dimension brings to the forefront issues of the research evaluation, transferability, and sustainability over the course of the service-learning endeavor and beyond. Representation includes the forms that the service-learning endeavor takes in order to benefit all the partners. It is critical to consider how the work produced by students and community partners is disseminated internally and externally, who has access, how faculty represent the work in their own scholarship, and how the products, partnerships, and service-learning function will evolve over several semesters or extended periods of time.

Additionally, partners must reflect on what resources they bring to the planning process in order to create sustainable partnerships that result in transferable research, increased capacity, and student learning. Each partner often comes with resources to meet the needs of the service-learning function. This service-learning capital may include personal connections, specific skills and experiences, funding, supplies and labor, and physical space in order to develop successful experiences for all partners. A critical resource is access to real-life settings, problems, clients, and data in multiple forms. Resources may not be apparent or equal, but partners often find that they provide an invaluable and necessary piece to the service-learning puzzle.

Finally, the dimension of relationships among community partners, faculty, students, and the higher education institution brings to light the interests of each and the depth of those relationships between the partners. Relationships permeate all aspects of the other four dimensions, including the continual negotiation of partner needs and interests within existing and newly created power structures. Because faculty are often the glue that holds service-learning relationships together, it is important that they appreciate the ongoing effort to identify, manage, develop, and nurture relationships between all partners. When focus is placed on this dimension, it is important to ask whose interests count, and consider those in relation to whose interests should count specifically in the service-learning course.

Discussion and Implications

The SLPPM presented here suggests a relational approach be included as a continuation of existing service-learning program planning models. The relational approach (see Table 1) draws from a dialogic planning practice that is characterized through its linking of the technical, practical, and sociopolitical dimensions and recognizes the resources, needs, and interests of each stakeholder. Additionally, this approach differentiates itself from previous models through its focus on facilitation of developmental and ongoing dialogue and reflection.

Table 1
A Continuum of Program Planning Models

Approach	Dominant Planning Practice	Characteristics	Faculty
Relational Approach	Dialogic	Links technical, practical, and socio-political dimensions, recognizes stakeholder resources, needs, and interests. Facilitates developmental and on-going dialogue and reflection.	Nurturer
Adult Education Approach	Democratic	Managing the planning context, recognizes social and political factors, acknowledges power structures	Negotiator
	Interactive	Practical decision making, recognizes context, planner-centered	Deliberative Practitioner
Service Learning Approach	Reflective Experiential	Curriculum based, student-centered, project based outcomes, neglects negotiation	Reflective Practitioner
Technical Rational Approach	Classroom Based Curriculum	Linear, formulaic, decontextual	Facilitator

One important aspect of the model is the guidance it provides for the inclusion of multiple stakeholders. Beyond attending to who needs to be included, it leads to a more focused and nuanced understanding of context and stakeholder needs and interests. In the process of negotiating the fulfillment of those needs and interests, it illuminates what is typically an unequal relation of power. For a service-learning course to be successful, there needs to be an equitable but not necessarily equal relationship. That is, partners can bring significantly differing resources to contribute to the overall outcomes. Drawing on program planning theory empowers the service-learning educators and students to become power brokers in meeting and balancing the needs of the respective partners.

Responsible program planning is not only negotiating power but also nurturing relationships and fostering dialogue among partners beyond the teacher-student relationship. The goals and objectives of the service-learning program should be derived from the shared goals and visions of the partners. Ideally, these goals are clearly stated, but more often than not, expectations, needs, and expected outcomes are tacit; thus purposeful dialogue is required to establish clear terms for program success. To achieve this, all participants need to convey their own perception of the partnership and the anticipated process, outcomes, and program goals. Successful communication provides a foundation for sustainable service-learning experiences that are mutually beneficial to all involved.

The model compels program planners to consider a more complex understanding of social relations between the partners. It can lead to deeper consideration and understanding of institutions' role in enhancing or hindering success. It raises questions on whether institutional positions, policies, and procedures work against sustainability or diminish capacity to include the community or faculty stakeholders outside the discipline. In addition to challenging institutional positionality, program planning theory presents opportunities to alter the mental models of the other partners. Students can have a broader understanding of how courses operate, instructors can examine their multiple roles, and community partners can observe their outsider/insider relationships.

This paper illustrates the importance of combining the principles of program planning theory as a relational model to inform the theory and practice of service-learning. This proposed relational model highlights both the social and democratic aspects of program planning to offer a common language for service-learning stakeholders to better articulate what they do, and how their actions and contributions to the process ultimately benefit learners. Applying this stakeholder- and dimension-based process gives direction to the service-learning field and graduate faculty as they facilitate service-learning experiences in their classrooms.

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