

Service-Learning Studies Series No.1

サービス・ラーニング研究シリーズ 1

# 「サービス・ラーニング入門」

"Introduction to Service-Learning"



国際基督教大学

International Christian University

サービス・ラーニング・センター

Service Learning Center

# Elements of a Successful Service Learning Experience

Florence E. McCarthy

## Introduction

Service learning has become an important curriculum innovation in countries around the world. The International Christian University has led the way in establishing service learning in Japan, and ICU students are actively pursuing service learning experiences in agencies in Japan as well as elsewhere in Asia, Africa, and the United States. The service learning program at ICU is built around providing students with a combination of an introduction to, good preparation in, and lots of information about the possibilities offered in service learning experiences. While these inputs can be offered to students, it is impossible to guarantee them a "successful" service learning experience. Only the students themselves can do this, as they are the ones that must decide what "successful" means, and how they are going to achieve that success. This is not to suggest that the administration and faculty supporting service learning do not have an idea of what a successful service learning experience would be for students. To this end, the different service learning courses are provided. These courses include the Introduction to Service Learning, the Preparation for Service Learning Field Study, and the seminar in Reflections on Service Learning Experience.

There is some question concerning the context of the various courses, particularly the Preparation course. This course focuses on what students need to do to arrange for and then make the most of their service learning placements. The purpose of service learning as has been discussed throughout this book, is to encourage students' involvement in their own learning through the engagement with community agencies in providing needed service to the agency and their staff and participants. While there are many different types of placements that students may arrange for themselves, basically service, or doing something for others, is focused in not-for-profit organizations such as community agencies, government offices, regional offices of the United Nations and so on.<sup>1</sup>

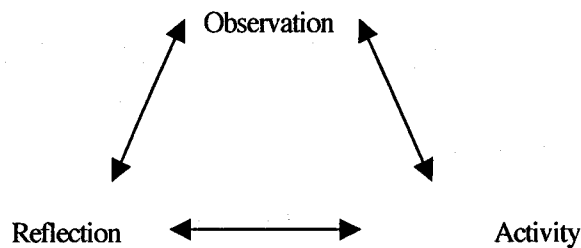
## The Elements of Success

The process of being successful in one's service learning experience requires a combination of elements. These are noted below in a triangle that indicates the interconnectedness and interaction involved in making

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive list of organizations that are suitable for service learning placements is available at the Service Learning Center, 104 Administration Building or visit the service learning web-site.

the most of one's service learning experience. These elements will only be briefly described in the following pages, as a means of illustrating the content of the Preparation course, and to suggest the kinds of skills and techniques students will need to develop in the process of making the most of their service learning experiences. The elements included in the triangle below represent just a minor, but important, portion of the content of the Preparation course.



The elements of observation, activity and reflection are the most basic elements in being successful as a service learning student. Each will be considered in turn. But first a note about the nature of the triangle. It is an isosceles triangle, meaning that each side is equidistant from the others, and that the angle represented in each corner of the triangle is the same. The double-headed arrows connecting the points of the triangle indicate that each element of the triangle is equally important and interactive with its two other points. This suggests that successful service learning requires the development and practice related to observation, activity and reflection.

### **Observation**

Most people are quite unobservant; they see very little of what goes on around them. Many factors contribute to this state. For example, in Japan, many people, and students in particular, tend to be self-absorbed, overly tired, stressed, preoccupied and rushed. The combination of these factors encourages people to just pass through most of their days in a daze, and only really pay attention to their work; the rest is just a blur. When people are not paying attention to what is going on around them they tend to miss out on what other people are doing, or what kind of a day it is, or what's going on with their friends or colleagues at work or at the university. Being unaware means it is difficult for such people to be very sympathetic to others, or to take the initiative at work, or to be very engaged and supportive with friends or family members. In addition to not adding much to the social situations in which these people are involved, they often miss out on creating or sustaining good social relationships with others. In severe situations, these kinds of people can become quite alienated from the world around them.

The difference that observation makes is that it focuses people's attention on events, people, and activities going on around them. Observation is not a gift; it is a skill that anyone can develop. However, how to do it,

and what is good observation has to be taught and learned. The Preparation course deals with observation and gives student's the skills to be good observers.

### **Activity**

Any service learning placement involves students in activities related to the ongoing work of the agency, international organization or government office where the student is placed. The range of activities students are asked to do are varied and change over time. Agencies and organizations tend to give new students simple tasks in the beginning of the student's association with the organization, just to see what the student can do, and to get some measure of the student's capabilities. This may be somewhat conflicting or confusing to students, as they may expect to do only important work right from the beginning, and may misunderstand why such simple tasks are being given to them.

The staff are *observing* the students to gauge their interest, enthusiasm, responsiveness and ability to take responsibility and follow through with tasks. This suggests that observation is one way people can gather information that becomes useful in decision making. Staff members will learn about students not only from what students say or write; they will learn by observing what the students do.

Another lesson from this situation is that all activities are important in agency work. The work the student does frees a staff member to do other work. If the student didn't do the work, someone else would have to, or the work would not be done. Even simple tasks have a place and need to be done.

A third lesson is that staff members learn by observing what is going on around them, and become adept at adapting activities to different people and situations as they arise. For example, this combination of observation and activity is used to gauge students in their placements and becomes the means by which more important work is assigned to students. Activity is a complex and complicated process that engages people in the world around them; provides them with information useful in understanding situations and making decision, and is a key to understanding others through the approach others take to the activities in which they are engaged.

### **Reflection**

While it is important to be observant and active in one's placement, it is not enough. A successful service learning experience requires that students think about what goes on around them, in addition to being active and observant. This process of reflection is also a skill that is quite undeveloped in most people. Not only are most people, students included, unobservant, they are non-reflective as well. This means that people don't take in much of what goes on around them, and don't think much about what they do take in.

There is a difference between memorization and reflection. As students, we are encouraged to memorize lots of information and to be letter perfect in parroting it back to the professor. But often if students are asked to explain what they have memorized, they are unable to do so. Why? Because most often they have not

thought about the content of what they have been memorizing, and so are unable to explain it. In the same way students may have experience, but don't necessarily learn from it. This is why being successful in service learning is really a task for the students; faculty and staff can provide the best preparation and the best placements, but if the students aren't engaged in thinking about what they have experienced, it will be very difficult to have a successful placement.

Reflection is the process of thinking about the situations one is in; of thinking about the people and activities one is engaged with and in; of actively drawing conclusions and inferences from, and using these inferences to guide further action. Reflection is a skill that requires practice and time. There are no short-cuts and no easy ways to become a reflective person. However, a successful service learning experience requires students to be reflective; to think about, learn from, and use the knowledge they've gained from their experiences to inform their future actions and decisions. The Preparation course gives students key insight and experience in developing reflective skills. Like so much in student-oriented learning, however, the faculty can provide the skills and techniques, but it is up to the students to make the most of these inputs, and to actively learn from what they do by reflecting on their activities, the actions of others, and the possible ways of interpreting what has occurred.

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