



# LEARNING THROUGH SERVING

*A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning  
Across the Disciplines*

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*Christine M. Cress  
Peter J. Collier  
Vicki L. Reitenauer  
and Associates*



STERLING, VIRGINIA



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CHRISTINE M. CRESS, PETER COLLIER AND VICKI REITENAUER

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# Introduction

## *Why a Book about Learning through Serving?*

CHRISTINE M. CRESS

*Learning through Serving: A Student Workbook for Service-Learning across the Disciplines* is a textbook for students who, like yourself, are involved in service-learning experiences as part of the college or university program. We wrote this book because we care about your serving and learning experience. Whether you are performing service work in the community as a member of a course or engaging in service on your own, we offer exercises and activities to help you have a more effective, interesting, and meaningful experience.

The purpose of this book is to guide you through the essential elements of *learning* and *serving*. In other words, we focus on how you can best provide meaningful service to a community agency or organization while simultaneously gaining new skills, knowledge, and understanding as an integrated aspect of your academic program.

As you may know, service-learning courses are complex teaching and learning environments that are designed to enhance learning through the process of connecting academic course content with service opportunities in the community. This approach will require you and your instructor to participate in new roles and in different ways of learning than a traditional lecture course. What you are about to experience is an entirely new context for learning—one based in active practice in the community—that will challenge you to connect that learning back to classroom instruction, course readings, and discussion. We have developed this

workbook to assist you in planning, processing, and evaluating your learning-through-serving experience.

The text first guides you over the initial hurdles faced in service-learning courses by addressing questions of meaning and values as you face the potential irony of “required volunteerism” and grapple with the essence of what it means to be a learner, a citizen, and a community member. For the most part, we assume that you are reading the text and completing the activities as part of a service-learning course. If you are not, however, you can still easily adapt any of the exercises to be completed on your own. You might also use these exercises to reflect upon your service experience even if your instructor does not assign all the activities to be completed as part of your class.

We have intentionally planned the book to be read over an academic term or semester. You will probably read about one chapter per week. Most important, though, is that you pace your reading of the text and completion of the exercises with the progression of your community-based experience for maximum benefit and insight.

The various inventories and reflective activities in this book are designed to help you understand your relationship to your classmates (viewing the classroom as a community), to the community organization (or wherever you are providing the service), and to the larger society. Further, the book prepares you to enter multicultural communities by addressing diversity issues that you may encounter in community-

based work. We offer information, resources, and activities to explore issues of race, class, gender, ability, orientation, and other lived differences and likenesses that you may encounter in your classroom and extended community.

The text also provides academic scholarship and inquiry questions to help you glean lessons regarding the nature and process of societal change. We encourage you to think about how your academic program or major can be used as a framework for understanding and addressing complex community challenges. Moreover, we help you look for leverage points that you can use in considering the dynamics of power, collaboration, change, and transformation in communities. Finally, the text offers further reflective strategies for assessment so that you can make meaning of the service you have performed (the processes and the outcomes) and envision future roles you will play in your community (as a citizen, a volunteer, and an employee).

Thus, this book is designed as a practical guide to help you survive and thrive in service-learning experiences, whether that service to the community lasts a few weeks or a few months. The book can also be read as a companion text to your course readings in that it offers creative resources and ideas for bridging the gap between learning and serving across a variety of academic fields and a multitude of community-based experiences.

As you will see, each section's chapters include theoretical information in order to provide a contextual understanding of contemporary community issues. The bulk of each chapter, however, incorporates methods for self-reflection and assessment, offers questions for your individual thought and group discussion, suggests techniques for effectively interacting with the community, and details brief case-study examples of service-learning projects at other institutions.

To assist you, key symbols have been added to the exercises to highlight their relative importance in explaining chapter concepts. If applicable, check with your instructor in advance to see which exercises he or she may require you to complete on your own and which ones you might complete as part of a group.

Exercises with a star cluster ★★ are of utmost importance to complete (working either on your own or as part of a group); those with a lightbulb 💡 represent optional exercises (strategies for gaining deeper insights into the issues); and those with a question mark ? identify exercises that provide further resources and information in your quest for understanding community

problem solving and change. Please note that, because of the range of community-based experiences, we will use the terms *service-learning* and *community-based learning* relatively interchangeably, although we will explore the differences between these terms in chapter 1.

For clarity and ease of understanding, the book is divided into four sections: (1) Understanding the *Learning-through-Serving* Proposition; (2) Learning the Landscape, Learning the Language; (3) Facilitating Learning and Meaning-Making Inside and Outside the Classroom; and (4) Assessing the Engagement Effort.

## Part One: Understanding the *Learning through Serving* Proposition

The goal of part one is to prepare you for the experience of learning through serving. Some students begin their service-learning courses already understanding the foundations for this type of classroom-community experience through their own personal histories of volunteering and engaged citizenship. For others of you, the experience may be unfamiliar, untested territory. Chapters 1–3 will provide you with the steps for connecting yourself to the community and offer suggestions for how you might begin to experience yourself as a collaborator in learning through serving.

### *Chapter 1 What is Service-Learning?*

In chapter 1, we look at the nature of “service” and “learning” as they are enacted in service-learning courses and connect this description to a larger conversation about democracy, citizenship, and civic responsibility. You will be introduced to reflection as a key practical element that distinguishes service from volunteerism. We also discuss the role of colleges in facilitating the development of your civic capacity, and the types of knowledge, skills, and motivation that will allow you to become a fully contributing member of your community.

### *Chapter 2 Building and Maintaining Community Partnerships*

In chapter 2, we delve more deeply into the potentially transformative power of your partnership with a community organization. We discuss the key elements for successful partnerships by offering a case study example of entering, engaging with, and exiting a service-learning experience. You will also have an opportunity to develop an “Action Learning Plan for Serving” (ALPs)

as a strategy for making the most of your serving and learning.

*Chapter 3 Becoming Community: Moving from I to We*

In chapter 3, we discuss “community” as experienced in a service-learning course: the class as learning community, extended community as wall-less classroom, and the intersection of these learning landscapes. We discover that good intentions and communication are not always enough to ensure a fruitful serving experience, as multiple parties may have differences in values and goals. We also introduce you to a new leadership model as a framework for how to make the best use of collaboration in creating community change.

### **Part Two: Learning the Landscape, Learning the Language**

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As you participate in your learning-through-serving experience, you will come to understand yourself and others in new ways. In this section of the book (chapters 4 and 5), we provide you with information and exercises for interacting with diverse groups of individuals in order to maximize your effectiveness and empathy as a learner and server.

*Chapter 4 Groups Are Fun, Groups Are Not Fun: Teamwork for the Common Good*

Whether or not you are part of a formal team to perform your service, teamwork and collaboration in a group setting is a standard process in many, if not most, service-learning experiences. Chapter 4 specifically addresses the development of your knowledge and skills for creating effective group collaboration to further both course learning and service objectives.

*Chapter 5 Creating Cultural Connections: Navigating Difference, Investigating Power, Unpacking Privilege*

Chapter 5 builds on the experiential learning inherent in navigating differences in group practice to look more closely at multiculturalism. No doubt you hope to work respectfully, ethically, and effectively on behalf of classmates and community constituents, but to realize these goals you must look at underlying issues (power, privilege, discrimination, stereotypes, intercultural communication, cultural competence, and others) that affect the life of a community. In this chapter we examine how to incorporate multiple

voices to offer a chorus of viewpoints on community and discuss the politics of difference and the implications for community engagement.

### **Part Three: Facilitating Learning and Meaning-Making Inside and Outside the Classroom**

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The goal of part three (Chapters 6–8) is to highlight multiple venues for understanding the community-based experience—when things are going well and when things are not going well. Specifically, how can you use reflection to construct meaning and knowledge from your experience, what can be done if the community interaction is a disappointment or is failing, and how can the context and content of the course itself provide direction and insight?

*Chapter 6 Reflection in Action: The Learning–Doing Relationship*

Without sufficient, multiply focused opportunities to reflect on your actions, you are at risk for leaving the service-learning class without having articulated how your learning was amplified through engagement with your community partner and what that engagement meant to you. In chapter 6, we suggest strategies for structuring the ongoing practice of reflection throughout the service-learning experience. Moreover, we help you understand how your learning style may be supported through multiple modes of reflection.

*Chapter 7 Failure with the Best of Intentions: When Things Go Wrong*

In spite of the best-laid plans of faculty and students, a host of things can go wrong when working with the community. For example, students can become bitterly embroiled with one another when working in groups; the community partner may not provide sufficient information or support for the learning experience; and financial and logistical requirements may not be met within expected time frames. This chapter will help you anticipate and circumvent possible “failures,” strategically problem-solve and confront issues, and persevere in the process irrespective of the odds for “success.”

*Chapter 8 Expanding Horizons: New Views of Course Concepts*

Identifying and understanding the relationship between course content and service-learning experiences

is often the most challenging aspect of community-based experiences. This chapter will provide you with critical leverage points and strategies for connecting cognitive theoretical material with your concrete experiential realities. The goal is to give you insights into how conceptual models and the content of various academic fields can better inform practice in the community. In addition, you will also learn how “real-life” situations and case studies can serve to add to our academic knowledge base about how to address community challenges and issues.

#### **Part Four: Assessing the Engagement Effort**

The goal of part four (chapters 9 and 10) is to assist you with evaluating the results of your community-based engagement. Did your efforts with the community actually make a difference to that community and its stakeholders? As for yourself, what skills, knowledge, and values did you gain in the process of connecting with the community? How might you leverage this learning in future efforts to make positive change in your community?

##### *Chapter 9 Beyond a Grade: Are We Making a Difference? The Benefits and Challenges of Evaluating the Impact of Learning through Serving*

There are a number of aspects to consider at the end of a service-learning experience. This chapter focuses

on how to determine whether or not your service made meaningful differences to you, your classmates, your instructor, and the community partner. Were community stakeholders positively impacted by your work? What did you learn that is directly connected to your academic major? Was positive change realized? Included in this chapter is a number of rubrics and strategies to assist you in evaluating the multiple impacts of this college–community relationship.

##### *Chapter 10 Looking Back, Looking Forward: Where Do You Go from Here?*

The final chapter asks you to reflect in a holistic manner on your learning process. You will re-examine who you were when you began the service experience, who you have become, and how you leave this experience poised to act again in the service of the common good.

We believe this book will prove to be a valuable resource to you, your classmates, and your instructor in enriching your insights from learning through serving. What you will read here has been informed by the experiences of many persons. We extend sincere thanks to our scholar-colleagues at Portland State University who collaborated in the writing and preparation of the manuscript. We are greatly indebted to them for sharing their experiential insights and wisdom. And to our students—the best teachers we have had—we offer our gratitude and respect.



## **PART ONE**

# **Understanding the *Learning-through-Serving* Proposition**

The goal of part one is to prepare you for the experience of learning through serving. Some students begin their service-learning courses already understanding the foundations for this type of classroom-community experience through their own personal histories of volunteering and engaged citizenship. For others of you, the experience may be unfamiliar, untested territory. Chapters 1–3 will provide you with the steps for connecting yourself to the community and offer suggestions for how you might begin to experience yourself as a collaborator in learning through serving.

### **KEY SYMBOLS**

- ★★ Exercises of utmost importance to complete (working either on your own or in a group)
- 💡 Optional exercises (strategies for gaining deeper insights into the issues)
- ❓ Exercises that provide further resources and information in your quest for understanding community problem solving and change