

# SERVICE-LEARNING: RELEVANCE AND MEANING

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## ABSTRACT

*Institutions of higher education have multiple purposes. These purposes focus mainly on teaching (learning), research, and community service, but it is believed that more attention and resources should be turned to the compelling needs of the contemporary society. Therefore the growing urgency for Higher Education Institutions to become more involved and a more vigorous partner in addressing our most pressing social and economic community problems. The belief is that this involvement and partnership can be brought about through service-learning (SL), a community and Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP), introduced by the Joint Education Trust (JET) in 1998. This article reflects on the development and implementation of a service-learning module in Human Resource Practices at the Central University of Technology, Free State to not only support the Free State Development Plan, but also to address both curriculum and community needs.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Free State Development Plan (Executive summary of the Free State Development Plan, 2001:3) is to work effectively with all stakeholders to serve the people of the Free State through:

- Enhancing economic development and job creation, and
- investing in the development of people of the province.

Some of the key elements driving this mission are:

- To create wealth and reduce poverty, and
- developing and empowering people.

One key strategy from the Free State Development Plan, to enhance economic development and job creation, is to promote the creation and expansion of Small, Medium and Macro Enterprises. Partnerships are suggested to achieve this, as well as training in business skills and entrepreneurship.

Apart from the fact that the development of the CHESP module was influenced by the CUT, it inevitably was also influenced by the Free State Development Plan and more so the needs within the province.

The Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (DoE), a Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, specifically refers to the role of community service in transforming the higher education system in South Africa. The White Paper postulates “the growing interest in community service programmes” and

gives support for “the feasibility studies and pilot programmes which explore the potential of community service in higher education” as a way to address the reconstruction and development of the South African society and the subsequent transformation of higher education in relation to societal needs. (Lazarus, 2001:1)

With the White Paper as foundation, the Joint Education Trust (JET), in partnership with the Ford and Kellogg Foundations, launched the Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) initiative in 1998. The aim of CHESP (Lazarus, 2001:1) is to contribute to the reconstruction and development of South African civil society through the development and promotion of socially responsive ‘models’ for higher education. Central to these ‘models’ is the development of partnerships between communities, higher education institutions, and the public, private, and NGO sectors. The purposes of these partnerships are: community empowerment and development, transformation of the higher education system in relation to community needs, and enhancing service delivery to previously underserved communities (JET, 1999).

The service-learning module in Human Resource Practices strives to address these needs through module design and skilled learners that have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to establish a sense of business, entrepreneurship and small business development among a local community group.

## **2. DEFINING THE CONCEPT**

Bringle and Hatcher (1995:112) defines service learning (SL) as a “course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students:

- Participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and
- reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Service-learning furthermore seeks to engage individuals in activities that combine both community service and academic learning (Furco, 2002:25).

In trying to describe SL, academics very often relate the notion to other more familiar notions such as experiential learning, co-operative education and work-based learning. The distinguishing factor, however, between these more familiar concepts and SL, is that SL essentially is an experiential education approach in which students receive academic credit for performing community service. SL is closely related to volunteer service and internships, but may be distinguished from these practices because it is mainly designed to benefit the provider of the service and the community being served, equally. (Mouton and Wildschut, 2002:9)

SL is furthermore regarded as an academic enterprise, and deliberately integrates community service actions with education objectives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995:85). SL may also be regarded as a teaching method that brings community service and academic instruction together through focusing on critical thinking, problem-solving and civic responsibility.

Rosenberg (2000:68) assumes that students are not being empowered in the traditional classroom; rather, they are actually separated from the means of empowerment. The problem of empowerment appears to be related to the separation of an 'unreal' world of education from a real-world context.

Forman and Wilkinson (1997:43) also suggest that traditional education separates students from participation in public life and in fact does not give them the skills and knowledge they need for such participation.

In all of these cases, service-learning is a way to overcome separation by means of integration and engagement. Concerning integration and engagement, service learning unites research, teaching and service; combined community work with classroom instruction; and prepares students to participate in public life, thus integrating theory and practice.

The main intention of service learning, therefore, is to ensure that academic study is integrated with the larger public life, generally regarded as life outside the classroom.

Wiegert (1998:5) suggests that at least six key elements, taken together, help differentiate service learning from voluntarism, community service, and other forms of experiential education.

**On the community side:**

- a) The student provides some meaningful service (work).
- b) This service meets a need or goal.
- c) This goal or need is defined by a community (or some of its members).

**On the campus side:**

- a) The service provided by the student flows from and into course objective.
- b) It is integrated into the course by means of assignments that require some form of reflection on the service in light of course objectives.
- c) The assignment is assessed and evaluated accordingly.

### **3. REWARDS OF SERVICE LEARNING**

Wiegert (1998:5) poses the question that, given the formidable challenges presented by service learning, why should facilitators take on the hard work of

incorporating service-learning into their courses? Numerous rewards derived from the incorporation of service-learning into course work answer this question.

First, there is the joy that academic service learning provides. It can contribute to the renewal of the love of teaching that draws so many into higher education in the first place. Teaching and learning should after all make a difference - for students, for the partners, and ultimately, for the country.

Service learning not only makes that desire real again but also offers a way of effecting it. As one learner reflected in her post-implementation questionnaire "I gained the ability to present materials to people like a lecturer and the ability to be positive about what I know and believe it is enough, correct and efficient".

Second, because service learning crosses so many boundaries, it offers new opportunities to think more consciously and more creatively about relationships, including those of faculty and student, disciplinary and interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary knowledge, campus and community.

Third, because service learning is an evolving field in the South African context those who enter it have the opportunity to contribute to its development. As far back as the 1980s, SL has been a point of discussion in the USA, with the main focus point of how it could address educational concerns. In Boyer's 1987 publication of *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* he then maintained the "today's undergraduates urgently need to see the relationship between what they learn and how to live." The recommendation was further made that every student complete a service project – involving volunteer work in the community or at the college, with the objective to help students see that they are not only autonomous individuals but also members of a larger community to which they are accountable.

Fourth, because service learning calls for a link between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in a community, it offers a vehicle to faculty, students, and community partners for thinking and responding in new, collaborative ways to the critical issues that confront our local and global worlds.

In short, service learning offers one avenue for rethinking and re-imagining the whats, whys, and for whoms of higher education.

#### **4. THE PROCESS**

##### **4.1 Background to the module: Human Resource practices**

The programme Human Resource Management was targeted during 2003 as one of six pilot modules for service-learning at CUT. The subject HRM 3 was then specifically indicated to comprise this module.

As SL is based on a triad relationship, comprising learners, a service provider and a designated community; MUCPP (Mangaung Community Partnership Project) seated in Mangaung Township was selected as representative for the designated community. MUCPP is a community centre established for partnerships and well equipped to host such events.

The Department of Labour of the Free State was selected as service provider, but after numerous attempts, red tape and other problems experienced, it was decided to liaise with MUCPP only in the planning and implementation of the module.

The rationale for this module in HR practices was derived from numerous discussions with representatives from MUCPP, representative community members, a mentor of the SA Board for Personnel Practitioners, learners and the HR program head.

After these discussions it became evident that the HRM 3 subject in its current form would not address the community needs that emerged from the discussions. It was established that there was a strong need among community members for the acquiring of entrepreneurial skills for the purpose of small business development within the community.

Based on these identified needs, it was decided to implement the SL module as a program based module and not subject-based module. It is believed that the student, as well as the community would benefit from this, as this combination of HRM, entrepreneurship and small business development would marry the main outcomes of the HRM program (comprising HRM and Business Management as main subjects) and the most pressing community needs as identified by the designated community itself.

Against this backdrop of program outcomes, learning objectives and community needs the module was developed. The module, furthermore, had to coincided with the three-fold purpose of service-learning.

#### *Academic purpose*

Development of student competence especially in the following areas:

- Enhancing economic development and job creation
- Investing in the development of people of the province
- Improving knowledge, abilities and skills in community business thinking
- Problem solving
- Communication (skills with all walks of life)
- Compassion
- Broaden mindsets
- Motivation and self development

*To address a community need:*

The module was developed with themes that directly linked to identified community needs as indicated by participating parties. It was however not possible to meet all the identified needs and therefore an assessment was made to determine those needs that would coincide with the Free State Development Plan, as this plan is based on the identified regional needs.

*To support the Free State Development plan*

There is much to be done in developing educational levels needed for improved livelihood and development. The key strategies used included:

- Enhancing economic development and job creation
- Investing in the development of people of the province

Learner and community member development was an important consideration and action learning was applied as learners and community members were faced with real-life problems for which they had to generate real-life solutions (Nel *et.al.* 2004:450).

The use of action learning was found to be extremely valuable in the service-learning process, as some of the characteristics of it related so well with the foundation of service-learning. These include:

- Project based
- For real
- Learner driven
- A social process
- High visibility
- Time-oriented

#### 4.2 Module development

The module was developed with themes that directly linked to identified community needs, curriculum prerequisites and strategies of the Free State Development Plan.

The identified themes were as follow:

- An introduction to HRM
- The human being as employee (personality, the psychological contract, motivation, learning, self management, discipline skills and leadership)
- Career planning
- Entrepreneurship

- The org as a system and different structures
- Identifying a feasible small business idea
- The marketing plan
- General management
- HR policies, practices and legislation

The main issue has been to design a module that would be for the common good of both the CUT learners and the designated community.

#### 4.3 Learner profile

From a group of 65 registered Human Resources Management III students, a group of 22 was to be selected for participation in the SL module.

One of the crucial factors for participation was that the participating students had to be full time, as part time students could not be accommodated. This left me with a group of 42 full time students.

The following criteria were then used to obtain the 22 students needed for the module.

- The students had to have both their main subject, Human Resources Management and Business Management on a third year level
- They had to be full third year
- The average for both these main subjects had to be above 60%

Academic records for all 42 students were requested and from that the best 22 candidates were selected to participate in the service-learning module.

#### 4.4 Community Profile

Prerequisites for participating community members included:

- Focus on the Mangaung township community
- At least a Grade 10 level education
- Interest in people
- Interest in business (starting own business and working in a business)
- Only 35 community members could be accommodated

The rationale for these prerequisites was that greater community engagement could be established where learners could facilitate knowledge to community members with a common interest in the material that had to be conveyed.

Literacy was furthermore a priority as engagement could be disrupted by communication gaps and the inability to read and write.

The belief was also that engagement would furthermore be strengthened through language and working with both a culturally diverse student and community group made a basic literacy level (in English) inevitable and essential for the successful implementation and facilitation of this module.

As this was a pilot run, it was decided to use a small group of community members, both for the learners' sake and administration purposes.

#### 4.5 Implementation

Learning guides were prepared for both the SL learners and the community members. The learners' guide encompassed information about the service-learning concept, the rewards of service-learning, the role of the learner, the nine identified modules, the outcomes of each module, literature and evaluation to take place after the completion of each module.

The community guides included a brief introduction, background and purpose of service-learning, the role of community members and what they can expect to learn and achieve at the end of each theme.

All learners had to complete a pre-implementation questionnaire designed by CHESP to determine learner knowledge on service-learning prior to the implementation of the module.

For a period of 14 weeks the SL learners conducted weekly sessions at MUCPP. A briefing and reflection session was held after each session where the work for the following week was discussed. Learners were also given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences from the previous session, from both an academic and personal point of view. Learners were then provided with material and guidelines for the conduct of the consecutive theme.

The learners furthermore had to submit a written report of the previous day's experience, problems encountered and any other issues.

Derived from these sessions was definitely a greater sense of social responsibility among students as well as a greater feeling of empathy towards community needs. Learners furthermore, throughout the module displayed enthusiasm in terms of the transfer and application of theoretical and practical knowledge gained from the traditional classroom setup.

Learners also progressively displayed greater confidence in their knowledge, working with others and addressing issues of cultural diversity.

One major benefit derived from this engagement, as indicated by both the learners and the community members was the reciprocity of knowledge sharing.



Both groups indicated that they learnt a lot from the other, not only academically but also in terms of needs, sense of creativity and innovative thinking.

After the completion of the module a CHESP post-implementation questionnaire was administered in order to measure the experiences of learners during the conduct of the service-learning module.

Valuable information was derived from these questionnaires, especially concerning their notion about service-learning as a new approach to establish greater involvement between institutions for higher education and their respective communities.

In the beginning a few learners were clearly disillusioned as to the purpose of service-learning and indicated that it was a one-way exchange of knowledge, flowing from the learner to the community member(s).

The majority, however indicated that service-learning is a reciprocal process as evident in statements by some of the learners below:

” Providing or giving my knowledge to the community and at the same time learn something from that community.”

“The working relationship of the community and learners/students to help them share knowledge and ideas with one another.”

“The service you provide to the community at the same time the service you acquire from the community, exchange of service.”

It was evident that a substantial amount of growth in terms of aspects like confidence, teaching skills and communication abilities took place during the service-learning process. Learners indicated in the pre-implementation questionnaires that they experience uncertainty about their own abilities to communicate and teach members of the community. They subsequently indicated in the post-implementation questionnaires that they coped well with the challenges of the module and that they had more confidence in their own ability to apply knowledge.

A common theme throughout the post-implementation questionnaires was that the learners believed that the module should be presented over a full academic year and that a semester rendered too little time to significantly contribute to community learning with regards to HR practices. All learners commented positively on the module material and believed that it was of such a nature as to actually teach community members about entrepreneurship, small business development, HR practices and more so, the application of this knowledge within the community.

The learners furthermore indicated that knowledge from other subjects in the HR programme assisted them in the exchange of information with the community. This was then also the main reason why this service-learning module was designed not as a subject specific module, but as a programme specific module. I do believe that isolating a specific subject for service learning purposes will not enhance the integration of knowledge and that the exit level outcomes of an academic programme should serve as the ultimate guidelines for the development of a service-learning module.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Kezar and Rhoads (2001:150) maintain that the recent growth and interest in service-learning may be interpreted as a response to three general critiques levelled at academe: lack of curricular relevance, lack of faculty commitment to teaching, and lack of institutional (and faculty) responsiveness to the larger public good.

There are many ways from the Higher Education point of view to become more engaged in and responsive to community needs.

But, as Bringle and Hatcher (2002:513) contend – the most meaningful way to build campus – community partnerships is through service-learning as it encompasses the most central part of the mission of Higher Education, teaching and learning.

SL *per se*, if approached, planned and facilitated in such a fashion as to address community needs and marrying the curriculum with these needs will lead to greater engagement between Higher Education and the community. This engagement will in turn support some key strategies of the Free State Development Plan. When these elements are in place, the impacts of curriculum-based service-learning will go far beyond those of traditional community service and volunteering. Service-learning combines academic and civic learning to engage students hands-on in the real-world. This combination – not to mention the incentive to get out of class – is what makes service learning such a powerful tool and teaching strategy.

SL in this sense would furthermore promote the common good of reciprocal learning between an institution of Higher Education, the community it sets out to serve and the service sector within the designated SL field.

More active involvement of the service sector in the Free State is necessary, not only for the success of the SL module, but also to improve practice and how to target funds to best promote the development of students and communities. It is believed that through this involvement, sustainability of the module will be enhanced.

It is, however, not yet clear that the SL module will be capable of sustaining itself after the CHESP grants end and further research in this regard needs to be done.

In this regard, it is recommended that formal structures should be established at CUT for the support and implementation of service-learning. Participation in service-learning should be enhanced by involving more programmes in the process.

For the successful implementation of service-learning at CUT it is imperative that an institutional policy on service-learning should be bought in and an awareness should be created among all academic personnel, so that a service-learning culture, for the good of both the institution and the community it serves, can be established.

Furco (2002:61) states that the institutionalization of service-learning does not happen overnight and that the establishment of a long-term vision and strategic goals for service-learning becomes essential for providing a strong grounding and clear direction for service-learning.

When a service-learning culture has been established the CUT could, as stated by Gray *et.al.* (2000:32), promote student involvement in community service, both to encourage students to “give back” and learn from communities and to strengthen their commitment to civic involvement.

## **6. LITERATURE**

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