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Distinguishing Service Learning from Other Types of Experiential Learning

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Abstract

This discussion paper examines the lack of clarity surrounding the term *service learning* in the library and information science (LIS) literature, which frequently conflates service learning with other types of experiential learning. We suggest that the lack of distinction between service learning and other types of experiential learning confuses the practice of service-learning courses in LIS education. We attempt to mitigate this confusion by clarifying the term *service learning*. We believe that a clear understanding of service learning's unique purposes and characteristics can help LIS educators maximize the benefits of service-learning courses and improve students' educational experiences.

Keywords: service learning, experiential learning, practicum, internship, LIS education

1. Introduction

Library educators have long recognized the value of experiential learning as a means of enhancing formal classroom instruction [3]. Experiential learning may take a number of forms, including volunteerism, service learning, internships, practica, and cooperative education [6, 29]. Each of these forms is characterized by students' direct engagement in field or community work outside the classroom and in activities that are different from traditional classroom-based methods [29]. Of the various forms of experiential learning, service learning, in particular, has become a popular pedagogy in higher education since the 1990s. This popularity is evident from the growth of Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents and a proponent of

service learning in the U.S., from three member institutions in 1985 to more than 1,100 member institutions as of September 2014 [10, 19]. According to the 2012 Campus Compact member survey, 95% of responding member campuses offered service-learning courses [11]. Such data demonstrates that higher education is interested in supporting service-learning courses as a means of campus-based community engagement. Similar trends are evident in the library and information science (LIS) field, which has seen, since 2000, a number of LIS teaching faculty publish articles either on service learning or on their own experiences teaching service-learning courses [3]. In fact, service learning is well aligned with the philosophy of librarianship, a profession that is deeply service-oriented [3].

In spite of the popularity of service learning in higher education, the literature reveals misconceptions about the term service learning as well as concerns about how service learning is implemented [13, 41]. Two decades ago, Bringle and Hatcher [6] identified the misconceptions some faculty held of service learning. In particular, these scholars observed that some faculty confused service learning with other types of experiential learning such as internships, practica, cooperative education or volunteerism. It appears that this phenomenon continues to persist, and it is one to which the LIS field has not been immune. For example, recent LIS literature shows that LIS authors use the term *service learning* ambiguously or interchangeably with terms that identify other forms of experiential learning, such as internships or practica [e.g., 1, 2, 24]. Similarly, the authors who contributed to a compendium on service learning [38] use *service learning* as a catchall term to describe distinctly different experiential learning situations. The lack of clarity surrounding the term *service learning,* as well as the lack of

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distinction between service-learning and other forms of experiential learning, hinders LIS educators in developing learning goals and outcome assessments that are appropriate to service-learning courses. This, in turn, confuses the practice of service learning in LIS education. In addition, service learning is often implemented with a focus on student benefits, with little attention paid to long-term community benefits, and indeed, little knowledge of whether service-learning even benefits those being served [13, 41].

Service learning, compared to other forms of experiential learning, has unique purposes and characteristics. As we demonstrate below, it is necessary for LIS educators to have a clear understanding of service learning's purposes and characteristics in order to make the most of service-learning courses and to enhance students' educational experiences. First, service learning is intended to enhance students' academic and civic learning through a combination of traditional learning resources and community service [7, 33]. In fact, the literature shows that civic responsibility or civic engagement is established as one of the important student-learning outcomes in service-learning programs [26; 28]. Accordingly, assessment of student-learning outcomes should be based on students' demonstration of academic and civic learning through service experiences [6, 33]. If instructors are not oriented to this means of assessing student learning-outcomes, they will be unable to establish the goals and the assessment of student learning outcomes intended in a service-learning course.

Second, service learning is designed to benefit both students and community [7, 9]. Consequently, assessment of a service-learning course should include not only student outcomes, but also the community impact from the perspective of community partners Only with a clear orientation to service-learning courses that jointly benefit students and

community will instructors be able to purposefully collect data that demonstrates such joint benefit as well as the effectiveness of their courses.

Finally, community organizations work as integral partners of a service-learning course, collaborating with instructors in establishing the goals, objectives and structure of the course [40]. In other words, a service-learning course should reflect the needs of the community in order to benefit the community being served. This differs from other forms of experiential learning, specifically, practica or internships [40], which are not necessarily tailored to community needs. In addition, community partners work as co-educators of a service-learning course, assessing students' learning outcomes [28]. Without clear orientation to the integral role played by community organizations in a service-learning course, instructors will be unprepared for the loss of control they may experience in a service-learning course, nor will they be able to adjust their courses in response to community needs [30, 36].

As described above, LIS educators must have a clear understanding of the unique purposes and characteristics of a service-learning course in order to maximize student learning outcomes, community impact and the role of community partners in service-learning courses. Given the ambiguity and confusion in service-learning practice, as evident in LIS literature, we identify the need to establish a clear understanding of service learning in LIS education in order to maximize the benefits of service-learning courses, and to improve students' educational experiences. We attempt to achieve such clarity by: 1) reviewing the background service-learning literature; 2) identifying the similarities and differences between service learning and other forms of experiential learning; and 3) delineating both what service learning is and what service learning is not.

Finally, the major contribution of this paper is to clarify the confusion surrounding the term *service learning* in the LIS literature by clearly distinguishing between *service learning* from other forms of experiential learning. We believe that our clarification of service learning will help LIS educators to achieve meaningful implementation of their courses from the perspectives of the three parties (the community, student and instructor) involved.

2. Background literature

2.1. Clarifying the term service learning

Bringle and Hatcher [7] identify four important characteristics of service learning. First, service learning is an academic activity, which has intentional academic goals for the curriculum. Second, the community service activities are selected to contribute to both the educational objectives of the course and the goals or values of community partners. Third, reflection bridges the community service activities and course content. Finally, civic learning encompassing civic knowledge, skills and habits is one of the unique qualities of service learning. Based on this identification of service learning, Bringle and Hatcher [7] define service learning as "a course-based, credit bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) 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 personal values and civic responsibility" [7, p. 112]. Others define service learning as a "teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection" [40, p.5] or service

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learning as a philosophical orientation for the betterment of the local and global community [9].

Regardless of the definition, researchers identify service learning as a type of experiential learning that *balances* service with learning, and includes well-structured critical reflection [3, 9, 13, 16, 26]. Service-learning scholars, in particular, emphasize that the impact of service learning cannot be sustained without well-crafted reflection and integration with academic content [13, 29]. According to Deeley [16], critical reflection as a form of critical thinking is an essential aspect of service learning. Similarly, Moore [29] remarks that without the intensity of the reflection process, students gain little from simply performing the two activities of academic work and real-world experience at the same time.

Rather than focusing on what service learning *is*, the Morgridge Center for Public Service [32] at the University of Wisconsin-Madison clarifies *service learning* by identifying what it is *not*. Under the Morgridge framework, service learning does not include experiences which: 1) are episodic volunteer programs; 2) are non-reciprocal - only the students or only the community benefits; 3) are absent of formal reflection; and 4) involve the completion of a minimum number of service hours in order to graduate. In addition, the Morgridge Center for Public Service [30] provides four myths of academic service-learning that lead to misconceptions about service learning. These myths include the following: 1) academic service learning is the same as student community service (the myth of terminology); 2) academic service learning is a new name for internships (the myth of conceptualization); 3) experience in the community is synonymous with learning (the myth of synonymy); and 4) academic service learning is the addition of community

service to a traditional course (the myth of marginality). Given the ambiguous use of the term *service learning*, this clarification helps us better delineate what service learning actually is.

2.2. Philosophical roots and perspectives of service learning

The philosophical and theoretical roots of service learning have been intensively discussed elsewhere. Rather than offering a superfluous examination of these subjects, we will touch on them only briefly, and instead focus on a variety of service-learning perspectives that help to explicate the unique characteristics of service learning. Despite the usefulness of these perspectives, to our knowledge, they have not been well introduced in the LIS literature, and therefore would benefit from further examination here.

Scholars attribute the philosophical underpinnings of service learning to John Dewey's experiential education and democracy [15, 18, 19, 22]. Based on John Dewey's philosophy and other prominent scholars' work, David Kolb further developed experiential learning theory [23], which has been widely used as a theoretical basis for experiential educational programs including service learning [6]. Lastly, community-based research (CBR) is another source of inspiration for service learning [19]. The goals of CBR include solving the pressing problems of a community, effecting social change and enhancing social justice [42].

Much of the service-learning literature tends to be aligned with a view of service learning that promotes democracy, social change or citizens' social responsibilities [9, 13, 42]. This phenomenon stems from the view of service learning as a social movement. However, with service learning transitioning from a social movement to an academic

field (see Butin's [9] work for further understanding), educational theorists have recognized the lack of conceptual frameworks and empirical inquires [18]. This recognition has led to a call for the development of theory as a body of knowledge as well as a guide for pedagogical practice [18]. This transition also seems to contribute to the generation of multiple perspectives of service learning.

Butin [9] and Chupp and Joseph [13] discuss a variety of perspectives on service learning. First, the technical perspective views service learning as a means of enhancing student learning outcomes with respect to students' sense of personal efficacy, moral development and social responsibility [9]. This perspective is consistent with traditional service learning [13], in that the real-world context of community service provides students with better academic learning. Second, the cultural perspective views service learning as a means of supporting civic engagement, enhancing tolerance of diversity and encouraging volunteerism. Third, the political perspective examines service learning in the contexts of power relations among and across individuals, groups and institutions. From this perspective, service learning can either transform such power relations by empowering those being served or can maintain inequitable power relations by patronizing those being served [9]. Next, the social justice service-learning perspective [13] seems to be positioned between the cultural and political perspectives in that it aims to foster students' morals, civic values and cultural competency, as well as their commitments to being social change agents.

Finally, the antifoundational perspective views service learning as a strategy of questioning presumed realities. By embracing the antifoundational perspective, Butin [9] summarizes service learning as "a pedagogical practice and theoretical orientation that

provokes us to more carefully examine, rethink and reenact the visions, policies and practices of our classrooms and educational institutions" [9, p.19]. In this regard, Fish's [17] view is consistent with Butin's [9] to a certain extent. That is, Fish [17] criticizes the service-learning movement for social change in higher education. Fish stresses that academics should not confuse their obligation to interpret the world with the desire to "change" or "save the world." For Fish, performing academic work responsibly and excellently is a considerable task for any academic. Therefore, Fish urges that academics focus on pursuing the truth for which they are paid and for which they are qualified, rather than focusing on tasks that should be left to other more qualified individuals.

The first three views of service learning (technical, cultural and political) are more prevalent in the service learning literature than the last perspective (antifoundational). The prevalence of these views may be due to service learning's action-oriented nature, as well as its roots in the philosophy of John Dewey, who espoused the role of education in democracy [18]. In addition, the prevalence of the technical, cultural and political views of service learning may be related to the fact that advocates of experiential learning tend to focus more on practical matters than on theories or scholarly pursuits [29]. Nonetheless, this literature suggests that it is important to recognize a variety of perspectives involving service learning in order for educators to critically employ service learning for their educational purposes and to understand any limitations of a service learning approach to their teaching.

3. Similarities and differences of various forms of experiential learning

3.1. Volunteerism versus service learning

Bell and Carlson [5] discuss the similarities between volunteers and service learners. Both volunteers and service learners may have similar motivations, such as the wish to help others, an interest in a cause or activity, or the desire for knowledge and experience [5]. However, there are a number of differences between volunteers and service learners. First, service learners earn academic credit [6], while volunteers do not [44]. Instead, volunteers gain on-the-job experience and accumulate references for the ultimate aim of establishing themselves in the job marketplace [44]. Second, volunteers focus primarily on service, while service-learning students focus on both service and learning [44]. Thus, the letters of reference a volunteer may receive reflect the *service* they provided [44], while the academic credit a service-learning student receives reflects the *learning* that resulted from the service [43]. Third, service-learning students have curricular and learning goals, which may provide them with opportunities to participate in higher-level complex work that expands their capabilities in order to achieve such goals [5]. In contrast, volunteers', who do not have curricular or learning goals, may be restricted to task-oriented work matching their current capabilities [5]. Fourth, volunteers' service primarily benefits community organizations whereas service learning intends to benefit both students and community organizations [44]. Finally, service learners participate in a two-way transfer of knowledge in which both the community organization and the student learn, in contrast to volunteerism, in which the learning is typically one-way [8,45].

3.2. Practica and internships versus service learning

The LIS literature shows that the term *service learning* is used ambiguously or interchangeably with the two terms *internship* and *practicum.* For instance, as described

above [e.g., 1, 2, 24], some LIS authors do not differentiate between these three forms of experiential learning, instead grouping them under one category of service learning. Given the recognition of service learning's distinctive characteristics [3, 15], not distinguishing between service learning and the terms term internship and practicum adds ambiguity to the practice of service-learning courses in LIS education. We will address this ambiguity by first examining practica and internships separately in order to contrast them with each other, and then by examining them together, in order to contrast them jointly with service learning.

3.2.1. Practica

In the LIS field, the term *practicum* refers to an unpaid on-site library experience that takes place during the educational process and is professionally supervised [14, 25, 44]. In addition, the practicum is credit-earning and is part of the overall LIS curriculum rather than part of a specific course [25]. Historically referred to as *fieldwork*, the practicum has long been considered a core element of the LIS educational process [25]. In recent years, practicum has become the more common term for this experience although the term fieldwork may still be used [e.g., 44] or the two terms may also be used interchangeably [e.g., 3, 45].

Coleman [14], in a survey of practica across 60 library education programs, found not only varied titles for the practicum experience (including *internship* and *field work*), but also variances in the number of required on-site hours (ranging from 84 to 225), whether or not a practicum was optional or required, and who was responsible for coordinating the practicum. Leonard and Pontau [25] proposed a model for a "structured practicum" based on their survey of practicum supervisors and students. Their model

specified the inclusion of the following elements: 1) course objective(s); 2) defined job duties for the student; 3) specific student learning goals; 4) course readings; 5) completion of a special project; and 6) involvement of supervising librarians who also acted as mentors. In fact, many of these practicum elements are also characteristic of internships [34], as described below.

3.2.2. Internships

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) [34], an internship is a form of experiential learning that allows students to gain experience in a professional setting, enabling them to develop new professional skills in the fields they are considering for career paths. An internship offers students training and supervision that enhances learning. NACE provides a list of criteria for legitimate internships, including that: 1) the experience must be an extension of classroom learning; 2) the knowledge or skills obtained must be transferable to other employment settings; 3) there must be a job description with desired qualifications and a defined timeframe; 4) there are clear learning objectives linked to the professional goals of the student's academic coursework; 5) an expert with a professional background supervises the student and provides routine feedback; and 6) the host employer must provide resources, equipment and facilities that support learning objectives.

In addition, Moore [29] discusses a range of different internships. These include a freestanding activity not connected to a classroom, an experiential equivalent of an independent study, an add-on to a classroom course and an internship without school credit that can be done in some organizational settings. An internship may or may not be

for academic credit but most programs that are credit-bearing require some form of formal reflection [29].

Although internships may or may not be paid [34], paid internships in the LIS field appear to be in the minority, or at least mention of payment is omitted. Only Witbooi [44], in an analysis of the various forms of experiential learning in the LIS program at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, mentions paid internships. Witbooi also notes that this particular internship model allowed students to work independently or under supervision. This contrasts with NACE's definition of internships, which calls for professional supervision, as well as with practica, which, as stated above, are also professionally supervised.

3.2.3. Practica versus internships

Certain fields, such as counseling and clinical psychology, tend to distinguish the terms between practicum and internship [20, 21]. In these fields, a practicum refers to a supervised clinical experience in which a student develops basic professional skills, while an internship is a post-practicum experience in which the student obtains practical and professional skills in a work setting. A practicum tends to require fewer hours and fewer direct client contact hours than an internship. In addition, a practicum is completed prior to an internship. In other words, a practicum is sometimes considered as a "pre-internship" [21].

In contrast, the LIS field does not always distinguish the terms *internship* and *practicum*. Instead, the two terms are inconsistently or interchangeably used. For example, Coleman [14], in a 1989 survey of practica in library education programs, included all types of supervised on-site practical experience, whether the individual

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programs referred to it as fieldwork, internship or practicum. More recently, Sargent, Becker and Klingberg [39] describe the internship and practicum at their institution as equivalent except that the practicum allows the student to earn academic credit. However, their distinction is inconsistent with other evidence showing that an LIS credit-bearing internship course exists [e.g., 15] and an internship may or may not be for academic credit [29].

On the other hand, some LIS authors do distinguish the terms *internship* and *practicum*. For example, Leonard and Pontau [25] describe an internship as a post-graduate experience, or one reserved for experienced librarians, while a practicum was seen to occur during the LIS educational process. Another distinction that emerges between these two terms is that practica focus on the practice of classroom-learned skills and tools in order to prepare for a profession [37, 44], while internships focus more specifically on career development [12. 37]. As Riddle describes, practica serve as a "laboratory" to test class-learned concepts, while internships are "career and job sampling opportunities" [37, p.72]. Witbooi [44] also notes that organizations view internships as a trial period, or a "low-cost way to source good future employees without offering them a full-time position from the start" [44, p.93]. Taken all together, however, these are subtle distinctions and therefore it is not surprising that LIS scholars use these terms interchangeably. Even scholars writing specifically on the topic of practica, for example, vacillate between calling the educational experience a practicum and an internship within the same article [e.g., 25, 35]. Owing to these rather fine distinctions, we will treat practica and internships as alike in the next section, in order to contrast them jointly with service learning.

3.2.4. Practica and internships versus service learning

Both practica and internships share certain characteristics with service learning in that field experience and learning objectives are linked to the student's academic coursework and classroom learning. However, there are a number of differences between practica/internships and service learning. First, practica and typical internships are stand-alone experiences while service learning is course-embedded [3]. Second, practica and internships are designed to develop pre-professional skills before students enter their profession [26, 43], while service learning has intentional goals of developing civic skills and dispositions in students [4, 26, 43]. According to Maccio and Voorhies [26], service learning offers what practica and internships do not. That is, service learning promotes civic engagement among students and encourages critical reflection on their experiences. In addition, service learning encourages students to view how they and community partners are positioned in a larger social context. Third, service learning may or may not involve activities that are skill-based [6, 29], in contrast to practica and internships, which involve skill-based activities designed to prepare one for a profession [6]. Fourth, practica and internships intend to primarily benefit students and focus on learning [29, 31, 44] despite certain benefits for a hosting organization as a potential employer [44]. In contrast, service learning intends to benefit both students and the community while striking a balance between service and learning [44]. Fifth, the goals and objectives, as well as the structure of a service-learning course are collaboratively developed with community partners. Put differently, community organizations work as integral partners of a course or curriculum, which differs sharply from field studies or internships [40].

Similarly, unlike in practica, the role of the student in a service-learning course is determined by the needs of the community not the student's learning goals [36].

4. What service learning is and what service learning is not

Based on the above literature, we define service-learning as a form of credit-bearing experiential learning in which students participate in service activities in a community setting with the intent to mutually benefit both the provider and recipient of service, while maintaining a balance between service and learning. In addition, students regularly reflect upon how their service activities connect with course contents as an intentional means of achieving both academic and civic learning or developing critical thinking skills.

In addition, we also identify what service learning is *not*, in order to distinguish service learning from other types of experiential learning, and to clarify service learning for LIS education. To that end, we contend that service learning does not include experiential learning forms in which: 1) the main goal is the development of practical professional skills before students enter a profession; 2) voluntary community service work is not integrated into the curriculum; 3) students' roles are determined primarily by their learning goals; 4) there is no formal and regular reflection on the connections between service activities and course contents; and 5) students perform a field project for an organization or community in a traditional course without formal reflection.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to establish a clear understanding of service learning for LIS education by differentiating service learning from other types of experiential learning. Based on the literature, we identify a number of core characteristics

of service learning, which can be used as a common ground for a service-learning course in LIS education. These characteristics include the following: 1) service learning is a form of credit-bearing experiential learning; 2) students participate in service activities in a community setting or for a non-profit organization; 3) the outcomes of service activities intend to be beneficial to both the provider and recipient of service; 4) there exists a balance between service and learning; 5) the objectives as well as the structure of a service-learning course are collaboratively developed with community partners as integral partners of a course; 6) students regularly reflect upon how their service activities connect with course contents; 7) a service-learning course has intentional goals of achieving both academic and civic learning or developing critical thinking skills through service; and 8) the main purpose of a service-learning course is not to obtain practical experience or pre-professional skills before students enter a profession.

The LIS literature shows that various forms of experiential learning, from service learning to internships/practica are used ambiguously or at least practiced in a mixed manner. In particular, given the evidence of some confusion between practica, internships and service learning, we find it critical for instructors to clarify whether the course is mainly designed to obtain practical experience, to achieve academic and civic learning, or to develop critical thinking through service experience. Without the instructor's clear orientation to the intended goals of a service-learning course, students may end up leaving the course without achieving its intended educational goals or without a clear understanding of why they engaged in service activities outside of the classroom.

As described above, service learning is designed to benefit both students and the community. As a result, a service-learning course should assess both student learning

outcomes and community impact from the perspective of the community partners. This unique characteristic of service learning grants community partners a distinctive role in a service-learning course. That is, community partners work as integral partners in service-learning courses, which requires that instructors be prepared to adjust their courses in response to community needs. Only with a clear orientation to the unique characteristics and purpose of service-learning courses, will LIS educators be able to make the most of service-learning courses, and in turn, maximize students' educational experiences in such courses.

Furthermore, due to the community's involvement, a service-learning course has certain complex and difficult elements. First, the academic calendar differs from the community calendar, which makes sustainable or long-term service learning difficult [27]. Second, a service-learning course requires the faculty to expend significant time and efforts in developing partnerships with the community for their courses [13, 41]. Such complexity requires the instructor to put forth additional effort in implementing a service-learning course that is successful for all three involved parties (the community, student and instructor).

Finally, it should be noted that each course or each type of experiential learning has its own intended purposes and its own merits. It is not our intention to claim that a service-learning course is more valuable than other forms of experiential learning, or even traditional courses. Nor do we suggest that a course should not be implemented in a mixed manner. Rather, we stress that it is important for an instructor to understand service learning's unique purposes and characteristics in order to achieve the intended goals of such a course, and to implement a course that all three involved parties (the

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community, student and instructor) will view as successful. We believe that the explication of the unique purposes and characteristics of service learning offered herein will allow LIS instructors to maximize the intended goals of service-learning courses while also allowing them to mitigate potential challenges. This, in turn, will ultimately enhance students' educational experience in service learning courses.

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