

No Service to Learning: “Service-Learning” Reappraised

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Mixing community service with college students’ learning is a bad idea. When service-learning was promoted in a newspaper op-ed by Dr. Robert L. Caret,¹ the president of Towson University (where I have taught for over two decades), I responded skeptically.² Dr. Caret’s follow-up letter suggested that I misunderstood service-learning.³

I argued that wrapping a veneer of learning over community service conceals the promotion of a particular social agenda, that it wastes students’ valuable time and other resources, and that its learning goal actually weakens students’ respect for the processes of social interaction that is conveyed by a good liberal education.

Like many op-eds, mine was written quickly, but I think a closer look⁴ reveals no substantive problem: service-learning attempts to promote a communitarian, anti-individualistic social agenda, and the attempt and agenda are educationally harmful.⁵

¹Robert L. Caret, “Local Students Serve as They Learn,” *Baltimore Examiner*, September 20, 2007, http://www.examiner.com/a-945060~Robert_L_Caret_Local_students_serve_as_they_learn.html.

²John B. Egger, “Service ‘Learning’ Reduces Learning,” *Baltimore Examiner*, October 2, 2007, http://www.examiner.com/a-966679~John_B_Egger_Service_learning_reduces_learning.html.

³Robert L. Caret, letter to the editor, “Service Learning Educates the Whole Person,” *Baltimore Examiner*, October 16, 2007, http://www.examiner.com/a-991706~Letters_October_16_2007.html. President Caret also kindly sent me a longer personal letter, of which the published letter was an excerpt. It is private and will not be relied upon here.

⁴Among the literature with which *AQ* readers may be familiar is Mary Prentice’s empirical study, “Service Learning and Civic Engagement,” (Spring 2007). My “socially beneficial” includes both her “personally responsible citizens” and “participatory citizens” (142). What Prentice means by her third civic-engagement category, “social reformer”—later “changed to ‘justice-oriented citizen’” (143)—is probably excluded in my conception because I suspect it refers to the socialistic concept “social justice.”

⁵A hyphen (service-learning) will designate the technique here, rather than quotation marks or “servicelearning.”

What Service-Learning Is

To an economist, all assets provide flows of services. Every landlord, employee, and investor *serves* by selling the services of land, labor, and capital, and everyone *learns*, inevitably, through on-the-job experience. But this service is the antithesis of that of service-learning, and neither is this its learning. Once we understand service-learning's concept of service, its goal for learning follows.

President Caret's op-ed defined service-learning only as "a specific teaching method that incorporates community work into the curriculum."⁶ His letter responding to me offers wording virtually identical to that of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse:⁷ "For example, students who collect trash from an urban streambed provide a service to the community as volunteers. When they collect trash from an urban streambed, analyze possible sources of pollution, share the results with the community, and suggest strategies for reducing pollution, they are engaged in service-learning."⁸ The National Service-Learning Partnership also uses the streambed example.⁹

In the academic literature of my and Caret's school, the Towson University Service-Learning Task Force defines service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development."¹⁰ What is meant by "human and community needs" is left as an exercise for the reader, but they do not include those met by the labor services of the student who is a clerk at Wal-Mart.¹¹

⁶Caret, "Local Students Serve as They Learn."

⁷See http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php: "For example, if school students collect trash out of an urban streambed, they are providing a service to the community as volunteers; a service that is highly valued and important. When school students collect trash from an urban streambed, then analyze what they found and possible sources so they can share the results with residents of the neighborhood along with suggestions for reducing pollution, they are engaging in service-learning."

⁸Caret, "Service Learning Educates the Whole Person."

⁹See http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=SL_index.

¹⁰See <http://www.towson.edu/studentaffairs/civicengagement/ServiceLearning.asp>. There are many similarly worded statements elsewhere in the service-learning literature.

¹¹A hint of the subtlety of service-learning terminology is offered by pioneer Robert Sigmon's distinctions among "service-LEARNING," "SERVICE-learning," and others, cited in the entry on "Service-learning" on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_learning.

The attribute that makes paid employment different from service-learning’s “service” is not that it is paid, but that its intended beneficiary is the student himself. Qualifying service is to be “community service” directed toward the “greater good.” Phrases describing service include “meets identified community needs,”¹² “meaningful community service...teach[es] civic responsibility, and strengthen[s] communities,”¹³ “meet[s] a public good,”¹⁴ “get[s] involved with their communities...[f]ostering a sense of caring for others,”¹⁵ and “acts of kindness and caring...community stewardship...civic action.”¹⁶ Specifically, it is a “volunteer” activity. I use quotes because it isn’t volunteering if it is done for course credit or as a requirement to graduate, any more than if it were done for money.¹⁷

The other-directed nature of service-learning’s service also precludes career-oriented internships. Binghamton University explains that “[u]nlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in a service-learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education,”¹⁸ and Towson University’s Handbook on Service Learning¹⁹ includes, in its list of what “service learning is not,” “a “Practicum or Internship....Such internships emphasize benefits to the student rather than the community.”²⁰ Business and public administration majors’ internships with businesses or government agencies are of this nature. Apart from the lack of a paycheck, they hardly differ from career-related part-time jobs, and there is nothing new about writing reflection papers on “skill-based” activity “within the context of professional education.” I participated in such an activity, a paid engineering co-op program, in the 1960s. Internships are mutually beneficial exchanges, with the intern’s principal goal being the betterment of his or her own life. That’s what disqualifies them from the “service” of service-learning—and their valuable on-the-job experiences from its “learning.”

¹²See <http://www.binghamton.edu/home/academic/types.html>.

¹³See http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php.

¹⁴See <http://www.compact.org/syllabi/syllabi-index.php>.

¹⁵See http://www.learnandserve.gov/about/service_learning/index.asp.

¹⁶See http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=SL_index.

¹⁷Similarly, referring to the United States Army as “volunteer” may distinguish it from a drafted force, but if that’s how “volunteer” is used, then every employee (including the college professor and administrator) is a volunteer.

¹⁸<http://www.binghamton.edu/home/academic/types.html>.

¹⁹See <http://www.towson.edu/itrow/2%20-%20Major-Degree%20Requirements/ITROWServiceLearningHandbook.asp>.

²⁰See <http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/Whatisnotservicelearning.asp>.

On the other end of the spectrum, pure volunteer work (“volunteerism”) passes the other-directed test, but is not service-learning because it lacks “learning.” Binghamton University explains that “[u]nlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience,”²¹ and Towson that it is not “principally a “volunteer or community service program were [*sic*]...the primary or sole beneficiary is the service recipient.”²² Activities akin to career internships are excluded from service-learning by their lack of service, and volunteerism by its lack of learning.

Many assignments have both volunteer and career-internship attributes. Binghamton’s examples include: “Accounting class—students develop accounting systems for non-profit organizations” and “Chemistry—students lead an after-school Chemistry Club for junior high school students.”²³ But improved knowledge of accounting or chemistry are inner-directed internship goals; only these tasks’ volunteer aspects, and whatever learning arises from those aspects, are essentially service-learning.

Internships are valuable in career-oriented programs, but they differ from the service and learning promoted by service-learning. Not differentiating between these types of service (vocational training and volunteer tasks) has the effect—intended or not—of surreptitiously transferring the educational validity of the former to the latter, or lending what service-learning advocates typically consider the latter’s altruistic feel-good aura to the former. This is distressing for what it suggests about professors’ and administrators’ attitude toward the moral status of career-oriented actions of private businesses and their employees. The notion that charity is moral, but self-interested behavior that respects others’ rights is something for which one must atone, demonstrates a misunderstanding of the moral foundations of a free society. This is part of the reason for my deep aversion to service-learning.

An emphatic statement of “service” is in service-learning professional John W. Eby’s 1998 essay “Why Service-Learning Is Bad.”²⁴ If it focuses on the student’s learning, Eby writes, “service can be subverted and become a ‘means to an end’ rather than an end in itself”; for the same reason, “[s]ervice-learning tends to skew programs toward the needs of students

²¹<http://www.binghamton.edu/home/academic/types.html>.

²²<http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/Whatisnotservicelearning.asp>.

²³<http://www.binghamton.edu/home/academic/types.html>.

²⁴John W. Eby, “Why Service-Learning Is Bad,” monograph (1998), available at http://www.messiah.edu/external_programs/agape/servicelearning/articles/wrongsvc.pdf.

rather toward the needs of communities. It [*sic*] often ameliorative rather than oriented toward change of social structures."²⁵ To Eby, the goal of the student's career and self-improvement is not merely secondary but a "subversion" of service-learning. He notes that "[m]ost service-learning programs include volunteer service,"²⁶ but his theme is that service-learning's "service" is student labor directed not at his or her own self-improvement but at others' needs, the kind of activity most people would call "volunteering."

For a definition of service, the literature relies primarily on examples, but some inferences seem reasonable. As much as an economist may insist that the Wal-Mart clerk provides "community service" and that businesses profit to the extent to which they implement "care for others" (their customers), this is not service-learning's service because their motive is self-interest, with service to others merely a means; its individualism is anathema to service-learning. Service-learning's service, most clearly expressed by Eby, is a charitable contribution of labor to the community, with payment neither in money nor in career-skill experience but in some other form of learning that is *essentially* different from that of a student's internship.²⁷

What the student is expected to *learn* from service-learning should be consistent with its view of service, and I think it is. Most writers (though perhaps not Eby) consider learning its primary goal, and focus on how it is reported. Reflection and discussion are emphasized: "[s]tructured opportunities are created to think, talk, and write about the service experience,"²⁸ for example, and "[h]arvesting academic and/or civic learning from a community service experience."²⁹ These tell nothing about the nature of the hoped-for learning.³⁰

If internship-like tasks like the accounting student's do not qualify as service, one must ask what learning emerges from the volunteer-like aspects

²⁵Ibid., 2, 4.

²⁶Ibid., 4.

²⁷The streambed example, too, can be a mix of "volunteer" and career-focused activities. If the student of geography or ecology observes the effect of stream bank vegetation on erosion while picking up old tires and tin cans, he furthers his understanding of his subject. But an old-fashioned field trip, long a staple of botany and other courses, would do the same. It is only the act of picking up the trash that is "volunteer" and truly unique to the "service" part of service-learning.

²⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_learning.

²⁹<http://www.towson.edu/itrow/2%20-%20Major-Degree%20Requirements/ITROWServiceLearningHandbook.asp>.

³⁰This is not to deny, of course, that the process of setting down one's thoughts in an organized, formal manner, whether in the course of writing or carefully composing an oral address, can contribute immensely to one's learning. Whether informal group discussions and reflection papers offer this contribution is another matter.

of assignments. What does the student learn at streamside, not by studying erosion and analyzing samples, but by picking up the trash? What does the accounting student learn at the nonprofit, not by working on the books, but simply by donating labor to people she otherwise might not have met?

Caret's op-ed suggests what he seeks from service-learning. Fellow college presidents lament that "students seem to lack civility or a traditional work ethic...[and that they are] too self-absorbed and have lost sight of the greater good."³¹ Disagreeing, he suggests that service-learning *demonstrates* civility, work ethic, a sense of "the greater good," and a lack of self-absorption, and his advocacy implies that he believes it *promotes* these virtues.³² But work ethic and civility are readily taught and demonstrated in other ways, so the goals unique to Caret's view of service-learning are "a sense of the greater good" and a lack of "self-absorption."

The Towson Handbook on Service Learning states that "[a]cademic service-learning, illustrated by student community service integrated into an academic course, utilizes the service experience as a course 'text' for both academic learning and civic learning."³³ If the essence of service-learning's service is its volunteer aspect, its essential learning must be "civic learning." The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse's "self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content"³⁴ is so general that it is devoid of meaning. Binghamton University describes a goal of "further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility."³⁵ Wikipedia explains that service-learning "integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, encourage lifelong civic engagement, and strengthen communities for the common good."³⁶

³¹Caret, "Local Students Serve as They Learn."

³²In an independent Towson University student newspaper interview, Caret explains his plan to "require every student to participate" in service-learning by 2010: Brian Stelter, "Caret Evaluates TU's Progress toward 2010: President's Campus Report Card 'Tells Us What We've Done'; Hopes to Keep Towson on Track," *The Towerlight*, February 2, 2006, <http://media.www.thetowerlight.com/media/storage/paper957/news/2006/02/02/News/Caret.Evaluates.Tus.Progress.Toward.2010-2203648.shtml>.

³³<http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/WhatisServiceLearning.asp>.

³⁴http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php#what.

³⁵<http://www.binghamton.edu/home/academic/types.html>.

³⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_learning.

Eby's thoughtful essay distinguished "intentional and serendipitous" learning.³⁷ The value of serendipitous learning is undeniable, as on-the-job training and experience confronting ethical challenges demonstrate. Self-knowledge of how one acts in the face of conflicting values comes only through experience; indeed, character is shaped by one's actions in such situations. But serendipitous learning related to one's career, like an economics student's observation of the everyday tradeoffs made by a family with one minimum-wage income, is an aspect of internship service, and not what service-learning's learning is.

The intentional learning related to service-learning's service must arise from the very act of volunteering services to others. It is the promotion of a sense of community, a way "to encourage and foster active citizenship,"³⁸ "to develop what is often called a 'sociological imagination,' that is the ability to see patterns, structures and social context,"³⁹ "an enhanced sense of civic responsibility,"⁴⁰ a "sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community."⁴¹ This is not simply practical demonstration of the value of cooperating with others, which everyday economic transactions illustrate. It is also not intellectually learning the value of a social structure that facilitates social cooperation. The specific meaning of the intentional learning sought by service-learning is illustrated by Eby's phrase: "increases in empathy for persons in need."⁴²

This sense of community, a feeling that society is a family and that individuals owe to all of its members feelings and actions similar to those appropriate to one's actual family, appears to be the intentional learning sought by service-learning. Eby is emphatic in criticizing individualistic attitudes and in promoting service-learning as an antidote. "A Somali proverb," he writes, "states that the presence of a man in a village who is too poor to own a camel is an embarrassment to the entire village. In America the village blames the man for his poverty! Unfortunately, service-learning when

³⁷Eby, 7.

³⁸<http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/WhatisServiceLearning.asp>.

³⁹Eby, 7.

⁴⁰Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher, "A Service Learning Curriculum for Faculty," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 1995): 112–122; cited on <http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/DefinitionsofServiceLearning.asp>.

⁴¹Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges, cited on <http://www.towson.edu/itrow/6%20-%20Internship%20Opportunities/DefinitionsofServiceLearning.asp>.

⁴²Eby, 7.

it is characterized by individualistic understandings of need perpetuates this kind of individualism.”⁴³ His criticism that the student’s self-improving learning often takes precedence over community needs has already been cited. Eby cautions, though, that “need” itself must be conceived not as some kind of “deficiency” in a person or group: “The answer to need as deficiency is an outside person whose service fills the deficiency. This exaggerates the importance of the person who serves, demeans the person served and ignores resources in the community such as peers, families and community leaders. It fails to recognize the political, social and economic factors which create the need.”⁴⁴ While every thoughtful person appreciates that his position in life was shaped by circumstances outside his control, this learning goal teaches that one with ability is in no sense better than one without it. It minimizes individual responsibility and promotes a kind of leveling: knowledge, initiative, and skill make one no better than those without them.

It thus appears that the learning goal of service-learning is for the student to embrace a philosophical position that would best be identified as *socialist* or *tribal*, but that some might prefer to call *communitarian*, a reverence for the society of Eby’s Somali proverb or Senator Hillary Clinton’s African-rooted “it takes a village.”⁴⁵ Firmly opposed to the individualist philosophy of Western civilization, service-learning’s learning seeks to instill a sense of responsibility for members of society less fortunate than the student’s peers—not merely that it is good, or to one’s own long-run benefit, to help them, but that one is obligated. Philosophical arguments for this position can come from books, but the learning of service-learning is an attempt to sway the emotions of the impressionable young adult. Aiming to impart a “sense of the greater good” (greater than the individual) and to disabuse the student of “self-absorption” is the promotion of a specific political ideology. It isn’t really learning at all.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 4.

⁴⁵See the Wikipedia entry on then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_takes_a_village: “The authenticity of the proverb has been the subject of some controversy, however, as there is no evidence that the proverb genuinely originated with any African culture, although numerous proverbs from different cultures across Africa have been noted that convey similar sentiments in different ways.”

Liberal Education and Service-Learning

A perfidious aspect of service-learning is that its best-known goals seem so benevolent that no well-meaning scholar could dispute them: Civility and “empathy for others” are hard to quarrel with, and “civic responsibility” and “commitment to the community” might simply refer to an acceptance of one’s role in maintaining institutions that facilitate social cooperation. “The greater good” and “overcoming self-absorption” are more problematic, and suggest the true ideological goal of service-learning. Well-intentioned professors drawn to the technique for its contributions to civility and empathy may find themselves inadvertently contributing to these more extreme goals.

If civility were the primary goal of service-learning advocates—it was first on Caret’s list—they need look no further than the traditional liberal education. Promoting a work ethic, second on his list, is part and parcel of such an education, but it is work befitting a student: reading, thinking, and writing, not the unskilled labor of digging tires from streams or dishing out soup.

A liberal education offers courses like history, chemistry, calculus, and music appreciation that promote the student’s understanding of human nature and therefore his ability to cooperate with others in a society. In the early days of the West’s transition to liberalism, economists like Adam Smith—in his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as *The Wealth of Nations*—and other political scientists reasoned that there is no conflict between properly understood self-interest, within a moral and legal framework respecting individuals’ autonomy and rights, and a love of society. Indeed, economists maintain that an individual’s respect for society arises from self-interest, from the benefits *to one’s self* that social cooperation makes possible. In a free society, each makes himself better off by making others better off, with the strengthening of social bonds and mutual respect among people an unintended but inevitable consequence.

An education that promotes civility has, therefore, nothing to do with “good works,” the service part of service-learning. If students are thought to “lack civility or a traditional work ethic,” and to be “too self-absorbed” in not appreciating the importance of considering others, a liberal education that teaches the advantages of respecting others’ nature as human beings, of trading with them, and of contributing to the civic institutions on which any free society depends would remedy that.

The modern student, tragically, too often is not being taught these lessons, as liberal education is chipped away by various “studies” that promote the special interests of particular groups and denigrate the individualism of Western political philosophy. Among the consequences are disrespectful behavior that arises from students’ ignorance of the social function of morals, manners, and culture, and their widespread misunderstanding and distrust of human freedom—especially free markets. Teachers who instill these lessons do their students no favors. Their advocacy of service-learning may reflect an awareness that the very changes they have wrought in undergraduate education have rendered civility and respect for others less common. If these are truly their goals, the remedy is not service-learning, a makeshift substitute that diverts attention and resources from liberal education and reinforces *anti-liberal* attitudes. It is a recommitment to true liberal education.

Civility, liberal education teaches, requires the respectful treatment of strangers because of their nature as fellow human beings, but it does not require giving each of them one’s money or labor. Far from losing “sight of the greater good,” it teaches that one’s civil self-interested action best furthers it. Students should, of course, not be discouraged from using leisure for activities like stream cleaning, but they should not be substitutes for academic work. The “greater good” is better furthered by development of skills in which students have a comparative advantage, in the library, lab, or classroom. They further their own interests by increasing the value of the services they are able to provide to others.

Although most economists—whose subject, after all, is based on what Smith called “self-love”—embrace the principle that enlightened self-interest promotes civility, and Caret’s letter referred to it as a “truism,” this interpretation is not universal. Certainly the kind of self-interest that is unconstrained by the proper moral and legal structure can be antisocial. Those who disagree that civility is subsumed by self-interest must treat that powerful motive as something to be reined in by morality, law, and respect for others. Civilized people, in this view, learn the virtue of acting morally and civilly, even though this is contrary to their self-interest. Certainly a liberal education can promote civility and respect in this way, but its clash with the economist’s (well, *this* economist’s) perspective is sharp. In either case, genuine learning of this lesson is not the goal of service-learning.

Service-learning’s goal may not in fact be civility and “commitment to the community” in the sense of liberal education’s understanding of human society’s contribution to the individual’s flourishing. It may, instead, be the promotion of a communitarian ethic that suppresses and denigrates the individual in favor of a group or “society” and views self-interest as a vice. From this perspective, social order can co-exist with individualism—it’s hard to deny that the West has prospered since the Enlightenment—but it is a mean social order not consistent with human beings at their best.

This position’s ethic, a guiding principle of service-learning, actually weakens respect for society. Teaching that others are morally entitled to a part of one’s life—people one does not know, may not like, and whose misfortune one had no role in creating—is a sure way to engender a sense of resentment and disdain, not benevolence, toward one’s fellow human beings. In the ethic consistent with the West’s liberal traditions, one views others benevolently because association with them can make one better off. This source of benevolence is replaced by suspicion and distrust when others’ misfortunes constitute a moral claim on one’s own life.⁴⁶ This is how the central lesson of service-learning weakens the very social fabric its supporters believe they are promoting.

Liberal education has a place for the study of socialist or communitarian ethics: in courses of philosophy, history, political science, and economics where logical reasoning deduces conclusions from underlying axioms. This is profoundly not the method of service-learning, which conceals behind a façade of learning an appeal to students’ emotions.

A university’s purpose is to train the mind. Promoting reliance on one’s emotions, even if they are supported by reason but particularly if they supplant or even contradict it, is profoundly contrary to the university’s mission. A professor can convey, in a few minutes at most, the discipline-related intellectual content of most service-learning assignments, but the “learning” at which service-learning aims with, say, a student’s hours in a soup kitchen, is not intellectual: It’s simply the emotional experience. These feelings provide no clue to the actual amelioration of poverty. Would a higher minimum wage help? How about tax laws that permit the expensing of

⁴⁶This superior-inferior relationship is suggested in Eby’s caution that students “sometimes use service-learning to make themselves feel good” while the community members to whom their service is targeted “become objects rather than participants or passive recipients rather than actors” (2–3). See also, above, his caution about interpreting “need” as “deficiency.”

capital investments? With credit-hours the real student is not accumulating in the soup kitchen, she can analyze these policy changes. That's what education is for.

But the reasoned analysis of the causes and effects of "community needs" is not the goal of service-learning. Nor is "serendipitous learning" about one's career. Service-learning seeks to exploit young students' natural sympathy for the less fortunate, relying on emotions to promote a socialist, communitarian philosophy. By attempting to substitute emotions for reason, service-learning contravenes the purpose of liberal education while chipping away at students' respect for the social order. Despite its name, service-learning does no service to learning.