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*Philosophically Speaking: Reflections of Teaching Philosophy  
with a Service-learning Component*

**Krishna Mallick<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract.** In this paper the author writes about her first experience of teaching Eastern Philosophy at the undergraduate level with a service-learning component. Many Philosophy faculty members think that a service-learning component diminishes the academic rigor in a credit-bearing course. The author argues that credit is given for learning and not service. By analyzing the relevant service-learning literature and explaining the preparations needed and the implementation process, the author argues that service learning as a pedagogical tool enhances student learning because students can make the connection between the theoretical aspect of the course and the practical experiences through their service with the partnering organization. The literature review shows that service learning is a natural bridge between character development and citizenship education. The author believes that service learning aids in the development of the character and the integrity of the students who take such courses during their undergraduate years.

Key words: Service-learning, teacher reflection, philosophy

**I.**

**Introduction**

Using the pedagogical tool of service learning offers the potential for personal and emotional development that may be difficult to accomplish through traditional classroom learning. Philosophers often think that a Philosophy course cannot be taught with service-learning component. I also was skeptical at first. That was before I signed up for the Faculty Learning Community (FLC) in Service Learning at my university, which has helped me prepare for teaching any course with service learning component.

In my teaching experience, I find that many undergraduate students are not interested in the theories written by great philosophers as these theories seem too abstract. To explain these theories, Philosophy faculty members use many examples to explain how the philosophers' views can be applied. Many Philosophy faculty members think that service learning lacks

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academic rigor or is irrelevant to the discipline of Philosophy. Some are discouraged by the anticipated logistical problems.

In this paper I intend to show that one of the principles of service-learning pedagogy is to avoid compromising academic rigor and that academic credit is given for learning, not for service. In addition, service-learning projects help in the development of good character and integrity and can make students better citizens. One of the goals of any Philosophy course is the development of students' reasoning skills through the critical analysis of philosophers' views. The Eastern Philosophy course I taught included a service-learning project (in addition to other assignments, such as in-class exams and research paper). Students were able to apply their knowledge of the Eastern religions and philosophies of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism to their service. For example, one of the students in my class said that he had a conversation with the senior citizen about both Eastern and Western religions and that reminded him about the concept of Interbeing (interconnectedness of everything within the universe) in Buddhism, as found in Thich Nhat Hahn's book that students read in this class. This opened their minds to a variety of ways to consider philosophical ideas and better enabled them to understand these ideas even if they might disagree. A student in this class questioned the Hindu belief in reincarnation. This question led to a very interesting discussion in the classroom, and in the end, she understood the concept of reincarnation though she might still disagree with it.

### **Service-Learning Overview**

At my university, service learning is defined as "A teaching methodology in which students learn through thoughtfully organized service and structured reflection tied directly to academic objectives. Service activities conducted with and meeting the needs of a community partner, foster civic responsibility and deepen academic understanding." (SSU website <http://www.salemstate.edu/18733.php>)

There are other definitions of service learning but there are certain common points that are important to the pedagogy of education. A course that incorporates service learning must provide a link between the service experience and the academic objectives of the course. The student is graded on demonstrated knowledge in connecting the service experience with course content. Most scholars of CSL (Community Service Learning) theory trace its philosophical birth to the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early-20<sup>th</sup>-century progressive educational approach that John Dewey first advocated, which was followed by William H. Kilpatrick and Paul Hanna among others. (Dewey, 1938) These CSL historians credit the progressives as the first to see the necessity of developing not only an intimate relationship between education and lived experience, but an equally intimate relationship between schools and democratic communities. Both are essential notions to supporting experiential educational practice.

Though the progressives never used the phrase "Community Service Learning," their pragmatic philosophy has remained at the core of CSL theory and practice, and they may be regarded as CSL's conceptual founders (Sheffield, 2011). It should be noted here that what Sheffield calls the pedagogy of Community Service Learning, I am referring in this paper as the pedagogy of service learning.

I refer to John Dewey's view in this article, as I believe he was one of the first philosophers to advocate CSL. According to Dewey (1938), all learning is the result of

experience, and previous experience is always present in the learner when tackling challenges. Dewey saw learning as individually constructed through a process of continuity and interaction. Each person has a continuous exposure to the world and personal experience, which creates an additive (or spiral) system of learning. One experience is built upon the next. As people experience things through their interactions in the world, they attempt to make sense of their involvement and establish a basis for growth. These interactions involve the whole person, from intellectual interactions, to affective (emotional) interactions, to sensory interactions. Thus, each person constructs a continuum of experiences as they grow, and uses these experiences as their interpretation platforms by and through which they understand every new experience. This fundamentally connects them to character development (Shumer, Lam, Laabs, 435).

In distinguishing between extracurricular community service and experiential learning opportunities for students, (e.g., clinicals, internships, co-op programs, field experiences, practica, student teaching) and service-learning experiences, Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher point out that students can actively participate in extracurricular activities through university-sponsored clubs, student service offices, and campus-based religious organization. The experiential learning opportunities focus only on extending a student's professional skills and do not emphasize the importance of service within the community and lessons of civic responsibility. But the authors say,

We [Bringle & Hatcher] view service learning as a 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. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations (Bringle & Hatcher, 222).

To teach a course with a service-learning component, the rigors of academic teaching and learning do not have to be sacrificed, provided the goals and objectives of the course are clearly stated for the students. Student's academic learning is enhanced with an integrated service-learning project as students are able to see the connection between the theories based on classroom discussion and the application of the theories to real-life situations. As it is shown in this paper, students' learning improves due to the integration of service and learning. I noticed that some students initially had a very different kind of perception of senior citizens such as they are co-dependent and are not open to younger people's ideas. However after their service work, students realized that all senior citizens are not the same. Some seniors are open to communication with younger students about religions other than their own. One student commented in her reflective journal, "My volunteer work with senior citizens taught me how helping others in need can bring peace to my own life."

Service learning also contributes to student's sense of social responsibility. This in turn, helps students to feel more engaged and to become involved in activities that support their values. Service learning projects help develop skills such as teamwork, interpersonal communication, and multicultural sensitivity that help students to become better citizens and

leaders of the community and the world. The literature shows that service learning is a natural bridge between the character development and citizenship education.

As a modern educational movement, its early founders described it as pedagogy to engage individuals in service activities dictated by the community, whereby the learning applies academic subject matter to the service. It is also a philosophy where the service is developed in collaboration with the community, where the goal is empowering those most affected by social and economic challenges. It is often delivered through academic course connections, but is effectively developed through constructivist approaches to curriculum, where the community prescribed needs define the subjects required for study and service (Shuman, Lam and Laabs, 430).

Service learning has been linked to both character education and citizenship (Billig, 2000; Boston, 1997; Shumer, 2002, 2003, 2004; Winings, 2002), both by connecting academic programs with community settings and contexts. “There is a simple connection between the two (character education and service learning): One cannot exist without the other. In a study of character education and service learning in Pennsylvania for three years (Shumer, 2002, 2003, 2004), one of the primary findings was that service learning was a critical component of character education” (Shumer, Lam & Laabs, 431). This article is concerned with the character education of high school students but it can be argued that similar things happen with young adult university students, too.

### **Preparation for service learning course in Philosophy**

As part of the professional development, the Center for Teaching Innovation office at my university offers a FLC (Faculty Learning Community) every year in which faculty members can participate and learn new pedagogical tools. I participated in a two-semester long Faculty Learning Community on service learning that included eight faculty members from the disciplines of Criminal Justice, Education, Occupational Therapy, Political Science, American Studies and Philosophy. We discussed the literature of service learning, how different faculty members have used or are using service-learning components in courses they taught and attended workshops on research methods and assessment every other week. In the second semester, we had to incorporate service learning in a course that we were teaching. It was exciting to find out how faculty members from so many different disciplines were using service-learning projects in their courses. One thing I realized was that one cannot just add a service-learning project to the other requirements for the course, such as, exams, papers, group presentation etc. Prior to teaching a service-learning course one must:

1. Build partnerships with the local organizations that one selects for the service-learning project. It is extremely important to get to know the organizations, to note their needs, and to determine how best to match those needs with a service learning-component. A characteristic of service learning is that one can build partnerships only when there is a mutual need that can be met while adhering to the academic demands of the course. Reciprocity is an essential element for the success of the service-learning project. Since I had only ten students, I decided to partner with one organization, the Council on Aging or Senior Citizens’ Center, in the town where my university is located.

2. Discuss the details of the service-learning project with the partner organization, such as the specific goals, how many hours of service are required, and who will be responsible for supervising the students at the organization. My goal for the service-learning component, which I shared with the Director of the Council on Aging, was for students to be able to relate the worldviews and principles of the Eastern Philosophy course to the values and beliefs of the senior citizens through their interactions. Because this was my first time teaching a course with a service-learning component, the Council on Aging Director and I decided to have students perform ten hours of service over the course of six weeks with a beginning and end date. The Director and I also discussed the expected weekly progress for students. Other instructors might require more service hours for their courses. Of the ten hours of service required, students spent seven and a half hours visiting the organization. Students spent the remaining two and a half hours in class watching a movie with the senior citizens, followed by discussion. A very specific structure with timeline for the entire service-learning component is essential as students are spending these service hours outside of the class time and many of our full time students also work full time.
3. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the three parties-- the instructor, the organization, and the student-- so that all parties are clear about their responsibilities. Each party's responsibility is spelled out from the beginning to the end of the service-learning project. Each party has to sign the MOU. Developing a MOU is not a common practice found in service-learning literature, but I recommend it strongly, as it allows the instructor to monitor how the student completes the service. If any problems arise, they are detected immediately since all three parties (instructor, partner organization, and student) have been communicating with each other. On the days when the student does service at the Council on Aging, she has to get the MOU signed by the Director. If a student does not do service during the assigned weeks, the Director communicates with me by e-mail. Then, I can contact the student with a reminder about their responsibility.
4. According to the constructivist theory of John Dewey, another important part of service-learning project is to prepare an assessment tool. Also, as Sherril B. Gelmon states, "Assessment is important, first, to articulate what has been learned for oneself.....Assessment can also provide an opportunity to stop and celebrate successes that have been achieved....Finally, assessment can help us to focus our thinking in ways that result in new insights and identify opportunities for improvement." (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon and Kerrigan, 2000, pp. 231) In my course, the service-learning project comprised about 33% of the grade for the course, which included the ten hours of service, writing two reflective journals on the service experience, and an oral presentation on the volunteer work experience and tying it with the religions and philosophies discussed in class. A research paper, three exams, and class participation determined the remaining 67% of the grade.

For the Eastern Philosophy course that I taught with a service-learning component, I prepared a questionnaire with reflection activity in preparation of the service-learning project. Students were required to answer the questionnaire on the second day of class. The purpose of

the reflection activity was to find out at the beginning of the semester where students were with regard to their perception of senior citizens, and what kinds of questions they have about the senior citizens and the service-learning project. At the end of the semester, an evaluation questionnaire with questions related to the service-learning project was given to the students. The purpose of the assessment was to measure the change in their knowledge and preconceived ideas from the reflection activity to the evaluation questionnaire on the service-learning project.

At the beginning of the second semester, students were given a reflection activity with the following questions to answer:

1. What is your perception of senior citizens in our society?
2. What are your fears about service learning project you are entering into?
3. What questions do you have about senior citizens or the project?
4. As you see it, how does this service-learning project connect with Eastern Philosophy course?
5. What do you think you might (or hope to) gain (personally, professionally) from the service-learning project?

These reflection questions helped students to prepare themselves for the service-learning project. It was interesting to find out that some of the students' fears had to do with time management. However, the majority of the students were concerned about how the senior citizens would respond to them as young adults and what the seniors thought about such Eastern religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Regarding the first question, students' perception of senior citizens, the common point that arose was that though senior citizens are a source of experience, they are not respected as much in Western society as in the East. Given that this was the first time that I taught a course with a service-learning component, and given the small size of the class (10 students), there was insufficient measurable data. However, I want to make the point that while students had fears concerning how to communicate with someone from another generation, they were generally open-minded and expected that they and the senior citizens would learn from each other. The questions asked for the reflection activity and some sample questions for the end of the semester assessment are reproduced below, with student responses in the following section.

### **Eastern Philosophy course with a service-learning component**

In the Eastern Philosophy course that I taught, the service learning project's theoretical goal was to help develop skills, capacities, sensitivities, and attitudes to understand the course material and to learn about their own interests and abilities. The theoretical goals, in addition to the other goals of the entire course, created the rigor for the course. The instructional objectives of the course were: (a) to broaden one's knowledge about Eastern philosophical views, (b) to understand how Eastern views are different from Western views, (c) to explore whether there is anything that West can learn from the East, and (d) to apply some of the Eastern concepts to our lives. The objectives of the service-learning project were: (a) to learn about real world applications of Hinduism, Buddhism Taoism and Confucianism, (b) to engage with the

community to increase the community's understanding of these religions and their real-world application, and (c) to reflect on the connections between theory and activism.

As noted earlier, students were required to complete seven and a half hours of service at the senior center. The service-learning project included serving food to the seniors, helping seniors with an ongoing painting project, and performing other chores. Each student was partnered with one senior citizen. Students communicated with their senior citizen partners about their life experience and their faith. Students were given certain guidelines to follow in terms of questions they should consider asking their senior partners. The last two and a half hours of the partnership were spent in the class where the senior citizens and the students watched a movie related to India. Following the movie, the class and their senior partners discussed the cultural and religious aspects of the movie and had a very interesting dialogue relating the film to Indian culture and Hinduism. At the end of this service-learning project, each student did an oral presentation in class in which they discussed their experience with their partners and related it to one of the religions studied. Directions were given to the students regarding the presentation.

Students also were required to write two reflective journals following the guidelines that were explained to them before they started their service. Students were given the model, developed by the Campus Opportunity Outreach League and based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle of action and reflection. Students were asked **What?** What happened? What did you observe? **So What?** Did you learn a new skill or clarify an interest? Did you hear, smell, or feel anything that surprised you? How is your experience different from what you expected? What impacts the way you view the situation **or** experience? What did you like **or** dislike about the experience? What did you learn about the people **and** the community? What are some of the pressing **needs and issues** in the community? **Now What?** What seems to be the root causes of the issue addressed? What other work is currently happening to address the issue? What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning to the Eastern religions discussed in this course? In addition, students were given more questions to consider that would relate their experience to the religions being discussed in this course. (Kolb, 1983)

Of the total of three reflective journals that students had to write for this course, the first two were on students' experiences of the service-learning project, as stated above. It was fascinating to read students' reflections since most of them, in different ways, found that the ten-hour service project gave them a better understanding of the senior citizens' perspective, some of which were different from their own grandparents. Many students had images of a senior citizen based on their own grandparents. Now, students were able to put themselves in the senior citizens' shoes and understand life experiences and beliefs, though these might be very different from their own viewpoints and beliefs. A student from another country wrote in her reflective journal, "I recognize that life is a journey that stops at many stations along the way, but at each station we are faced with different situations, which lead to various learning experiences and memorable stories."

In their reflective journals and the oral presentation, all of the students asserted that this partnership with a senior citizen and the service at the Council on Aging was a valuable experience. In the article "A Qualitative Examination of a Character Development Service Learning Project and its Impact on Internalizing Virtues in College Students," authors Janet Fox,

Kimberly Jones, Krisanna Machtmes and Melissa Cater argue that, “The reflection activities guide students toward discovering, exploring, and evaluating relationships within the course content as they encounter it in readings, lectures, discussions, and their service learning experiences.” (Fox, Jones, Machtmes, 7) It is important to note that this kind of deeper learning of the students shows that the academic rigor was not compromised. In addition to the comment of an international student in my class, another student commented, “When I talked with the senior citizens as I served them meals, I realized that they had a purpose. This made me very happy to be in their company.” Another student wrote in his reflective journal, “If I didn’t take this course, I wouldn’t have known that an elderly man who fought in the Vietnam war and grew up as a Catholic had exposure to Buddhism and talked with me about Buddhism.” To me, these comments are evidence of deeper learning that took place among some students.

At the end of the semester students were asked questions related to the service learning project and how it has or has not been a positive experience for them. In this paper I discuss some, not all, of sample questions that I asked on service learning questionnaire. For each question students had the choice of circling: disagree strongly, disagree, neutral, agree, and agree strongly. Significant responses are noted below.

1. By participating in community service I can make a meaningful contribution to the community—80% of the students circled ‘agree strongly’
2. I know what social justice is—60% of the students circled ‘agree strongly’
3. Through community service I can apply classroom knowledge in ways that solve “real-life” problems—70% of the students circled ‘agree strongly’
4. Community service takes too much time away from real class activities—60% of the students circled ‘disagree’
5. Community service activities help me understand the course material—60% of the students circled ‘agree’

Since this course with a service-learning project was a first in my department, we didn’t get the chance to assess the course in the context of the Philosophy program. All service-learning literature on assessment emphasizes the importance of assessment within the context of the program and also the institution. With my course, we have just started the process.

I like to conclude this paper with some observations from my first experience of teaching a course with service learning component. First, I have learned that the instructor does not have to give up the academic rigor of a credit-bearing course. If it is planned and structured properly, students’ learning can improve, compared to a class without a service-learning component. Second, it is important to build a network of partner organizations. This partnership can build up only when the partners’ needs are met. Reciprocity is essential to continue teaching courses with service learning component. Third, preparation of a Philosophy course with a service-learning project requires a greater investment of time before and during the semester. If sufficient time is not allowed, students will not have a positive learning experience. Fourth, the service-learning component must be well integrated with other pedagogical and assessment tools that are used in the course. This connection should be explained clearly in the course syllabus and explained to

the class few times during the semester to reinforce the link. Finally, by participating in the service-learning project, in this case with the Council on Aging as the partner organization, students received the opportunity to work with senior citizens and became familiar with their actions and beliefs by talking with them and asking the questions as instructed. The students also learned from their peers by listening to each other's presentations on their experience of service learning and their thoughts on how they would relate their experience to the Eastern religions and philosophies discussed in the class.

Lastly, students' awareness of social justice helps them to pursue community service activities in their life with the understanding that they can make a difference in the world by building good character and integrity. Integrating service learning in a course leads to increased student engagement, as well as an increased understanding of the practical application of the theories discussed, not only in the classroom but for some, I hope, throughout their lives. For this reason, it is also important to assess service-learning courses in the context of the program and the institution. When I teach Eastern Philosophy again, I plan to expand the service-learning project to include a higher percentage compared to other requirements (exams, papers), as I have experienced first-hand that student learning improves with the service-learning component.

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