

Reflections

Beyond Classroom Borders: Incorporating Collaborative Service Learning for the Adult Student

Millicent J. Kelly, MS¹

Abstract: This article provides an overview of collaborative service learning activities as they are incorporated into university curricula designed for the nontraditional student. The basic tenets of the concept of *andragogy* are briefly reviewed to emphasize the special considerations that need to be addressed to ensure the successful inclusion of collaborative service initiatives for the adult learner. Some specific inclusion suggestions are offered to maximize the impact and meaningfulness of these unique learning opportunities.

Keywords: service learning, andragogy, adult education

Incorporating collaborative service learning activities into university curricula is a topic that has gained much attention over the past few years. As related to academia, and more specifically higher education, *collaborative service learning* combines the more traditionally recognized concept of volunteering with relevant higher learning objectives requiring application and synthesis of knowledge gained from the learning experience. As such, the effectiveness and outcomes of

collaborative service learning activities are typically measured through the completion of appropriate written, oral, or written and oral research assignments evaluated using assignment rubrics. One is cautioned not to draw parallels between *community service* and *collaborative service learning*. *Community service* is

generally defined as uncompensated work designed to benefit other entities or persons in one's community. Community service can be voluntary or compulsory in nature (Collins English Dictionary, 2009). Although *collaborative service learning* involves a voluntary service component, the integration of formal and informal instructional components distinguishes collaborative service learning from community service.

There are numerous examples of successful collaborative service learning projects incorporated into higher education curricula. The impetus behind these initiatives can come from within the institution of higher learning or from organizations that promote mutually

beneficial partnerships between the community and educational institutions. One such organization

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is the Community–Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), which promotes community health through collaborative service learning partnerships with colleges and universities. CCPH promotes various resources for maximizing the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships through their website and hosts annual conferences targeting the formation of relationships between the education and health care sectors (CCPH, 2011). The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal government initiative that offers support for education and community partnerships through its Learn and Serve program (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2011). Specifically, Learn and Serve provides support for the K-12 educational system, community, and higher education entities to facilitate service learning programs and activities through grant support, education and training initiatives, and research efforts (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2011).

Establishing successful collaborative service learning initiatives in higher education is not restricted to any particular discipline or course of study. For example, students in an accounting or mathematics class could participate in a collaborative service learning activity by offering free tax preparation services to low-income populations and then reflecting on their interactions and experiences in an evaluative research paper. As another example, students in an English writing class could provide free tutoring or proofreading sessions for new United States citizens with limited English language proficiency and then synthesize their experiences in a class journal. The opportunities for establishing successful collaborative service learning initiatives are far-reaching, but there are special factors worthy of consideration when implementing service learning opportunities for the adult student population in higher education.

In the early 1970s, Malcolm S. Knowles introduced the concept of *andragogy*, a learning philosophy that distinguishes the ways in which adults learn from the ways in which children learn. Today, andragogy is a widely accepted philosophical and theoretical concept guiding the instruction of adult learners around the world. The six basic tenets of andragogy purport that adult learners are self-directed, can contribute life experience, are ready to learn, need the opportunity for immediate application, require a sense of information

relevancy, and are motivated when entering the learning environment (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Ever since Knowles defined the concept of andragogy, it has been widely accepted that the needs of the adult learner are vastly different from those of the traditional-aged college student (Knowles, 1984). Adults present themselves in a higher education environment with distinctive needs and expectations. The adult learner, more often than not, assumes a wide variety of roles in daily life. These roles can encompass professional, parent, caregiver, volunteer, student, and so forth. Time is therefore of the essence, a rare commodity that is not taken for granted. In an educational environment, the adult learners not only expect, but often demand, that structured learning is facilitated with efficiency, allowing them to gain the maximum amount of benefit for the minimal amount of time invested. Institutions of higher learning have validated this expectation by specifically designing and implementing accelerated degree programs with the adult student in mind. The majority of colleges and universities worldwide now offer customized programs for adult learners, emphasizing flexible scheduling and alternative credit award programs that allow them to complete their educational goals with maximum efficiency. This in turn warrants consideration of a nontraditional approach to incorporating collaborative service learning assignments into curricula designed for this unique population.

Traditionally, most collaborative service learning initiatives have required students to venture beyond the classroom borders on their own time. Often students are provided with the assignment, instructed to seek out the appropriate community organization, and left to their own devices in completing the task. This approach to completing a service learning activity can cause great anxiety and resistance for the adult learner. As mentioned previously, adults who return to school see their time as a rare commodity. More likely than not, they have already made great time concessions by the simple act of enrolling in a higher education program and attending class. Asking them to complete a collaborative service learning program outside the scope of classroom learning will undeniably be met with resistance. This resistance in turn will have a direct impact on the lasting effectiveness of the activity. Ultimately, collaborative service learning has

the goal of reemphasizing and reinvesting individuals with activities that will strengthen their communities as a whole. Adult learners are key participants in this process, setting the example for future generations. To maximize the benefits and meet the goals of collaborative service learning for adult students, service learning assignments must be incorporated into class curricula with andragogical considerations in mind.

To address the unique needs of adult learners when planning collaborative service learning activities, several activity guidelines allow this type of learning to have substantial impact. First, the course facilitator should encourage adult students to involve their families in the actual service experience. Adult students may protest out of class assignments on the basis of causing child care hardships, but by encouraging students to involve family members in the activity a positive light may be placed on the experience. Not only will adult students be able to complete the assignment, they will be able to serve as a positive role model to their family members, further increasing the potential impact of the experience on the community as a whole. In addition, instructors should allow adult students to utilize class time hours to complete the activity. This can be accomplished by allowing students to spend a certain number of hours away from the classroom, thus avoiding the burden of additional time requirements. Alternatively, the instructor could lead the entire class in a group collaborative service learning activity during class time. This approach would appeal to naturalistic learning styles, and again prevent the placement of additional time commitments on students. Regardless of which method is utilized, the collaborative service learning experience must be debriefed after completion to have lasting impact. Adult students need to derive meaning from their experiences, so reviewing outcomes and their impact is of critical importance. Completion of an applied writing project, following the activity and guided by a rubric, serves as a valid evaluation tool.

As the trend to incorporate collaborative service learning activities into higher education curriculum continues, it is apparent that instructional design consideration of adult learning principles would be appropriate when serving the adult student population. Evaluation of service learning activities

designed for adult higher education curricula should consider whether the activity is relevant, engaging, and meaningful, and ensure it can be accomplished with little or no additional time requirements beyond the original commitment to the class. When planned effectively for adult learners, these service learning activities have the potential to effect positive change on a personal and societal level, while holding institutions of higher learning accountable in the communities they serve.

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Author Biography

Millicent J. Kelly is a site manager, academic advisor, and lecturer for Barry University in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. She has actively engaged her adult students in collaborative service learning activities since 2004, and has built strong ties with local community organizations. Ms. Kelly's service learning initiatives in Palm Beach County have received recognition for successfully bridging the gap between education and community service.

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