

# Forty Years of Service-Learning in the United States, 1969-2009

Thomas A. Kessinger  
Xavier University

## Abstract

This article reviews the relatively brief forty-year history of service/service-learning in the United States. Distinctions are offered between community service, service learning, and service-learning (hyphenated) with emphasis on the latter during this period. A summary of service and service-learning ventures by public and private groups during the past ten years is also highlighted; and, the connection between service (and/or service-learning) and citizenship education is emphasized as well.

## Introduction

Service-learning is a relatively new term. It is a form of experiential education that has its roots in the ideas and writings of John Dewey. Nearly eighty years ago, Dewey said:

The aim of civic efficiency...calls attention to the fact that power must be relative to doing something, and to the fact that the things which most need to be done are things which involve one's relationships with others. (Dewey 1930, 140)

Additionally, social efficiency

covers all that makes one's own experience more worthwhile [sic] to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others. (Dewey 1930, 141)

Based on Dewey's ideas and writings as well as that of the National Society for Experiential

Education many forms of experiential learning can be found at grades K-16 in both public and private education today. Some of the more common examples include tutoring, mentoring, public service, and youth service.

## Historical Overview

The remainder of this article primarily serves as a historical description of service and/or service-learning in the United States for the past forty years.

Are the following terms synonymous: service, volunteerism, community service, service-learning? Truly, it depends. Oftentimes it is nearly impossible to distinguish or to discern the distinctions between these terms in philosophy, program, support or result. According to various writers (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kinsley & McPherson, 1995; Loeb, 1999; Putnam, 2000), the desire and ability to offer "service" has been present ever since the beginning of this country. Therefore, each one of the above terms has had attention given it and some evidence of application in the United States. However, it would be a major mistake to assume that the above terms are synonymous. According to the National Council for the Social Studies or NCSS (position statement, 2000), "[s]ervice-learning is distinguished from community service or volunteerism." Stanton and others (1999) also note distinctions between the terms. This article offers a survey of service-related terms and definitions by various groups. It also shows a connection between service (and service-learning) and citizenship. Finally, it notes how some public and private institutions (organizations) assist in

promoting either service or service-learning in this country.

During the 1840s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that Americans of all ages and backgrounds had a great propensity for forming voluntary associations to support community needs. More recent authors (Galston, 2003; Loeb, 1999; Putnam, 2000) express the concern that the United States is at risk in sacrificing this heretofore community or service ethic. Loeb (1999) states: "I remain convinced by Putnam's basic proposition [contained in an earlier article], that civic involvement has dropped off significantly" (198).

Service-learning, as a concept, has evolved from volunteerism and community service; or, to say it another way, service learning rests on both volunteerism, service and community service. The NCSS (2000) states: "Service-learning connects meaningful service in the school or community with academic learning and civic responsibility" (p. 240). It is one example of a tool or technique that fits within the dynamic notion of the "powerful social studies" (NCSS 1994, 11-12).

Shumer says ". . . one of the problems we face is to separate service-learning from volunteerism and community service. I'm not against the word *service*, but I think service and volunteerism take the emphasis away from learning" (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz 1999, 208). According to Eyler and Giles (1999), one researcher had uncovered 147 definitions of service-learning. Ten years ago, Sigmon (1996) took the concept of service-learning (with and without the hyphen) and offered a typology to distinguish four different possibilities and meanings based on a particular term emphasis. For example, he notes that when people go into the community and provide service—after

hearing or reading about selected agencies, he refers to this as *service-learning* (emphasis on the service, with learning goals secondary). Likewise, when service and learning goals are of equal weight, and each enhances the other for all participants (this implies the notion of reciprocity), this is service-learning; this is the richest definition of all offered (Eyler & Giles 1999, 5).

The focus of the remainder of this article will be to trace the idea of "service-learning" for the last forty years. An equally important objective will be to show how academics and others in the United States have applied the term. According to Wade (1997), "service-learning programs can take a variety of shapes and forms, making the defining of service-learning a challenging task" (19).

Pre-collegiate and collegiate student-centered volunteer/community services have a long history that includes YMCA, YWCA, 4-H, the Scouting movements, fraternities and sororities, and other initiatives. It grew dramatically in both numbers and in the public's eye during the early 1960s with Kennedy's Peace Corps. A few years later, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) followed which allowed young persons to take on domestic-based challenges in various communities around the country.

A precursor to service-learning can be found in four of the "Cardinal Principles" of the National Education Association (NEA) Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. In its report, the commission underscored the importance of "service" in the principles of vocation, civic education, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character. For example, under vocation, the report states: ". . . equip the individual to secure a livelihood for himself and those dependent on him, to serve society well through his vocation." As to civic education,

“[t]he pupil should feel that he will be responsible, in cooperation with others . . . (to) realize that democracy itself is an ideal to be wrought out by his own . . .” On worthy use of leisure, “the school should therefore, see that adequate recreation is provided both within the school and by other proper agencies in the community . . . because it includes in its membership representatives from all classes of society and consequently is able through social relationships to establish bonds of friendship and common understanding that can not be furnished by other agencies.” Finally, for ethical character, “. . . the social contacts of pupils with one another and with their teachers, the opportunities afforded by the organization and administration of the school for the development on the part of pupils of the sense of personal responsibility and initiative, and above all, the spirit of service . . . should permeate the entire school” (NEA Cardinal Principles 1918, 10-16).

As noted in the Introduction above, service-learning as a form of experiential education [note that the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) was formed in 1971], has its roots in the ideas and writings of John Dewey (see Giles & Eyler, 1994). Dewey (1930) said:

The aim of civic efficiency (or good citizenship) . . . calls attention to the fact that power must be relative to doing something, and to the fact that the things which most need to be done are things which involve one’s relationship with others. (140).

Furthermore, social efficiency “covers all that makes one’s own experience more worth- while [sic] to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others” (Dewey 1930, 141). As a

result of his work and that of the NSEE, many forms of experiential learning can be found at grades K-16 in public as well as in private education. For example, tutoring, mentoring, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, internships, experiential education, public service, youth service and other examples abound (see O’Grady, 2000; also, see Bailes, 2001).

### **Origins of Service-Learning**

What is the origin of the term service-learning? It first appears in the late 1960s in the publications of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) whose primary writers were Robert Sigmon and William Ramsay (O’Grady, 2000; Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999). In 1969 the Office of Economic Opportunity established the National Student Volunteer Program which later became the National Center for Service-Learning. In 1971 this program and two others—Peace Corps and VISTA -- combined to form the federal agency ACTION.

Service-learning was introduced and became a mainstay on many college campuses during the late 1960s and the 1970s. From the mid-1980s, service-learning on college campuses increased in popularity. In 1985 the Education Commission of the States began Campus Compact or the Project for Public and Community Service. Today, this is "a national coalition of more than of 1100 college and university presidents—representing some 6 million students—dedicated to promoting community service, civic engagement, and service-learning in higher education" (see Campus Compact website 2008). Campus Compact defines service-learning as “a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility”

(“What is Service-Learning?” *Campus Compact Online* 2008, 6).

As a result of community service and the spread of service-learning programs, the NSEE began to establish a set of “principles of good practice” in 1987. This effort culminated in a 1989 Wingspread conference hosted by the Johnson Foundation at which the “Principles of Good Practice in Combining Service and Learning” were articulated. Wingspread offered the ideal that any definition of service-learning must represent that “(s)ervice, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (Kendall 1990, 39).

After this conference Kendall and Associates published the classic three-volume set, *Combining Service and Learning*, under the auspices of the NSEE and in collaboration with ninety-one national and regional associations. The document contains a wide range of resources on service-learning in K-12 and higher education plus an annotated bibliography on service-learning literature. That same year mainstream educational publisher Jossey-Bass issued the first volume on service-learning.

During the 1990s additional articles and books were published on service-learning for secondary and higher education students and institutions. Besides publishing other references on service-learning (curricular service-learning models and reflective ideas for students), NSEE hosted another Wingspread conference in 1991. As a result of the push for research on the benefits and effects of service-learning, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* was launched in late 1994. Campus Compact continued its publication of service-learning materials as well.

In recognition of the need for a widely agreed-on definition of service-learning and a set of standards by which to judge programs, a

diverse group of service-learning educators formed the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform or ASLER. They defined service-learning in 1993 as:

. . . a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized service experiences: that meet actual community needs, that are coordinated in collaboration with school and community, that are integrated into each young person’s academic curriculum, that provide structured time for a young person to think, talk, and write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity, that provide young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities, that enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom, and that help foster the development of a sense of caring for others. (ASLER 1993, 1)

The federal government’s interest in and support of service-learning increased dramatically in the 1990s as well. This was due in large measure to the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990. This act reflected President George H.W. Bush’s campaign pledge of a “thousand points of light,” and led to the creation of the *first* White House Office of National Service and the Points of Light Foundation. President Clinton’s campaign stressed the establishment of a national “service” program that culminated—after much debate—in the passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. This legislation brought together the Commission of National and Community Service, ACTION, and the newly established National Civilian Community Corps

that merged to form the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS).

This corporation is responsible for the establishment and maintenance of three major volunteer, community service, and/or service-learning programs: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America. The goal of all three groups/programs is to provide opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to “serve” their communities and country. Specifically, the Act of 1993, states that service-learning:

- Is a method whereby students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of communities;

- Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education or community service program and the community;

- Helps foster civic responsibility;

- Is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the education components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; [and,]

- Provides structured time for students or participants to reflect in the service experience. (Act of 1993)

In other words, service-learning is built upon the concept of community service linked to or with schools, and civic participation/education is the primary goal of the act.

CNS has given dramatic impetus to service-learning in elementary, secondary and higher education settings especially in one program. The Learn and Serve America program focuses more on *service-learning* than on the other related concepts. According to its “fact sheet” (nd), Learn and Serve America (L&S) offers “grants to schools, colleges and nonprofit

groups to support efforts to engage students in community linked to academic achievement and the development of *civic skills*.” L&S America refers to this as “service-learning” and states that it improves communities while preparing students for a lifetime of *responsible citizenship*. L&S offers grants via the states to communities for school-based, community-based and higher education programs.

Finally, L&S also offers models by which service-learning can be accomplished by school and community groups in the states. One model—employed in Maryland—is PARE (preparation, action or service, reflection, evaluation)—as noted in CNS EpiCenter “effective practices.” Other states offer similar models (e.g., PARR and PARAC). According to various researchers (Pritchard, 2002; Wade, 1997), in order to move beyond mere community service, each model must contain the major elements of service-learning: preparation, action/service (which implies reciprocity), reflection (that relates service to academic learning), evaluation or assessment, and recognition or celebration (see *Learn & Serve Ohio 2000 Annual Report* for a state-adopted PARR model and explanation).

### **Community Service versus Service-Learning**

In early 1999 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education conducted the first “National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey.” This survey provides “reliable national estimates of the percentage of elementary, middle and high schools incorporating service-learning into their courses, as well as providing the most recent data on school engagement in community service.” (NCES 1999, 1) Significant findings include:

- Sixty-four percent of all public schools, including eighty-three percent of public high schools, had students participating in community service activities recognized by and/or arranged through the school;
- Fifty-seven percent of all public schools organized community service activities for their students; and,
- Thirty-two percent of all public schools organized service-learning as part of their curriculum, including nearly one-half of all high schools.

What is significant here is that service-learning in K-12 schools combines elements of community service with classroom instruction. Note that the percentage of public schools nationwide with service-learning was 32 percent, which means about one-half as many schools had service-learning as had community service.

Throughout the short history of service-learning, there still appears to be divided opinion as to its definition and some confusion distinguishing it from community service. Pritchard (2002) states that “*community service* is used more widely than *service-learning*, both in the sense that it is typically applied to a wider range of activities” (6). In the above cited NCES survey, community service was defined as “activities that are non-curriculum-based and are recognized by and/or arranged through the school.” The survey defined service-learning:

as curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities . . . organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum; have clearly stated learning objectives; address real community needs in a sustained manner over a period of time; and, assist students in drawing lessons from the service through regularly scheduled,

organized reflection or critical analysis activities, such as classroom discussions, presentations, or directed writing. (NCES 1999, 2-3)

Pritchard (2002) further notes “the decision about which term to use may be arbitrary, so long as the meaning is clear, but the public debate about these terms may also reveal other goals educators have about how service opportunities should be experienced by students” (6).

### **Citizenship Education**

Shumer (1999) notes that students can “learn to become critically thoughtful, engaged, active, lifelong *citizens*” by permitting their active participation in thoughtfully organized experiences that meet actual community needs, by integrating service into their academic curriculum, by providing structured time for thinking about the service, by providing opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their communities, by extending learning into the community, and by helping to foster the development of a sense of caring for others (1).

The notion of “community” naturally leads to a discussion of citizenship; or, it leads to the question: What has been the connection between community service or service-learning and citizenship education? (see Kessinger 2003). Recall in an inaugural address, former President George W. Bush called for all Americans to give 4000 hours or two years of “service” to their country. The President also embraced the work of the Corporation for National Service and further encouraged its three associated organizations/programs by requesting additional funding for these groups. Recently President Barack Obama acted similarly. He signed the *Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act* early in 2009, which is the most sweeping expansion of

national service in generations. It reauthorizes the CNS, expands its Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs, and creates new initiatives to increase service opportunities and strengthen the country's civic infrastructure. Specifically, this legislation reauthorizes and expands the mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS) by:

- increasing opportunities for Americans of all ages to serve;
  - supporting innovation and strengthening the nonprofit sector; and,
  - strengthening management, cost-effectiveness, and accountability.
- [CNS Press Release, "Highlights of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act", March 30, 2009.]

For example, this act puts young people onto a path of national service by establishing a Summer of Service program to provide \$500 education awards for rising 6th-12th graders, a Semester of Service program for high school students to engage in service-learning, and Youth Empowerment Zones for secondary students and out-of-school youth.

According to many in education, the primary purpose of the social studies is to foster and enhance *citizenship education*. Recall the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the major professional and learned society of the social studies, drafted and approved a position statement on service-learning in 2000. Besides defining the term, the statement includes a rationale and benefits for social studies teaching and learning. Clearly, NCSS distinguishes between service-learning and voluntary or community service. To the NCSS (2000), "service-learning connects meaningful service in the school or community with academic learning and civic responsibility" (240). Obviously there

is a notable—albeit expected—link with citizenship education here. According to Dynneson et al (2003), service-learning (formerly known as community civics) "in connection with citizenship education has been incorporated into the social studies curriculum" (44). This connection will be recognized and enhanced by subsequent groups and initiatives in both public and private sectors.

### **Recent Advocates of Service and Citizenship**

Indeed how others define these terms and relate them to citizenship may reflect their priorities in terms of ideology, program, or support. For example, in 1998, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in partnership with The John Glenn Institute for Public Service and Public Policy—at The Ohio State University—launched an initiative called "Learning In Deed: Making a Difference Through Service-Learning." Coupled with this effort, the National Commission on Service-Learning—chaired by former Senator John Glenn—was established to broaden the use of service-learning in school districts across the United States. In 2002 the commission issued a report and videotape entitled *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools*. The report encourages a higher level of public commitment to service-learning and recommends service-learning for all K-12 students. The video defines service-learning as integrating "community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities." Missing in this definition, however, is the role played by reflection, a critical or essential component of service-learning, as defined by others earlier (ASLER 1993; National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993; NCSS 2000; Wade 1997).

Glenn, in a letter of support (personal communication, May 2002) of the commission's

work, states “[a]fter a year of study and discussion, our Commission concluded that every student in kindergarten through high school should participate in a quality service-learning project every year. Service-learning stands at the crossroads of civic engagement and academic achievement. By making this strategy an integral part of every student’s education, we can produce world-class learners who are also world-class citizens. Furthermore, by doing so, “we can renew the engagement, dedication to learning, and civic commitment that have made our nation great.”

Also in 2002 the Corporation for National Service (CNS) was placed under a newly created governmental (supervisory) office of service: the USA Freedom Corps. This White House initiative was established to foster a culture of citizenship, service and responsibility, and help all Americans to answer the President’s Call to Service. According to then President George W. Bush, its mission is to help “more Americans engage in meeting vital community needs, develop their personal characters, and participate in our civic traditions and institutions.” (personal communication, 2003).

Later that same year, the USA Freedom Corps, CNS, and the U.S. Department of Education launched three initiatives to enhance citizenship. Two of these initiatives highlighted “volunteerism” and “service.” The third initiative, a report entitled *Students in Service to America*, focuses on service *and* service-learning programs in schools that aim to improve the teaching of civics and American history. The report is a guidebook for teachers and emphasizes ways of connecting service and citizenship. Note the emphasis here is on students contributing *service*—not necessarily service-learning—“in order to foster a culture of service, citizenship and

responsibility in or to America’s communities” (*Students in Service* 2002, 2).

Another effort promoting service (connected to citizenship) has been the work of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, in consultation with CNS, in its 2003 report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*. The report is a scholarly attempt “to determine, based on solid data and evidence, the components of effective and feasible civic education programs” (Carnegie, 2003, p. 4). Besides indicating that schools are important venues for civic education, the report notes “that schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens” when they “design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction” (Carnegie 2003, 6). Essentially, this is another definition of service-learning!

Finally, in May 2003, CNS—together with the USA Freedom Corps, the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities—sponsored the White House Forum on History, Civics and Service. Titled “We the People,” the purpose of the forum was to call public attention to the need for more and better American history and civics education and to focus attention on the promising practices in teaching history and civics through student service. The former chairman of CNS (Leslie Lenkowsky) noted, “service is one of the best ways to instill the lifelong habit of engaged citizenship” (CNS press release, April 30, 2003). This was an obvious attempt to renew and reinvigorate America’s tradition of citizenship, service (again, not necessarily service-learning) and responsibility.

More recently there have been other private partnerships formed in order to promote either the concept of service or service-learning between schools and their communities. For example, the National Association for Secondary School Principals and the Constitutional Rights Foundation have sponsored either programs or curricula that focus on one or both terms. Also, Learn & Serve America/Ohio is one of many state-sponsored programs to accentuate service-learning on a more local basis. In Ohio local school districts can apply—through a competitive grant process—for funding that allows districts to initiate and extend a service-learning program for up to seven years. Other states do similarly; in fact, legislation passed by Congress in 2004 provided \$43 million in grants to be distributed to the states in the Learn & Serve America program during the 2004-2005 school year. More recently, the *Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act* of 2009 greatly expands the notion of contributing service to the nation.

So, in spite of the differences in terms, service and service-learning have received added emphasis recently by governments (national and state) and by other groups in this country. But the question remains: Does everyone agree with the definition and practices of service, and especially, service-learning?

### Conclusion

It is evident that government, foundations and other interested parties embrace service and service-learning. It is equally true that many public and private efforts are ongoing to connect service and service-learning with citizenship education. So, even though the two terms (service and service-learning) and other terms are not synonymous, various groups use the terms to promote and encourage the service ethic that de Tocqueville (1961) keenly observed among

Americans in the 1840s. Yet, the problem remains to find a consistent definition of service, and especially of service-learning, that all individuals and groups embrace and practice in the twenty-first century.

Indeed until there is a commonly accepted and agreed upon definition of service-learning, questions and discussions will continue regarding what it is, how it should be encouraged, how it can be best measured, and what are the critical components, impacts or effects of service-learning.

Author's Note: The introductory section of this article borrows from information--previously written by the author--that will be published in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent* in 2010.

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