

# **The Community as a Classroom: Integrating Service Learning into the Human Resource Management Curriculum**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The use of service learning as a pedagogical tool in management education has become more prevalent in the last two decades. Service learning is an experiential learning technique designed to balance academic learning with service work to enhance student learning, encourage civic responsibility, highlight broad implications of management practices, and help universities serve the communities in which they exist. The current paper is organized in three parts. Part One includes a brief literature review including benefits and hindrances to service learning. Part Two includes description of several specific service learning projects conducted by students at the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa. Part Three includes specific recommendations for faculty interested in utilizing service learning projects in human resource management courses.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The term *service learning* describes a special type of experiential learning which strikes a balance between meeting academic objectives and providing service to the community. Most scholars (e.g., Barber & Battistoni, 1993; Furco, 1996; Howard, 1998; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996; McCarthy & Tucker, 1999) agree that in order to qualify as service learning, projects must integrate both academic and service components in such a way that the academic learning prepares students for the service work they do and the service work provides an experiential base for academic learning and discussion. Although it has a long history, interest in and use of service learning has increased notably over the last two decades.

Service learning is an effective tool that can help reduce the gap between universities and their civic missions, bringing about social change. Service learning, however, is not a panacea but instead just one of many methods instructors can use to teach students about civic responsibility and corporate ethics (DiPadova-Stocks, 2005; Papamarcos, 2005; Zlotkowski, 1996). An additional benefit of service learning is that its use can foster and improve relations between universities and their surrounding communities (Schneider, Piotrowski, & Kass, 2007). DiPadova-Stocks (2005) describes it as an “distinctive instructional method [that] has the capacity to break down social class barriers, integrate universities and their local communities, and diminish disciplinary barriers within our own institutions, while providing exceptional course substance learning for students” (p. 347).

Service learning has been described as a synergistic process (Clark, 2000; Howard, 1998) that leads to knowledge creation (J. Saltmarsh in an interview with Taylor, 2005) and outcomes not available through academic learning or service work alone. This is true for several reasons. First, as stated by Howard (1998, p. 21) “community service experiences in academic service

learning function as a critical learning complement to the academic goals for the course.” Given that the traditional classroom allows for the dissemination of large amounts of information while service learning allows for application and learning of smaller amounts of information in a way that is more likely to be retained, service learning provides a balanced learning approach whereby the deficits of classroom learning can be offset by the strengths of experiential learning and vice versa (Howard, 1998; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Second, service learning is a reciprocal process in which all parties involved in the process learn and grow from the interaction. The benefits of service learning extend beyond the students who are the providers of the service and the community organization or people who are the recipients of the service to include the instructor, prospective employers, the university, and the community at large (Clark, 2000; Furco, 1996; Godfrey, 2000; Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker, & Kickul, 2005; Papamarcos, 2005; Schneider et al., 2007).

Not only do service learning practitioners extol its benefits, but empirical research also supports its positive impact on students. Kolenko et al. (1996) as well as Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) indicated that service learning may help students develop a greater sense of social responsibility for their actions and the actions of their employers. Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, and Lenk (1998) reinforced this, asserting that service learning can enhance students’ sense of community responsibility and communication skills through their interactions with diverse groups of people. Empirical research supports these practitioners’ assertions and also suggests that service learning has positive outcomes on students’ academic performance and personal growth. For example, an experiment by Markus et al. (1993) showed that, when integrated with classroom instruction, service learning resulted not only in attitude and value changes among students, but also in higher course achievement and students’ perceptions of their own abilities. These results were mirrored by a large scale survey-based study by Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000), which showed that undergraduate students who engaged in service learning reported positive effects on their academic performance, values, self-efficacy, leadership, career choice, and future plans to participate in service. Additionally, research by Govekar and Rishi (2007) that examined pre- and post-test responses of undergraduate business students involved in service learning projects revealed significant positive gains on a variety of factors including self-reported leadership, communication, and speaking skills as well as creativity and career development.

The integration of academic and service components is crucial for the success of service learning endeavors. Utilization of service learning as a teaching tool is ideal when projects fit smoothly into learning objectives in such a way as to help students develop the skills and gain the experience they will need for future work assignments and roles (Godfrey, 2000). Weigert (1998) cautions that “faculty should never dream up a service assignment that has nothing to do with the objectives of the course” (p. 7). Instead, faculty members should first determine the educational purpose of the project (Papamarcos, 2005) and then assess how service learning may fit into the existing framework for the course (Kenworthy-U’Ren & Peterson, 2005).

Numerous articles and books have been devoted to defining and describing service learning and service learning projects and programs. Fewer articles, however, have provided detailed guidelines on how faculty can implement service learning into their courses, the problems and challenges instructors are likely to encounter when using service learning, or instructor benefits

and learning that result from its use. The next section of this article describes four service learning projects, detailing how the project ideas were developed and implemented. Specific challenges experienced and reflections on how to improve use of service learning for future courses are also discussed. The paper concludes with suggestions for human resource management faculty interested in initiating service learning projects in their own human resource management courses.

## **SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**

Service learning projects described in this paper were conducted by students enrolled in human resource management track courses in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Oklahoma in Tulsa. In this application-oriented Masters program, team-based and experiential learning techniques are emphasized. Additionally, the program uses a compressed format where an entire course's meetings occur over three consecutive weekends. Use of service learning techniques, along with an array of active learning methods, has proven to complement the goals of the program, helping students hone their teamwork and leadership skills while also helping them "question their assumptions about others who are different from themselves" (DiPadova-Stocks, 2005, p. 350) and see how the decisions they make within organizations have broad consequences that affect the lives of many people. Service learning projects have been utilized in some of the program courses, alongside experiential project options that involve for-profit organizations. This paper will focus on four distinct service learning projects.

### **Project 1: Training Videos**

#### **Project Development and Implementation**

I first utilized service learning in fall 2004 in the Employee Training and Development course. My ideas for the service learning projects arose from the applied learning focus of the program and my desire for students to generate solutions to real organizational problems that would also benefit the local community. I outlined a task (i.e., development of a short training video) that fit well within the objectives of the class, requiring students to apply all the steps in the instructional system design (ISD) model. The next step was to identify a community-based organization that was willing to work with students, that would allow the students to take responsibility for a complex task, and that was willing to tolerate possible project failure. Having recently volunteered with Habitat for Humanity, I contacted a staff member who was very open to the project idea, the 6-week timeframe for project completion, and the scope of the project. I met with Habitat staff members, relying on them to provide the problem that they thought a short training video would resolve.

Due to the size of the class, I needed a second organization that also wanted a short training video. A colleague in a different department put me in touch with a contact he had at Domestic Violence Intervention Services (DVIS). The project development process was similar; I described the project scope and timeline while I relied on DVIS staff members to choose the problem that they wanted addressed through a training video. During the first class meeting, students formed into three groups, one for each of the service learning video projects and another for an alternative experiential project. The first service learning group developed a short training

video for the Tulsa Habitat for Humanity office in order to train prospective homeowners, new staff members, and volunteers on the proper way to complete application materials in order to be considered for home ownership. This project was designed to reduce the high rejection rate resulting from incomplete and inaccurate applications. The second service learning group developed a short training video for Domestic Violence Intervention Services (DVIS) designed to provide important information regarding protective order processes and procedures. The audience for the video included victims of domestic abuse as well as new DVIS staff members. These service learning projects were designed to not only teach the students about issues in the development of training programs, but also expose them to potential issues (e.g., domestic violence, financial issues for the working poor) that they might encounter in their careers while working as human resource management professionals.

### **Project Outcomes, Challenges and Future Directions**

As my first foray into service learning, I initially was concerned that the scope of the project might be too great for the students to complete in such a short timeframe; however, these concerns were unfounded. Both student groups produced professional quality videos, showing that students can do a remarkable amount of quality work when motivated to do so. The Habitat project was well-received; several Habitat staff members sent feedback praising the work of the students and the quality of the video project. All students became much more engaged in the course material than anticipated which was reflected on their evaluations of the course.

There were a number of challenges with the video projects. At the time, the department did not own a video camera for the students to use. The Chair was supportive of the projects and quickly remedied that problem. Additionally, although I had tasked the students with development of training videos, I did not possess video editing skills. Instead, I encouraged the students to use any resource they could reasonably and legally access which led to their collaboration with a student from another department who had video development and editing experience. The student provided consultation *pro bono*. The DVIS group experienced problems with completing their video after their agency contact had a significant health event near the end of the project timeline. While I gave them a due date extension, it was ultimately not enough to ensure involvement of the DVIS member through to project completion due to his significant health setbacks. Also, no other agency member was available to replace him given the agency's staff shortage from his health leave. My grade of the project thus reflected its quality and completeness in consideration of the inaccessibility of the DVIS contact for the last few weeks of the project's timeframe. A final challenge to the projects was that, upon reflection, I realized a weakness in my implementation of the projects; I had not sought a formal assessment of the projects by the partner agencies. Despite these challenges, the outcomes of these two projects were superb, which led to my decision to include service learning in future courses.

### **Project 2: Recruitment Strategy for Tulsa CASA**

#### **Project Development and Implementation**

This project was conducted during fall 2005 as part of the Human Resource Management course. I had a prior contact with a staff member of the Tulsa Court Appointed Special Advocate

(CASA) agency and met with agency staff to discuss possible projects. CASA staff indicated their greatest need was finding additional methods for recruiting volunteers and that the agency needed to increase its number of minority volunteers so that volunteer demographics better aligned with the demographics of the children whom they serve. CASAs are individuals who conduct research to inform judges regarding the best interests of an individual child or siblings who are in protective custody. Because CASAs are required to make a significant time commitment to be eligible for service, including a one-year pledge of service averaging sixteen hours monthly, the Tulsa CASA office was having difficulty recruiting volunteers. The recruitment project idea fit well within the objectives of the class, requiring students to develop recruiting methods that were financially efficient while also effective at targeting members of desired minority groups.

Students developed a recruitment strategy for the Tulsa CASA office including a “toolkit” that identified methods to reach and recruit potential volunteers. The toolkit contained a wealth of information including sample recruitment flyers, volunteer job descriptions, minority media tips, guidelines for managing volunteers, and numerous media outlets that were willing to provide free advertising space to help CASA recruit volunteers.

### **Project Outcomes, Challenges and Future Directions**

Students who participated in this project were extremely engaged in the class and the project itself. The students even expanded their project after learning that the agency lost its regular donor of Christmas gifts for the children CASA served. Students had become so involved in the agency that they sought additional sources of donations and raised enough money to ensure the children would receive their Christmas gifts.

Based on my experience with the training video projects, I greatly expanded my assessment process by adding both student peer evaluations and assessment by relevant CASA staff in addition to the traditional instructor assessment. Students were assessed on presentation of the project, the project toolkit, and a scholarly paper that described processes and theories the students applied to guide development of the toolkit. A sample assessment, including feedback from a CASA representative, is included as Figure 1. Note that this evaluation form was used for all team experiential learning projects including service learning projects as well as experiential projects conducted with for-profit organizations.

The outcomes of the project were again notable, given the time limitations of the course. The four-week timeline for this project was more stringent than that for the training video projects given that this compressed format course was taught near the end of the semester and the project due date could not be extended much beyond the last class meeting. The quality of the outcomes and student excitement about this project were great nonetheless and increased my resolve to use service learning in other courses with additional follow-up on the benefits of the project to the community agency.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Human Resource Management Group Project**  
**Client Feedback Form**

	<b>Client Feedback</b>	<b>Percentage</b> (between 0 and 100%)
<b>Professionalism of Product Presented</b>	<i>Good use of technology and applying various skills of the team members to build a seamless team approach.</i>	100
<b>Accurate Description of Organizational Issue/Problem</b>	<i>Somewhat lightweight and naïve in applying SWOT mechanism. Excellent job of identifying external threats, not so good on the internal ones. Depended a little too much on opinions expressed by primary staff contacts (inside the forest) and not enough on those of other stakeholders.</i>	90
<b>Researching the Organization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information gathering from client organization</li> <li>• Appropriateness of proposed outcome measurement</li> <li>• Study design</li> </ul>	<u>Information gathering process from client organization:</u> <i>Was professional and thorough</i> <u>Appropriateness of proposed outcome measure:</u> <i>I don't see evidence of an outcome measurement being proposed</i> <u>Study design:</u> <i>Very flawed. The study attempted to measure "market awareness." Asking 50 peers of the team members scarcely approaches production of empirical, non-prejudiced, projectionable results. A blind study across a broader base would have given meat to the presentation and provided added value of use to the organization in future planning.</i>	80
<b>Theory Explication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application of relevant theories, concepts, previous organizational experiences</li> </ul>	<i>Here the team shined, especially in the post presentation discussion.</i>	100
<b>Project/Intervention</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequacy of proposed intervention for addressing issue</li> <li>• Consideration of organizational implications of intervention</li> </ul>	<i>Again, winners. Excellent job of mitigating the scarcities of time, money, energy with the notion of volunteers doing jobs other than accepting case loads.</i>	100
<b>Organizational Benefits</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persuasiveness of argument for intervention</li> </ul>	<i>Intervention ideas were thoughtful and will be evaluated for relevancy and potential use.</i>	100
<b>Overall Comments</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Originality</li> </ul>	<i>Beyond creativity and originality is the passion they exhibited for truly seeking solutions to entrenched problems. They were able to express their ideas without becoming argumentative, focusing on how the agency could benefit. Seldom will such an open forum present itself for the exchange of ideas with younger business professionals, with the added plus of an African-American perspective. The whole was truly greater than the sum of its parts. We agreed this group is more than capable of handling real world problems in a professional way.</i>	95
<b>Total</b>		<b>95</b>

### **Project 3: Reducing Burnout among Red Cross Disaster Workers**

#### **Project Development and Implementation**

Unlike the projects described thus far, this project was a student-proposed project conducted in the same course as the CASA project, but by a different group of students who had indicated having contacts in the Tulsa Red Cross office. This project was conducted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and students were interested in improving Red Cross human resource functions that related to disaster relief workers. The project's goal was to develop a human resource management system that reduced negative health events such as burnout, stress, and posttraumatic stress disorder among disaster relief workers. The project required development of a proposal for improving human resource functions related to the selection, training, scheduling, and provision of counseling for Red Cross volunteers. Unlike previous service learning projects, in this project, I relied on student reports of interactions with the agency rather than meeting with agency members myself due to the reported strong relationship between student(s) and agency members.

#### **Project Outcomes, Challenges and Future Directions**

Dependence solely on student contacts for this project was a mistake. Shortly before the project was presented in class, project team members told me that they had been unable to talk to and meet with agency members resulting in a lack of feedback from the agency. The team also revealed these difficulties when presenting the project to the class. While other class members were appreciative of the project's goal and the passion of the team members, peer evaluations were considerably lower due to the team's inability to coordinate efforts with the partner agency. The team was able to meet with relevant Red Cross members shortly thereafter, prior to turning in the final project. The evaluation by Red Cross members indicated that the project idea was timely and merited consideration but did not adequately address the extreme circumstances of disaster relief situations.

The outcomes of the project were disappointing and drew attention to the importance of several key aspects of service learning implementation. First, the experience stressed the necessity that the course instructor makes a connection with the community partner in order to foster project success. I had relied on the information that students provided regarding their contacts. In hindsight, I realized they overestimated or overstated their relationship with agency members as well as their progress on the project up until shortly before the project presentation. Second, this experience highlighted how crucial it is for instructors and agency members to reach an agreement regarding project scope, timeline, and deliverables as well as the responsibilities of the instructor and community partner for guiding the project and being available to students and each other. Finally, the importance of allowing the community partner to propose the content of service learning project to ensure that a specific agency need is addressed was further reinforced by this experience.

## **Project 4: Resonance CertiRestore™ Training Orientation**

### **Project Development and Implementation**

This project was conducted in fall 2006 as part of the Employee Training and Development course. This project idea developed from a conversation with the Executive Director of Resonance, a non-profit agency that helps women and their families gain self-sufficiency. The director had called to inquire about the possibility of students conducting a project with the agency. The agency identified a need for an orientation program to precede a two-year CertiRestore™ job skills training program. The agency was in preparation to train non-violent female ex-offenders on how to restore furniture as a way to help the ex-offenders develop marketable job skills. The goal of the project was for students to develop a five-day orientation program that would provide a realistic preview of the CertiRestore™ training, career opportunities available after the training, and the significant commitment that would be required of the women to be qualified for and graduate from the two-year training program.

Two students who had previously volunteered with Resonance were able to quickly recruit and garner student support for this project. This was by far the smoothest service learning project given ties between agency members, students, and myself. Additionally, for this course I had modified the way I used team project and reflection time to enhance the visibility of the link between the academic learning and service work. In previous courses, team project and reflection time was provided at the end of each Saturday session; in this course, time was made available after academic discussion of each course component (i.e., components of the ISD model). For instance, needs assessment was discussed from an academic perspective and then students were given time to meet in their teams to discuss and reflect upon the needs assessment phase of their project. At the end of the team discussion time, each team gave a five-minute presentation regarding the ISD component, how it applied to their project, why it was an important aspect of the project, and challenges or issues they faced or would face carrying out that component of the project. This greatly enhanced students' ability to see the ties between the projects and course objectives for their own project as well as projects completed by the other groups.

### **Project Outcomes, Challenges and Future Directions**

Not only were the students who conducted this project extremely committed to its success but other class members also became very interested in the project; this project became the one to emulate. I did not experience any challenges with this project. Resonance staff, the students' peers, and I rated the project highly. Later, a Resonance staff member wrote me to thank me for facilitating a partnership between the university and Resonance, indicating that Resonance had sought a United Way Venture Grant for \$28,000 to implement the CertiRestore™ program for ex-offenders, but was instead granted \$165,200. The excess grant was attributed, in part, to the thoroughness and professionalism of the student-developed orientation program.

I am now an active advocate of service learning. Not only will I continue to use service learning in my courses but I also plan to expand service learning opportunities available to my students including incorporating debriefing exercises (see Dennehy, Sims, & Collins, 1998) to



further highlight for students the linkages between concepts presented in the academic classroom and their real-world experiences.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE FACULTY**

### **Improving the Human Resource Curriculum**

Use of service learning can improve the human resource management curriculum not only by promoting deep learning through the application of course concepts but also by exposing students to and requiring that they work effectively with diverse groups of people. Such experience can help students develop their communication skills as well as see the broader implications of the types of decisions that they will face as human resource professionals (e.g., hiring ex-felons, giving employees time off for volunteer activities). Additionally, project-based experiences with organizations outside the university can foster the development of consulting skills they will later need as internal or external human resource management consultants.

### **Potential Resistance**

The value of service learning initiatives may be not be as transparent for human resource management programs compared to programs in fields directly tied to civic responsibility such as public health, environmental studies, or political science. Faculty members, especially those on the tenure-track, who are interested in using service learning projects must give due consideration to whether there will likely be resistance to their use of service learning projects. Colleagues, administrators, and students, especially those who focus on for-profit entities, may not readily accept service learning as a viable tool for learning human resource principles and practices. This does not, however, mean that service learning is less valuable in human resource management than in other fields but reinforces Barber and Battistoni's (1993) recommendation that faculty members use service learning as one of a variety of experiential learning options until support for its use becomes more widespread.

### **Choice of Projects**

Choice of service learning projects in human resource management inherently depends on the general type of course taught; projects for specialized courses can be easier to develop, manage, and tie to all course topic than projects developed for survey courses. For example, in the Employee Training and Development specialization course, all components of the ISD model tied into both the training video and orientation program projects. On the other hand, the recruitment toolkit project used in the Human Resource Management survey course only encompassed recruitment and strategic human resource management issues, thus excluding other areas such as selection, training, performance evaluation, and benefits and compensation.

There are several ways to address scope issues in survey courses. First, instructors can opt to have different team project options cover different major components of the course so that all components are addressed by at least one project. Second, instructors can require team members to speak to how other human resource management practices are affected by or affect

the component addressed by the team project. For instance, team reflection time for the recruitment toolkit team could focus on how the design of a recruitment program will affect and is affected by the agency's existing training, placement, performance management, recognition, and retention strategies and programs. Third, instructors can require that projects cover at least two major components in the course. For instance, both performance management and training components can be incorporated into one project by having students develop a performance appraisal system and a short training program to train agency members how to properly use the appraisal system.

## **Project Ideas**

There are many different types of projects suitable for inclusion in human resource management classes. Faculty members new to service learning may want to start with relatively low-risk projects such as those geared toward college or university units, including the human resource management program itself. For example, students can develop an orientation program for newly admitted students. Low-risk projects that involve community agencies include conduct of reviews and recommendations regarding a specific agency's human resource management practices such as existing training programs or reward and recognition programs. Other project ideas are to have students conduct exit interviews for agencies that have high volunteer or staff turnover, develop performance evaluation systems for agencies in which volunteers often seek permanent employment, or design placement procedures for agencies with diverse volunteer opportunities. Large-scale projects can include development of comprehensive training programs starting with a needs assessment, continuing through training program development and ending with a thorough program evaluation. Large-scale projects can be spread over several courses such that students in one course develop a training program while students in another course, such as a research methods course, evaluate the outcomes of the training program once implemented.

## **Improving the Assessment Process**

Evaluation of service learning projects is crucial in order to gauge student learning, improve project outcomes, and document the value of the service learning projects. Assessment should be multifaceted, at a minimum including feedback from members of the client organization and instructor. As described, my assessment process has grown over time to include evaluations from members of the client organization, students in the class and myself, but the process could be more comprehensive. Thus far, however, I have used only summative evaluation methods; I plan to expand my assessment strategy to include formative evaluations as well. For instance, in addition to the assessments already gathered, evaluations of projects should include pilot tests with individuals to whom the projects are targeted. For instance, in the case of the Resonance orientation program, a pilot test of the orientation program with a group of ex-offenders who were eligible for the job skills training program would have been beneficial in ensuring the orientation program clearly and completely addressed the concerns of the ex-offenders. Additionally, feedback from and evaluations by subject matter experts such as human resource management consultants would be beneficial to obtain prior to final project delivery to the client agency. Seeking such feedback from these diverse sources can provide a wealth of ideas regarding how projects can be improved as well as provide network opportunities for

students that may lead to later employment. Finally, the evaluation process overall can be improved by including student self-assessments; these can help the instructor gain insight into the efficacy of the project for promoting student learning while also helping students to develop their abilities to accurately appraise their own performance.

Finally, continued follow-up with client organizations as well as students who have completed the course is useful for tracking the outcomes of service learning projects. Such follow-up can help instructors document how service learning projects help community agencies become more effective and efficient as well as how such projects improve students' retention of human resource management concepts while also promoting their employability. Additionally, surveys conducted at the end of the course as well as when students graduate can provide insight onto students' perspectives on how service learning projects have enhanced their understanding of human resource management principles as well as their attitudes toward individual and corporate social responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Service learning is a pedagogical tool that is particularly relevant to human resource management curriculum as it combines experiential learning and service work in such a way as to increase student-learning, development of job-relevant skills, and awareness of issues related to corporate social responsibility. The rewards of service learning can be great, encompassing not only the students, agency, and instructors involved, but also the university and community at large. Service learning, however, requires a significant commitment on the part of faculty members who use it and involves a redefinition of the role of faculty member from that of instructor to process manager. When implemented skillfully and integrated into their research programs, however, service learning can help faculty members distinguish themselves as serious instructors, scholars, and practitioners. Small-scale projects such as reviews and recommendations regarding existing agency human resource practices can be implemented into course rather easily. With experience, faculty may take on larger service learning endeavors such as the development, implementation, and evaluation of human resource management initiatives including training and performance management programs. I strongly encourage human resource management faculty to try out service learning techniques in their courses.

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