

**IN THE SERVICE OF MANY MASTERS:  
DO THE PLURAL LOGICS OF SERVICE LEARNING  
INFLUENCE INDIVIDUAL LEARNING?**

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Abstract: This paper examines the influence of service learning as a pragmatic skills-based teaching intervention. Conceptually, it builds on literature, legitimizing service learning in terms of four educational logics– civic engagement, practical relevance, skill development, and responsibility. We investigate whether service learning can always achieve this broad range of educational objectives, in view of students being increasingly exposed to a logic of ‘educational performance’, which they may perceive to be in conflict with the logics of ‘civic engagement’ and ‘responsibility’. The theoretical part of this paper reviews the evolution of service learning literature and summarizes insights from experiential learning literature. We also report findings from a controlled field experiment with postgraduate management students. We find that service learning influences students’ self-assessment of management skills and awareness stakeholder needs. Surprisingly, our findings provide no evidence for its influence on attitudes to responsibility.

Keywords: service learning; plural logics; skills

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper we examine how student learning is influenced by service learning, an educational intervention involving students developing reciprocal relationships with members of society through non-profit community service activities (Jacoby, 1996). As its point of departure, our research builds on management learning literature, legitimizing service learning in terms of four educational logics (or rationales) – civic engagement, practical relevance, skill development, and responsibility (Godfrey, Illes and Berry, 2005; Toncar et al., 2006). In this respect, service learning’s initial legitimization in terms of civic engagement and practical relevance has

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broadened over time. Since the 1980s, the institutionalization of service learning within Higher Education has broadened its remit, focusing more strongly on pragmatic skill development. Moreover, the post-Enron debates of the 2000's have contributed to educators' aspiration that service learning can also develop students' wider responsibility.

However, an increasingly competitive job market may challenge the attainment of these broader educational objectives. We investigate whether service learning can always achieve this broad range of educational objectives, in view of students being increasingly exposed to a logic of 'educational performance', which they may perceive to be in conflict with the logics of 'civic engagement' and 'responsibility'. Therefore, we would expect that wider socio-economic logics influencing today's students to also impact upon their experience of service learning.

In response to these debates, this paper examines whether service learning can always achieve a wide range of educational objectives. Previous empirical research of service learning offers some evidence of positive learning outcomes. Yet, these studies are largely based on methods using only ex-post, self-assessments and no control groups. As a consequence, there remains a gap in understanding about the causal influence of service learning on individual learning. Due to a lack of studies using control groups, we also don't know whether service learning is more effective than alternative teaching methods in achieving the desired learning outcomes.

To address this gap, we examine whether service-learning influences the development of a wider range of individual learning outcomes – including personal learning of a repertoire of transferable management competences, reflexive practices and stakeholder awareness. Furthermore, we ask whether service-learning develops these outcomes more effectively than classroom-based teaching methods, and critically address how plural logics may affect individual learning outcomes.

This paper makes the following contributions. In the theoretical part of the paper, we review how the evolution of service learning literature reflects different logics about its learning outcomes and summarize insights from experiential learning literature relevant to this debate. We then report findings from a controlled field experiment with postgraduate management students. We find that service learning influences students' self-assessment of management skills and awareness stakeholder needs. Surprisingly, our findings provide no evidence for its influence on attitudes to responsibility.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The multiple logics of service learning**

The evolution of service-learning since its inception in the mid-1960s illustrates powerfully the positioning of management education at the fault-lines of multiple educational logics (Augier & March, 2007; Gabriel, 2009; Khurana, 2007) – defined as rationales that organizations and their members use to legitimize, implement and make sense of their practices (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2004.) Specifically, service learning literature has appealed to the four logics of 'civic engagement', 'practical relevance', 'skill development' and 'personal responsibility' to

legitimize this method within management education. Godfrey, Illes and Berry (2005: 309) have highlighted the role of service-learning in developing a more holistic approach to management, promoting “Reality, Reflection, Reciprocity, and Responsibility” and each yielding “a broader educational and experience base for students.” Similarly, Toncar et al. (2006) suggest that the benefits of service learning can be distinguished along four underlying factors – interpersonal skills, practical skills, citizenship and personal responsibility.

The launch of the *Academy of Management Education & Learning* in 2002 has perhaps contributed to the renaissance of service learning within a wider debate articulating a growing concern about the purpose of management education. In *AMLE*, prominent scholars have called for more relevance in management education (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Others were pinpointing the moral crisis of business education after the ethical scandals erupting in the early 2000s and growing concerns about the environment and social justice (Ghoshal, 2005; Waddock, 2007). Similarly, the need for organizations and their managers to act with care and responsibly has become more credible in the wider field of business education (Aspen 2008, 2010; Gabriel, 2009; Khurana & Nohria, 2008), business itself (Tams & Marshall, 2010; Waddock, 2008), and popular culture (Gore, 2006; Achbar & Abbott, 2003). Within this context, the logics of ‘civic engagement’ and ‘practical relevance’ have been emphasized (DiPadova-Stocks, 2005; Steiner and Watson, 2006), and complemented by the more general logic of ‘responsibility’ (Godfrey et al., 2005).

### **Experiential learning**

The relationship between service learning interventions and individual learning outcomes are typically framed with regards to experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), suggesting the importance of practical experience and reflection upon it on the assimilation of abstract conceptual knowledge.

However, an evolving body of experiential learning literature has also criticized a view of experience as a personal accomplishment (Kayes, 2002). Instead, it proposes experience and experiential learning as being constituted through emotional, social, institutional and cultural processes (Holman et al., 1997; Kayes, 2002; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998). For example, Vince (1998) suggests experiential learning as emotional, provoking anxiety, fear and doubt, which in turn cause denial, avoidance, and blocks to learning. Other scholars have suggested experiential learning as problematic, rather than objective (Reynolds 1999) and entwined with learners’ social and historical position (Holman et al. 1997; Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011).

From this perspective, collective logics can be seen to influence the vocabularies, identities, and rationales by which students implement and make sense of their learning experiences (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Even though educators may actively or implicitly encourage a broader range of logics (Godfrey et al., 2005), it does not automatically follow that students adopt all of these when making sense of their learning. In fact, little is known about the influence of the wider cultural and institutional contexts on students’ engagement in service learning. In a world where students are increasingly anxious about their educational investments ‘paying off’ in their future employment, they may use, adapt and customize service learning to meet these personal needs

(Gabriel, 2002). In other words, students' sensemaking of service learning may be in conflict with educators' aims of instilling greater 'civic engagement' and enhanced notions of 'responsibility'.

The service learning literature offers rich analysis of its implementation in North America (for example: Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001; Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Morton & Troppe, 1996), and elsewhere (for example: Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010; Muller & Subotzky, 2001). Despite a considerable literature, only a few studies of have examined its impact on individual learning outcomes. Findings by Flannery and Pragman (2008; 2010) suggest that students who conducted service learning projects within a pre-defined volunteering structure (Campus Kitchen) generally rated the project's impact on 'practical relevance' and 'skill development' slightly higher than on 'civic engagement'. Bartel, Saveedra and van Dyne (2001) examined impact in terms of community learning (knowledge of social, cultural, or economic issues) and personal learning (self-awareness of managerial attitudes and abilities). Lester et al. (2005) assessed four potential outcomes – practical skills, interpersonal skills, citizenship, and personal responsibility – using the Service-Learning Benefit (SELEB) scale (Toncar et al., 2006), but only found sufficient discriminant validity for two factors – citizenship and personal skills. Generally supportive of the impact on 'practical relevance' and 'skill development' is also Middleton's (2005) observation that service learning can be a context for the emergence of charismatic leadership in nascent leaders. However, most of these studies are limited by their use of ex-post assessments. As a result, conclusions about the actual effect of the service learning intervention remain limited. Moreover, no studies has used a control group to assess whether the impact of service learning is more significant than that of alternative teaching methods.

## METHODS

### The intervention

The effect of service learning was examined using a controlled field experiment involving an experimental group of 56 students and a control group of approximately 80 students who were participating in classroom-based team learning only. Both cohorts consisted of post-graduate management students in 2009 and 2010.

The experimental group were asked to select a suitable socially beneficial activity, develop a proposal with local non-profit partners, and deliver a project in teams of five to six students which created a "tangible social impact" within a twelve week deadline.

### Survey data

Student learning was assessed by administering two questionnaire surveys prior to (T0) and after (T2) the service-learning intervention. Two dimensions of individual learning were measured. The first dimension measured management competence. This included abilities to collaborate, create, control and compete, using the scales from the Competing Values Framework (Denison, Hooijberg et al. 1995; Lawrence, Lenk et al. 2009). The second dimension measured Attitudes to

Corporate Responsibility, using scales for breadth of stakeholder consideration and cost versus benefit of CSR, using the Quazi and O'Brien (2000) scale.

### **Qualitative data**

Furthermore, quantitative data was generated from student text samples, asking students to summarize their learning from the service learning activity. This data was analysed qualitatively by three independent coders.

## **RESULTS**

The preliminary results of the first cohort of the experiment have been subjected to partial analysis and are presented in summary form.

### **Management competence**

Findings suggest that, as a result of service learning, the experimental group showed significantly increased competence in collaboration by encouraging participation and also project competences in controlling and clarifying processes ( $P < 0.01$ ).

The experimental group also established a distinctly higher level of awareness of stakeholder needs compared to the Control group ( $P < 0.01$ ).

Consistent with the idea that experiential learning contributes to a greater realism in learning, we found that students' self-assessment of certain project control competencies were lower in the experimental group. This finding could be interpreted as a re-evaluation of their project skills in a multiple stakeholder environment.

### **Attitudes to Corporate Responsibility**

Contrary to expectations, there is limited evidence of any positive change in attitudes to responsibility as a result of service learning in the experimental group.

The significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) higher level of responsibility prior to the service learning intervention in the experimental group, when compared to the control group prompts the question whether individuals with a higher level of responsibility or prior experience of volunteering may be less affected by the service-learning intervention. There is some evidence of increased empathy in the experimental group; however this seems to be limited to those directly working with more emotive causes (e.g. Direct exposure to homelessness).

### **Qualitative analysis**

Qualitative analysis of student text describing in their own words the benefits and learning they had perceived from the service learning intervention provided some evidence across the four

educational logics of civic engagement, practical relevance, skill development, and responsibility.

However, the overriding emphasis of students' retrospective sensemaking of their service-learning project was in terms of the opportunities it provided to build a better CV for jobs applications. This was expressed with comments such as:

[I] developed specific skills in regards to project management and generic proficiencies which are transferable to many jobs.

Having had a lot of face-to-face meetings with businesses, I have developed and improved my professional approach in dealing with customers and potential clients/partners. This I feel will serve me well in my career, as this is a major factor in success. I pride myself on my interpersonal skills and feel that the experiential learning that I had on this project will certainly [benefit] me.

In support of our quantitative finding that service learning predicts the development of collaborative management skills, 60 percent of qualitative comments from students referred to the perceived benefits of having engaged in collaboration and with stakeholders/

As the project was about improving the lives of the residents, we wanted them to play a pivotal part and provide their ideas and needs to assist us in deciding what we needed to do. We created a questionnaire for the residents so they could give feedback...

Students also reported a greater realism about their management abilities when identifying an appreciation of project complexity as a new experience.

[We] had approximately eight weeks to plan, organise and execute our project, but pressures on this timescale were significant from the start – all of us had our individual commitments, other group work to complete as well as other lecture to attend, assignments to write etc.

Overall, the qualitative analysis suggests that students' focus was essentially on soft, transferable skills such as teamwork, project management, and organizational skills. Although, mention was made of social impact in most essays, relatively few students mentioned the beneficiary of the charity (e.g. the homeless). The majority of students appeared to conceive of the non-profit as a single entity with whom they interact, with little consideration of roles and differences within the organisation, or consideration of the social issue being addressed. In discussing achievements, most frequently discussed were those concerning direct tangible benefits to the charity e.g. donations (39%), raising awareness (25%), with very little personal reflection on personal social engagement. Other key themes were associated with academic success such as: achieving good teamwork (19%), receiving high project marks (22%), completing the project to deadlines (29%), and benefits for the individual such as professional development.

## DISCUSSION

Our study challenges the idea that service learning can concurrently achieve positive learning outcomes on a range of learning outcomes. We found support for the influence of service learning on the development of management competences. Yet, contrary to expectations we found no clear evidence of service learning also predicting attitudes to corporate responsibility in the same group of students. Furthermore, our qualitative data analysis suggests that the dominant student logic appears to be associated with 'practical relevance', and 'skill development', yet with limited engagement with sense-making logics associated with 'civic engagement' or 'responsibility'.

These findings suggest that an understanding of learning outcomes from service learning interventions require consideration of the wider institutional contexts in which both the design and student experience of this teaching intervention are embedded.

Experiential learning literature offers some explanation of these findings. It can be suggest that service learning creates an anxiety-provoking team context, in particular when compared with more conventional classroom approaches. In response to their perceived anxiety, students are more likely to engage in ego-protecting defence mechanisms (Vince, 1998).

As a consequence of this anxiety, they are likely to explain experiences in terms of familiar and positive logics – such as referring to “the leadership I showed.” Within a socio-economic context where building relevant skills for a competitive labour market is of high salience to students, they created meaning from their experiences in terms of a “CV building” script, favouring skill-development and personal benefits to employability. This logic was reinforced by academic course marketing emphasizing the benefits of the postgraduate degree for students’ employability.

Yet, our data also indicated that students were less likely to engage in critical reflexive thinking, about the relationship between business and the non-profit sector, the responsibility of business, and possible implications for their own careers. These observations are consistent with social critiques of *new capitalism* (Sennett 1998), social life in late modernity (Swidler 2002; Eliasoph 2002), and a changing higher education context (Molesworth et al 2010). Our findings suggest the instrumentalisation of Service Learning in terms of *consumption* and *employability*.

## Conclusions

In conclusions, the findings of this study suggest a sober realism about the potential of service learning in a Higher Education environment where student expectations and objectives are increasingly directed at employability. As our findings suggest, service learning is perceived as particularly beneficial with regards to developing management competencies that make students more employable. As educators we may be left with accepting this reality, or instead explore more creative ways to encourage students wider learning along the civic engagement and responsibility.

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