

Fall 1-1-1996

# Service-Learning Practice: Developing a Theoretical Framework

Dick Cone

*University of Southern California*

Susan Harris

*University of Southern California*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen>

---

## Recommended Citation

Cone, Dick and Harris, Susan, "Service-Learning Practice: Developing a Theoretical Framework" (1996). *Service Learning, General*. 193.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/193>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service Learning, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



## Service-Learning Practice: Developing a Theoretical Framework

Dick Cone and Susan Harris  
University of Southern California

Center  
for Service Learning  
1954 Lincoln Ave, Room R260  
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

*Service-learning has dramatically increased its impact on the American educational scene during the past few years, and new practitioners are quickly adopting the methods of integrating traditional classroom-based instruction and community service. As might be expected of practitioners, our practices are strong but our theory is sometimes found to be wanting. We have tinkered with methods to perfect practices without understanding the philosophical, psychological and social mechanisms that undergird our practices. For two decades, we have been drawing largely on Dewey, Kolb and Freire for theoretical support for our work. This paper suggests additional theoretical perspectives drawn largely from cognitive psychology and social theory. A number of constructs will be presented including concept formation, selective perception, categorization, critical reflection and mediated learning, each of which helps to explain the transformational nature of experiential education, as well as provide intellectual support for what are currently recognized as "best practices."*

Cheryl Gilbert<sup>1</sup>  
Sociology 101  
Journal Entry - Week One

*Week One - The Setting: What are your most vivid first impressions of the site? Describe settings, people, actions and positive or negative feelings you are having.*

Today was my first day as a volunteer for USC's Joint Educational Project at Prairie Avenue Elementary School.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that this is my third semester on campus, I have never ventured beyond Exposition Boulevard into South Central Los Angeles, and I must admit that I was scared to death. What had I gotten myself into? I had volunteered to spend two hours a week in riot-ravaged South Central LA?! Riding south on Figueroa St., which borders USC on the east, I was thinking that it didn't look much different than Minneapolis (which is about an hour's drive from where I'm from). However, the further south I traveled, the more run down the houses looked, the more boarded up stores I passed. The cars parked on driveways and along the street appeared very old, often with missing tires or broken windows. The scene changed even more dramatically after I turned onto one of the side streets. Suddenly I was thrust into a scene right out of one of the "gangsta" videos I've seen. I was very conspicuous as I rode my bike; I felt like every person I passed stared at me, a 19-year-old white girl on a shiny expensive bike, intruding where she shouldn't be.

Luckily, I arrived at the school safely. As I

circled the school trying to find a bicycle rack, my thoughts drifted back to Walnut Road Elementary School in Apple Valley, Minnesota. Prairie Avenue Elementary looks nothing like the spacious, lush campus that I once attended. The building was badly in need of repair and there was graffiti and trash in the neighborhood surrounding the school. How could anyone get used to this? I walked around to the front entrance and was stopped by a security guard who asked me to sign in. Once admitted, I waded through a sea of black and Mexican children to the JEP office, and then to the classroom where I am assigned as a mentor.

When I met my "mentee," my heart sank. Standing in front of me was this little Mexican kid who could barely speak English. Although he was smiling and seemed happy to meet me, I could tell that he was poor and probably neglected. While I feel very strongly for the people who live in this community, I do not understand why it is that they continue to live here, subjecting their children to such unbearable conditions. These children are susceptible to picking up bad habits like stealing, lying and cheating in trying to be like the gang-bangers who live in the neighborhood.

Cheryl's journal entry is representative of many students venturing beyond the perimeter of the University of Southern California campus through the Joint Educational Project (JEP), a program that links service-learning courses with community schools and agencies. USC is a wealthy, influential institution<sup>3</sup> located in a predominantly Latino and

African-American community in which 39% of all residents live in poverty and the per capita income is \$6,108 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). While the contrast between USC and the surrounding community is stark, it is also true that students' impressions of the community are often exaggerated and ethnocentric, if not racist and intolerant.

Cheryl's response highlights a dilemma which we, as service-learning practitioners, struggle with on a daily basis. As the world shrinks and our contact with a wide range of human experience increases, "multiculturalism" is a reality and no longer simply an ideal. However, multicultural experiences do not necessarily lead to a "multicultural attitude" (i.e. one that is tolerant and understanding); students such as Cheryl often draw on deeply-ingrained stereotypes, media images and previous experiences unless they are encouraged to consider new experiences from a critical, academically-informed perspective. Although experiential education has existed in one form or another for almost a century (Kraft, 1996), never before have we lived in such a diverse society and had to deal with the opportunities and challenges such diversity presents.

Cheryl is one of thousands of college students facing similar dilemmas everyday in the growing number of service-learning programs nationwide. As the number of programs has skyrocketed, so too has the number of scholarly articles examining service-learning practice and theory. The journal in which this article appears was created to provide a forum for the growing number of educators interested in reading and writing about the field.

Despite this surge of scholarly interest, the academic component of service-learning has not been a priority for the majority of programs, which tend to focus on the personal benefits to the students (Maybach, 1996; Shumer & Belbas, 1996). This emphasis has resulted in creating programs which do, indeed, increase the self-esteem of service providers (Kraft, 1996). However, it is not clear that they avoid doing so at the expense of the communities they "serve." Without an academically-informed understanding of difference and diversity, service may let students like Cheryl feel good about themselves, but they may leave the community having learned very little. Furthermore, this service-heavy approach may have devastating consequences for the future of service-learning as a pedagogy, which, as Cohen (1994) and Zlotkowski (1995) have suggested, may depend on its ability to prove its academic worth.

We believe that service-learning needs to consider the personal and intellectual growth of both the student and the community. For it to serve as an

effective tool that will survive the test of time, careful thought must be given to the pedagogy of service-learning. A model which simply asks students to go into community settings and learn through experience is potentially damaging. As we can see from Cheryl's journal entry, simply experiencing new worlds doesn't necessarily increase understanding and may even serve to confirm stereotyped perspectives. Dewey made a similar point when he wrote:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experiences does not mean that all experiences are genuine or equally educative.... Everything depends upon the quality of the experience...(as)...every experience lives on in further experiences. (1938, pp. 25-26)

A genuine service-learning pedagogy requires careful thought about how people learn experientially and careful attention to the methods educators can use to shape and structure the quality of student experiences.

### Theoretical roots

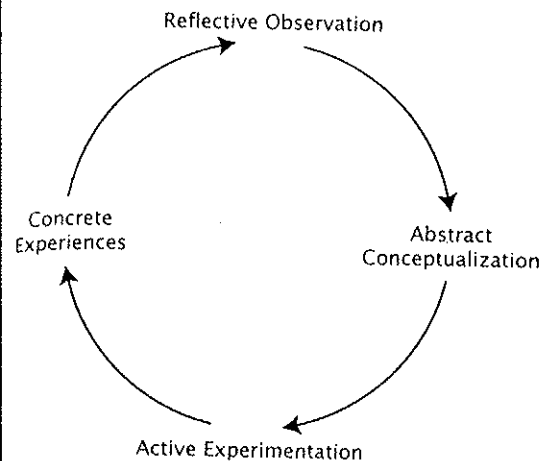
The model which has guided the development of experiential education for more than a decade is the model proposed by David Kolb (1984). Kolb's model is a variation of the process of experiential inquiry set out by pragmatist philosopher John Dewey more than half a century ago. Dewey set out a six-step process of inquiry which involved: 1) encountering a problem, 2) formulating a problem or question to be resolved, 3) gathering information which suggests solutions, 4) making hypotheses, 5) testing hypotheses, and 6) making warranted assertions (1938).

Kolb conceptualizes Dewey's six steps as a four-stage experiential learning cycle involving concrete experiences, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (see Figure 1). Learners are engaged in a cycle in which their work in community or work settings forms the basis for written or oral reflection. Under the guidance of an instructor, reflective work is used to form abstract concepts and hypotheses are generated which then get cycled back into further concrete experiences. It is a student-centered model which Kolb believes allows a variety of students with very different learning styles to develop and integrate their skills.

In 1990, David Moore suggested a post-structuralist approach to experiential learning: a "critical pedagogy...in which students and teachers conduct an unfettered investigation of social institutions, power relations, and value commitments" (p. 281). He argues that meaning is not centered or

fixed and that experiential approaches offer ways for students to examine "shifting systems of meaning." The method requires that students learn to "read" their workplaces as "texts" in which students "examine...the histories, power arrangements, and values underlying their work organizations" (p. 280).

FIGURE 1  
Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning



Kolb's model has helped service-learning educators develop an awareness of the role of reflection in relating the world of concrete experiences to abstract theories. The primary thrust of the model, however, has been to suggest that experiential approaches accommodate students with different learning styles better than traditional didactic methodologies. We find Kolb's model is somewhat ambiguous for educators attempting to better understand their role within a service-learning paradigm. As a consequence, many educators continue to send students out to "learn in community settings" and "reflect" on their work without a clear understanding of how experiences instruct or how educators make use of the reflective process. Moore's approach has not, to our knowledge, been widely adopted, but it falls prey to the same set of structural ambiguities as Kolb's model.

Service-learning educators also make frequent reference to Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire. Most often these references are made describing service approaches that "empower" communities and treat community members with dignity and respect. Less often is Freireian pedagogy applied to our own students. Freire challenges post-secondary education when he opposes "banking" approach to education and endorses a problem-posing education (which) affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming -

as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (1994, p. 65).

The authors believe that a number of theories evolving from studies of cognition, philosophy, critical pedagogy, and postmodern theory suggest that it may be possible to adapt components of these different strategies into a more comprehensive service-learning model. In proposing this model, we hope to clarify the role of educators, incorporate Freire's ideas, and avoid some of the ambiguity that we find in Kolb's model and Moore's suggested approach.

### A Service-Learning Model

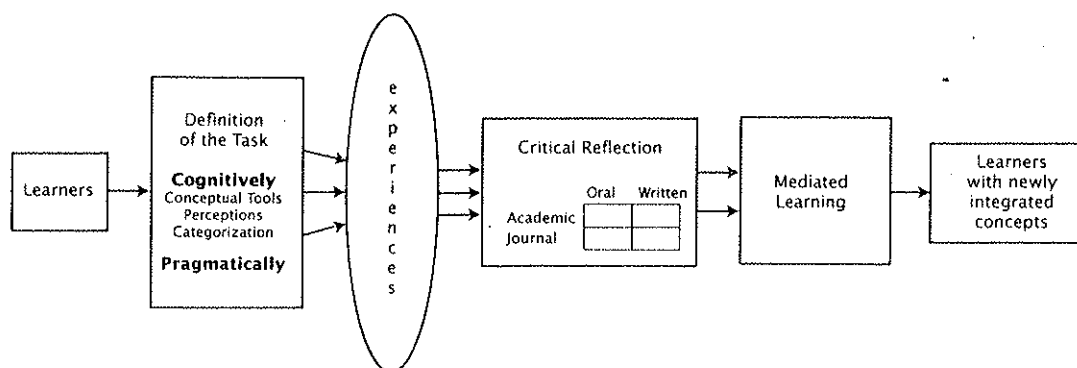
In this paper, we hope to develop a model of service-learning that bridges the typically expansive gap between theory and practice. A model which best seems to capture both the individual, psychological nature and the interpersonal, socio-cultural nature of service-learning is the six stage lens model which appears in Figure 2.

#### A Brief Overview of the Model

Before moving into a detailed analysis of the model, we offer a summary of each of the main components. The model begins with the learner and his or her unique set of characteristics. While it is typically impractical, if not impossible, to coordinate individualized service-learning programs, we nevertheless recognize the significance that individual characteristics have on the service-learning experience. Keeping this in mind, the second component of the model takes a look at the academic and pragmatic issues concerning a service-learning practitioner. The model emphasizes the need for carefully planning the service-learning experience so that the student is intellectually challenged and appropriately placed. This involves providing students with pre-service training and theoretical concepts that the student will be expected to apply and understand in the community.

The third part of the model examines the service experience itself. We argue that it is important to make the experience a "discontinuous" one, distinct from students' everyday experiences, so that students are challenged to broaden their perspectives on the world. Reflection follows the experience, in our model, as in most models of service-learning. However, unlike some models, we argue for more a holistic approach to reflection that involves the student's intellectual and emotional capacities, as well as their written and oral skills. As important as individual reflection is, the fifth component of our model proposes that reflection is most effective when guided by an educator or men-

FIGURE 2  
A Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators



tor who can facilitate the student's learning process.

In the end, our model returns to the learner, recognizing that service-learning is not simply an abstract pedagogical tool, but an experience that has potentially profound effects on a student's intellectual and personal growth.

#### *The Beginning - The Learners*

Like Kolb, we begin with the assumption that our students come to us not as blank slates but as individuals with different learning styles, skills, histories, philosophies of life, attitudes, values, expectations, and perspectives. Cheryl and her fellow students are products of social forces and their own personal life experiences. Their "knowledge" about the world is a composite of such things as earlier educational experiences, messages from the mass media, influences of home and community, and the reading they have done. Unlike Kolb, we intentionally include students in the model to remind ourselves that the rest of the model is about systematically attempting to help students to use experiences in the community to better build-upon, critique, and evaluate that knowledge and move to an intellectually "higher ground."

Educational theories of the twentieth century abound with examples of the differences among learners. While an examination of such differences is beyond the scope of this paper, we mention them here in order to emphasize the significance of different learning styles for developing pedagogical tools. In addition to Kolb's work in cognitive learning styles (1984), Bruner (1968) has looked at copers and defenders, Kagan (1964) has examined reflective and impulsive conceptual styles, and Witkin and Goodenough (1977) have looked at issues of field dependence versus field independence. From a sociological standpoint, compar-

tive studies have looked at the effects of class (Heath, 1983), gender (Crockett & Petersen, 1984) and culture (Maehr, 1974) on learning. From the abundance of these focused studies on differences among learners, it is not unreasonable to assume that there are an infinite number of ways that these variables and others could be combined, resulting in what might be thought of as a unique learning mode for each student.

As instructors, we cannot hope to know our students' individual learning styles and custom tailor our work to the wide range of differences. Furthermore, we cannot expect to adapt the curriculum in order to account for the demographic characteristics of each student. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that differences among students exist and factor some of this information into the way we structure and make use of service learning opportunities. For example, we may assume that Cheryl's small town Midwestern background will not give her the same set of expectations regarding her work in urban Los Angeles as her classmates Jaime, who lives in the *barrio* in East LA, or Mon-Fan, a student from China. A faculty member creating a service-learning program for a class comprised primarily of students like Cheryl might develop a very different model than a faculty member teaching a class of students like Jaime. In a similar vein, communities in the Midwest will differ from communities in other regions of the country, as will urban, suburban and rural settings have their own unique characteristics. We know from comparing service-learning programs across the country that they vary according to where they are located (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). Service-learning is particularly well suited to the consideration of differences among students and the communities in which they are placed through the careful use of the mediated learning

approach we will examine later.

### *Defining the Task - Cognitively*

#### Conceptual tools

Practitioners often describe service-learning as starting with concrete experiences. Moore (1990), for example, starts with "an unfettered investigation of social institutions...." However, as noted above, "unfettered" students enter into a classroom with their own unique ways of looking at the world. Therefore, it is critical that service-learning educators provide assistance and structure for students so they are prepared to learn from experiential opportunities. As Cheryl's journal indicates, without such structure and guidance, each student may simply continue to understand their new experiences in the same ways using the tools of conceptualization that already lie within their grasp. We think Dewey had it right when he talked about encountering a problem, formulating a set of questions to be asked, and gathering information - in other words, approaching experience with a set of conceptual tools. The job of service-learning instructors is to assist students in identifying problems, formulating questions, and knowing how to go about gathering information before they enter the field and as they continue their work in the field.

In our program, students enter the community with a set of clearly explicated theories that have been introduced in the classroom. These offer students a systematic way of looking at the world. Each week students use a single theory or group of concepts in the form of carefully crafted "Academic Questions" as a basis for their observations in the community. In responding to the questions, students are asked to define terms, cite their observations and describe how their observations support or contradict the theories and concepts presented in class.

In her first week, Cheryl's organizing question is:

As a community service provider, you play a different role than you do as a USC student. Describe this new role. What specific tasks and behaviors are expected of you? What obligations and rights do you have as a result of being in this role? Compare this new role with your role as student. Are you experiencing any "role strain," "role conflict" or "role distancing?"

Academic Questions ask students to consider their experiences using a new set of conceptual tools. Dr. Sorenson<sup>4</sup>, Cheryl's sociology professor, designed this first set of questions to heighten each

student's awareness of his or her various social roles, as well as the potential conflict between the roles of college student and community service provider. In examining this issue, Cheryl must draw upon what she has learned about role theory and relate it to her experiences as a student and a mentor.

The questions force Cheryl to look at and think about those things that are not physically manifested (e.g. role conflict) but that must be understood through analysis and interpretation using ideas which have been introduced in class. Without a somewhat formal structuring of the task, Cheryl's abilities to make observations in the community are limited to the conceptual tools she uses in her daily life. This can be problematic if students, like Cheryl, draw from stereotypes and prejudiced perspectives in their everyday analyses. The task of the instructor is to offer her a new conceptual basis for understanding her experiences.

#### Perceptions

Postmodern theorists hold that there is no absolute reality independent of human mental activity (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). Each of us lives in a world created by our own cognition (Goodman, 1986). Another, less technical way of saying the same thing is that no two humans see the world in exactly the same way. Our understanding emerges from worlds that are created by others and transmitted to us. The acquisition of knowledge is not a passive process, however. According to eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the meaning we make of that which we receive and perceive is shaped by an active mind which molds and coordinates ideas with sensations, "transforming the multiplicity of experiences into the orderly unity of thought" (Gardner, 1987, p. 57). Our understanding is shaped by our perceptions and our perceptions by our understanding. Together understanding and perceptions work to create a world that is unique for each of us.

Central to the work of Gardner, Bruner and other cognitive psychologists has been the fundamental questions of the nature of experience. Building on the works of Kant, they hold that no individual can see "the thing in itself" or the actual physical reality. Perception is affected by such things as the amount of material being considered, the conditions under which the perceptions take place, prior knowledge of the perceiver, and the perceiver's beliefs, interpretations, inferences, assumptions, and intentions (Gardner, 1987, p. 309). Faced with trillions of visual and other perceptual possibilities given to us each day, we actually perceive relatively little. Those things we do perceive fit within

certain concepts and have meaning at some conceptual level (Bruner, 1986).

If we ask a room full of people to look around and notice everything they see that is blue, then have them close their eyes and name off all of the *green* objects in the room, the list of items perceived will typically be very short. When then asked to list the blue items, they will generate an extensive list. Clearly their ability to "see" is shaped by the nature of the task. They assumed that our instruction was in some way meaningful and used the concept of "blue" as a filter by which to make their perceptions. The act of seeing is not only physical but mental and psychological (Gardner, 1987, p. 101). More accurately, it is physical, mental, psychological and social. Perceivers sitting in that room are free to "see" whatever they want. Indeed, people who know this game, make it a point to take note of random colors in anticipation of the bait-and-switch nature of the task. But even here, they are not "free" but rather constrained by their own anticipation of a task set within the social interaction. We act in a world we have created, constrained by what we "perceive" - perceive, feel, think (Bruner, 1986, p. 69).

Students venturing into communities perceive those things that they are mentally prepared to see. In her journal, Cheryl makes simplistic, non-critical comparisons between Prairie Avenue Elementary and Walnut Road Elementary and draws upon her experience watching "gangsta" videos because her first journal asked for her "vivid impressions" and offered no other conceptual frame. This initial journal offers a crude baseline of the learner as she or he appears in the first stage of our model. As the semester continues, other journal questions will help learners to focus on different vantage points, helping broaden perceptions and enabling students to "see" the "same setting" in different ways (see Appendix A).

#### Categorization

Just as the eyes and mind cannot grasp all of the physical perceptions available to our senses, our brain cannot carry all of the individual bits of information that we take in. Cognitively, we cope by packaging material into working concepts like "blue" or "school" or "sociology." These concepts are formed around discernable attributes or features that have some predictive power (Bruner, 1956). Within our concept of "school" are the attributes of "students," "teachers," "classrooms," and "learning material." Within the culture, the concept of "school" has some common meaning which we, as members of society, use when we are

talking about school, complaining about school or voting on school funding.

The meaning we make of even insignificant experiences hinges upon the conceptual categories we hold in our heads. Well defined and agreed upon concepts organized into theories form the basis of our academic disciplines and the manner in which knowledge is organized within academic disciplines. With or without formal education however, the organization of knowledge into conceptual categories is critical to the cognitive process. New information, whether transmitted within the culture or perceived individually, is integrated into our existing concepts, helping us constantly shape and re-shape our concepts.

While we have the power to form original concepts, generally concepts are learned or acquired via social processes. As noted above, we build and reshape acquired concepts to fit a world of our own making. We learned the concept of "school" before we set foot in the schoolhouse door. This conceptual understanding gets modified by our experiences and our concept is "personalized." In presenting relevant theories in class and shaping specific questions using those questions, Dr. Sorenson is offering Cheryl new categories to use. Cheryl's concept of "school" will likely be modified as she integrates her experiences as a college student and as a mentor in urban Los Angeles with her previous experiences as a student in rural Minnesota. Her experience will transform her concepts. If Cheryl's concepts about "school," "education," and "equality" are radically transformed during the course of the semester, her way of understanding the world may be transformed as well.

#### *Defining the Task - Pragmatically*

Prior to engaging in community service, students participating in the Joint Educational Project go through a pre-service training session in which they learn more about the nature of the assignment, about the school with which they will be working, and the culture of the community and the neighborhood schools. At the conclusion of training, students are asked to detail their own expectations for the assignment and include that information in a service-learning "contract."

The purpose of carefully planned pre-service training sessions is to clarify expectations and intentions. Expectancy (our anticipation of what will be encountered) and intention (our tentative plan for what we will do when we encounter that which we expect) are as much a part of the realm of emotion as intellect. Expectations and intentions are shaped by our past experiences and, as a consequence, carry emotional attachments as well as



information from the past. Under conditions in which frustration, anxiety and other emotional responses are too high, individuals have difficulty forming clear concepts (Eysenck, 1982). In preparing students for their experiences through pre-service training, efforts are made by the staff at the JEP to shape student expectations in order to minimize frustration and debilitating anxiety. This process calls for the expectations of both the educators and the site to be clarified and for students' own expectancies and intentions to be identified and, as necessary, modified.

It is important to note that what educators tell students to expect in communities will clearly shape what they observe. Educators need to be aware that in providing training on issues such as child abuse, gangs and delinquency, and other problem-focused views of community, students will be more likely to "see" such things, even if these problems are rare or difficult to observe.

### *The Experience*

Cheryl's assignment involves mentoring a fifth grade immigrant from El Salvador at a nearby elementary school. Her work requires her to enter into the community twice a week during the semester. What she encounters during each week is highly predictable in that the meetings with Miguel are always a combination of academic assistance and relationship-building within a school setting. On the other hand, the quality of that relationship, the responsiveness of the student, Cheryl's skills in working with him, and the events Cheryl has the opportunity to experience are highly unpredictable. In developing experiences which take predictability (continuity) and unpredictability (discontinuity) into account, educators can build in factors that promote active learning and minimize those factors which hinder learning.

In our everyday experience, we minimize the demands on our thinking through a process of anticipatory cognition in which we use scraps of input from our perceptions and "read" the rest of the scene from the model that exists in our head. For example, we commute to work daily barely conscious of our surroundings. We do not read signs, notice neighborhoods, or actively think about our route. This process requires that we live in a "continuous world" in which we can fairly accurately predict what we would see if we were to pay attention.

Active cognition is more likely to occur if we encounter the unexpected. There is then a heightened state of arousal (Bruner, 1986, p. 46). Cognitive arousal is most often created when our roles are changed, our concepts challenged, our

worlds brought into question. The challenge to existing conceptual frameworks in which our expectations are violated places us in an aroused condition in which we are forced to re-conceptualize (i.e. learn).

In Cheryl's case, the likelihood of active cognition is increased by deliberate thought about the placement of students participating in the service-learning program. JEP attempts to harness the social, cultural and economic discontinuity between the lives of most students at the University of Southern California and the lives of the students in the community with whom they work, in order to promote conceptual challenges. Cheryl is unlikely to have well-formed cognitive models of urban schools, of immigrant life, or of cross-cultural communications. Placing her in this new and different setting challenges existing models and can help her reconceptualize.

Reconceptualization is a process of formulating new hypotheses and testing them (Dewey, 1938). Effective service-learning requires extended experiences and relationship building with members of the community. Cheryl's work requires her to engage in an experiential-reflective cycle on a weekly basis where she can build on her efforts to make meaning of the environment with the help of her instructor, JEP staff members, and members of the community.

### *Critical Reflection*

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that, "language (is) an agent for altering the powers of thought - giving thought new means for explicating the world. In turn, language (becomes) the repository for new thoughts once achieved," (Bruner, 1986, p. 143). There is growing evidence that learning in contextual situations not only increases vocabulary but that the improvement in vocabulary increases the ability to learn in contextual situations (Sternberg, 1990). According to Bruner, there are two modes of thought, each of which calls upon a different vocabulary, each "providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality," (1986, p. 11). These are "the well-formed argument" and the "good story." At JEP, we promote both modes of thought by providing students with intellectual stimuli in the form of "Academic Questions" and "Journal Questions."

### *Academic Questions*

Each week Cheryl is asked to offer a written response to the theoretical or conceptual question described above in "Defining the Task." Drawing upon her observations as well as her conversations with Miguel, Cheryl attempts to define the terms



used in the question, cite her observations, and explain how her observations support or contradict the theory. She may also want to explore some secondary sources in the library or in her classroom reading which shed still more light on the topic.

During the second week of her assignment, Cheryl is asked to answer the following set of Academic Questions:

According to Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy (1993), *participatory research* "is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations" (p. 177). How does your work in the community compare to *participatory research*? How does it compare to other types of sociological research? (Be sure to use examples from your experience in the community that allow you to compare and contrast your work with various research methodologies.) Keeping in mind the Greenwood et al. article, as well as the lecture on research ethics, what might be the ethical issues involved in your work in the community? What precautions might you take to prevent ethical problems from occurring in your assignment?

Reflecting on these questions and their relationship to her experiences challenges Cheryl to compare her work to sociological research and to think about her work in scholarly terms. Furthermore, by asking Cheryl and other students to link their experiences specifically to "participatory research," Dr. Sorenson encourages students to consider their work from an egalitarian and collaborative perspective.

In response to this question, Cheryl wrote, in part:

Greenwood et al. challenges us to conduct our observations from the perspective of members of the community, but as careful as I may be, I find myself accepting certain racial and ethnic stereotypes. In my short nineteen years on this earth, I have not been able to interact with many people of other ethnic groups. As a result, much of my understanding of these groups comes from what I see on television. As Professor Sorenson mentioned in class, however, minority groups are typically under-represented and/or misrepresented in the media. This has left me naive and misinformed when it comes to analyzing my experiences in the community.

Wittgenstein holds that concepts are neither simple mental constructs in the head nor abstract ideas that exist independent of human beings but rather

represent a unity of ideas that have utility in world (Gardner, 1987, p. 346). The more frequently that students use abstract concepts in observing, thinking about, describing, and talking about world, the more clear those concepts become integrated into the thinking processes of the user. As these analytical methods and organizational concepts are acquired, they move students one step closer to being able to think critically and defend their points of view. As students develop more advanced critical thinking skills, Moore's "critical pedagogy" becomes a more viable alternative. We agree that an instructional approach that invites students to "read" their workplaces in the community as "texts" in which students "examine... histories, power arrangements, and values underlying their work organizations" is a worthwhile goal. Our disagreement is whether our students are ready to do this without a great deal of mediated skill development.

#### Journal Questions

In addition to an Academic Question, Cheryl responds to a reflective question which is designed to help her look at her own personal response to her experiences. Each week a new question helps her look at a new level of the experience or to look at the experience from a different angle to learn more about herself as a participant in the community.

In Cheryl's second week, she is asked to reply to the following Journal Question:

Week Two - Players in the Drama: Describe who you work with, their lives, their views, their goals in life. Include some personal reaction to the individual or individuals you are working with.

Cheryl offers a lengthy reply which includes the following:

...Miguel had a big bandage on his head and several bruises on his legs. Although I didn't ask him, I'm guessing that these are the results of living in an abusive home. Because of the high rates of poverty, crime, gang activity and drug use that plague the community, I assume that the pressures get to be too much, and parents release their frustration on their children...

Academically, in employing Dewey's model of empirical inquiry, we intentionally play down feelings, letting the student play the role of an "objective" observer. We realize, however, that students engaged in service-learning are hardly objective observers. They bring with them beliefs, attitudes, and values which frequently are at odds with the communities in which they work. The discontinu-

ity between student and community, while provoking active learning, also represents a danger in which their "learning" may simply be built upon their prior attitudes and values. When educators and community representatives speak of a "do no harm" policy for service-learning, they are acknowledging that service-learning may have negative consequences. Students who enter into communities and react in racist or patronizing ways may be doing far more harm than the ills they are supposedly addressing (C. Martinez, personal communication, 1995). We believe that this process needs the same sort of mediation that we advocated above and will describe this in more detail in the section on mediated learning.

A second use of these weekly journal questions is to help us identify and resolve problems that hinder student learning. Students engaged in service-learning frequently encounter problems that hinder their ability to learn. A student mistakenly assigned to the school's xerox room or a student assigned to work with an autistic child without the training required for such work can result in high levels of "noise," (Bruner, 1986) or frustration and limited access to new information about the community in which he or she is working (Eysenck, 1982). Many students accept whatever task they are given as they see themselves as "servants" to the community, despite debilitating anxiety produced by the situation. Weekly journals or reflective questions offer them a chance to air their frustrations and, as a consequence, a chance for educators to help establish conditions in which they are more likely to learn.

#### Written Reflection

Our efforts to assist students in developing the formal skill of weaving together the two abstract worlds of theory and community-based observations will be most successful if students' responses are in a written form. We believe that written responses are essential for teaching students how to create carefully developed, critical arguments. These written arguments require students to use the more technical vocabulary of the discipline. Our educational institutions expect that students should be achieving this skill as a form of technical literacy (Myers, 1986).

#### Oral Reflection

At the same time, we argue that there is an important role for a verbal and interactive reflective process that helps students test their thoughts in a marketplace of ideas. In order to accomplish this goal, Cheryl participates along with her classmates in a weekly discussion led by her Teaching

Assistant on the relationship between the theory and their collective experiences. It is at this level that students must address the consequences of challenging or supporting concepts within a social context. Central to the notion of socially constructed meaning is this process in which students shape and reshape their ideas based upon a larger public discourse. While formal written discourse is the mark of competency in our educational institutions, oral discourse is frequently the mark of an effective figure in the public arena. Whether reflection is written or oral, however, the process of naming and using concepts is central to concept acquisition.

#### *Mediated learning*

Students engaged in building bridges between classrooms and communities are engaged in a social process of constructing meaning. The theories they are asked to use in community-based learning are generally significant analytical concepts within the culture of the institution. Student observations, interpretations, questions, and hypotheses are part of the critical discourse about the nature of the world we share (Moore, 1990). Paulo Freire made this same point when he wrote, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other," (1994, p. 53).

We take issue, however, with Moore's assertion that this should be a discourse among equals conducting "an unfettered investigation." The discourse is fettered to some degree by what are currently constituted as concepts with some degree of social or cultural "validity." The instructor plays the role of mediator, facilitator, and guide in helping students to develop an understanding of these concepts as a necessary prerequisite to investigating and possibly challenging the concepts. The role of service-learning educators is a delicate one in that, on the one hand, educators act as elders transmitting the concepts of the culture, and, on the other, as agents of change helping students to think critically about the contextual validity of those concepts.

For educators, this process of shaping and refining students' thinking about the world can be greatly improved by applying a concept developed by Lev Vygotsky, which he referred to as the "Zone of Proximal Development," or ZPD. According to Vygotsky, ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under

adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Sternberg, 1990).<sup>5</sup> This is a process in which the adult or peer educator mediates between the psychological level of the individual and the complexity of the world in which problems are embedded, helping individuals to progress from the level of understanding they have toward ever more sophisticated understanding.

While Vygotsky's theory has been applied largely to Piaget's pre-adolescent stage of formal operations (1970), others have suggested that many young people in their late teens and early twenties still have very poorly developed skills when it comes to higher level abstractions and systems of abstractions (Fisher & Pipp, 1984). Our work at the University of Southern California during the past twenty years provides support for that theory. It is not uncommon to find university students who have little skill in relating their observations in community settings to the abstract concepts they are encountering in their classrooms, even when we believe that the relationship is self-evident. Lacking these analytical skills, they are unable to critically examine institutional, sociological, cultural, and economic forces at work in the communities and often respond to their experiences within a narrow, ethnocentric framework.

In addition, students often lack the critical self-awareness that is so important for reflecting on themselves and their roles in the community. This is particularly significant for USC students, where there is often considerable discontinuity between their experiences in the community and their experiences as privileged members of society. We believe it is critical to help such students to recognize their privileged status and move from an insular view of the world to a more empathetic, multi-cultural perspective. Educator and theorist William Tierney (1993) describes this shift as a three-step process of "cultural learning":

1. Step(ping) out of (one's) geographic and temporal spheres of influence and in the spheres of other. Such a step is more complex than it appears, for in doing so, the learner is consciously giving up components of a strategy of power in order to learn about the Other.
2. Developing the desire and ability to listen...We listen to individuals' stories so that we understand their views of the world, and in doing so, we may have to radically transform our own understandings.
3. The internalization of the Other's needs, wants and desires...to understand different people's

views of the world so well that we incorporate these views in our own outlook. (p. 145)

At JEP, students are asked to reflect on experiences in the community in order to develop abstract analytical skills, increase critical awareness, and enhance "cultural learning." Students' written responses to Academic Questions and Journal Questions are read each week by an undergraduate "Program Assistant" (PA), a student who has had one or more semesters of service-learning courses and has been trained to read student responses and guide students in their thinking and writing. PAs help students to think through any problems they may be encountering, clarify thoughts and feelings, and reduce anxieties. PAs also extend the discourse, clarify ill-conceived arguments, and direct students to additional sources of information through the use of "Socratic" questions, which challenge student statements with comments like, "How does observation support or contradict Greenwood's view of participatory research?" or "Might there be other explanations for a child wearing a bandage?"

While Cheryl's PA can often recognize and address seated fears and prejudices from the very first journal entry, she or he attempts to gradually question and challenge Cheryl's statements using the concepts presented in class, the testimony of the students with whom Cheryl interacts in the community, Cheryl's own experiences, as tools to increase her understanding. Through this mediated learning approach, the PA engages Cheryl in a dialogue, questioning her belief system and sources of belief. There is evidence that, during the course of the semester, students such as Cheryl begin to recognize the extent to which they are prisoners of stereotypes and preconceptions, and begin to develop new perspectives. As educators, we believe that carefully guiding the work of students engaged in service-learning is the most effective way of helping students acquire this skill: essential analytical tools.

#### *The Learner*

We conclude our model with the learner as a reminder to ourselves that, as educators, the outcome of our work should not be how much service our students have done, how well they have done that service, or how good they feel about their role in the community. We should judge our success upon the increased ability of students to engage in critical discourse at an abstract and conceptual level and to develop a "meta-perspective" of their experience in the community.

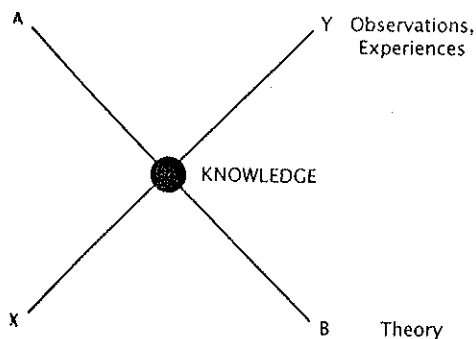
## Discussion

The model can be applied to a single week of a service-learning program, a semester of engagement, or an entire undergraduate approach to service-learning. The goal is to help students constantly critique, evaluate and build on knowledge and move to intellectually "higher ground" and, at the same time, continue to critically examine their roles within our complex and diverse society.

While we have presented the model as a linear one, it is clear that we could have just as easily constructed it as a cyclical model, or, more appropriately, a spiraling model. It is in fact not truly a linear process in that "defining a task" is in itself an "experience" as is reflection and mediation, and each stage of the process can have immediate effects upon the learner and the way he or she sees the world. We elected to present the model in a linear fashion in hopes of improving instructional practices. We think the model can help educators think clearly about their roles in structuring and mediating service-learning.

In short, we believe the role of the service-learning educator is to promote conceptual knowledge by uniting the abstract world of theories from the academy with the unique experiences of students at work in communities. David Lewis (1990) uses a schema that is particularly helpful in understanding this idea. Lewis describes two planes, the plane of intellectual, abstract theory (designated by line AB in Figure 3 below) and the plane of personal observation and experience (designated by line XY). Lewis describes "knowledge" as the intersection of those two planes. This intersection is the line (in our example, the point) toward which the service-learning educator strives. "Knowledge" includes our value systems in that these systems color the manner in which we understand the world. Knowledge is, to a degree, a subjective commodity.

FIGURE 3  
Lewis' Model: Knowledge = the intersection  
of theory and experience



Traditionally, the academy has been at the outer extension of the intellectual plane. Non-mediated community service often takes place at the outer extension of the experiential plane. The task of the service-learning educator is to move students as close to that intersecting line of knowledge as possible, given the time and resources available. It is a task which requires careful planning and even more careful instruction, attention to the nature of students' experiences in communities, and constant mediation of the intellectual and personal reflections of students as they try to make meaning of the community they have entered. It is a task where the role of the educator is to be not only a guide for the development of a higher level of intellectual understanding, but also to serve as a guide for the development of more carefully articulated values.

As Bruner says,

We are living in bewildering times.... There are deep problems that stem...from a changing society whose future shape we can not foresee and for which it is difficult to prepare a new generation.... (Our) culture is constantly in the process of being recreated as it is interpreted and regenerated by its members.... Education is (or should be) one of the principle forums for performing this function.... (1986, pp 121-123)

Our role as educators is to help our students to understand their role as interpreters of the culture who are, in the process, regenerating that culture. As we move toward a multicultural society, the demands on those generating that new culture are indeed bewildering. This educational challenge is not a job for the faint of heart.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Cheryl is a fictional character, her journal question entries are comprised of direct quotes and paraphrased material from actual JEP students from the past three years.

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>3</sup> Although 51% of the 1995 USC freshman class is white/Caucasian, and 27.7% come from families earning over \$100,000 annually, USC is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse universities in the country. According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 82% of the 1995 freshman class at universities nationwide is Caucasian. Further, while 23% of freshmen nationwide have families earning more than \$100,000, only 8.4% earn less than \$20,000 per year, compared with over 13% at USC.

<sup>4</sup> JEP often works with professors in constructing Academic Questions for students.

<sup>5</sup> The term "more capable peers" is Vygotsky's term. We prefer to think of our peer educators as simply "trained."

<sup>6</sup> Of course, Cheryl's conclusion that the bruises were

caused by child abuse could be accurate. Our point here is not to negate the existence nor minimize the seriousness of child abuse, but simply to help students question the manner in which such conclusions are drawn - are they corroborated with evidence or are they knee-jerk, stereotyped reactions?

### References

- Bruner, J. S. (1968). *Toward a theory of instruction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S., Goodnow, J., & Austin, G. (1956). *A study of thinking*. New York: Wiley.
- Cohen, J. (1994). Matching university mission with service motivation: Do the accomplishments of community service match the claims? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 1:1, 98-104.
- Crockett, L. J. & Petersen, A. C. (1984). Biology: Its role in gender-related educational experiences. In E. Fennema & M. J. Auer (Eds.), *Women and education* (pp. 85-116). Berkeley: McCutchen Publishing Corporation.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company.
- Dillon, K. E. & Cooper, D. M. (1996). USC Fall Freshman Survey - 1995 (conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program). *University of Southern California Chronicle*, 15:24, 12-14.
- Eysenck, M. W. (1982). *Attention and arousal: Cognition and performance*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Fisher, K. W. & Pipp, S. L. (1984). Process of cognitive development: Optimal level and skill acquisition. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Mechanisms of cognitive development* (pp.45-75). New York: Freeman.
- Freire, P. (1994, 1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gardner, H. (1987). *The mind's new science*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goodman, N. (1984). *Of mind and other matters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Greenwood, D. J., Whyte, W. F., & Harkavy, I. (1993). Participatory action research as a process and as a goal, *Human Relations*, 46:2, 175-192.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kagan, J. (1964). Impulsive and reflective children. In J. D. Krumboltz (Ed.), *Learning and the educational process*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Kincheloe, J. L., & Steinberg, S. R. (1993). A tentative description of post-formal thinking: The critical confrontation with cognitive theory. *Harvard Educational Review*, 63:3, 296-320.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Kraft, R. J. (1996). Service learning: An introduction to its theory, practice, and effects. *Education and Urban Society*, 28:2, 131-159.
- Lewis, D. (1990). What experience teaches. In W. Lycan (Ed.), *Mind and cognition*, pp. 499-505. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Maehr, M. L. (1974). *Sociocultural origins of achievement*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Maybach, C.W. (1996). Investigating urban community needs: Service learning from a social justice perspective. *Education and Urban Society*, 28:2, 224-230.
- Moore, D. T. (1990). Experiential education as critical discourse. In J. Kendall (Ed.), *Combining service learning*, pp. 273-283. Raleigh: National Society Internships and Experiential Education.
- Myers, M. (1986). Teaching writing in second schools. In K. Rehage (Ed.), *Eighty-fifth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 148-169. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of education and the psychology of the child*. New York: Grossman.
- Shumer, R., & Belbas, B. (1996). What we know about service learning. *Education and Urban Society*, 28, 208-223.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1990). *Metaphors of mind: Conceptions of the nature of intelligence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tierney, W. G. (1993). *Building communities of discourse: Higher education in the twenty-first century*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1990).
- Witkin, H. & Goodenough, D. (1977). Field dependence and interpersonal behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, 84, 661-689.
- Zlotkowski, E. (1995). Does service-learning have a future? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 123-133.

### Authors

DICK CONE has been with the JEP Educational Project since 1976 and has been Director since 1980. He is a veteran of the "relevancy" movement in public education in the '60s and is dedicated to an evolutionary approach to transforming educational institutions by building educational teams of faculty, staff and community members that can help students develop competencies required in the contemporary world.

SUSAN HARRIS is a doctoral student at University of Southern California, studying sociology and marriage and family therapy. Her research interests include volunteerism, community issues and gender. As Academic Coordinator for the JEP Educational Project, Susan assists in mediating the learning process of undergraduate sociology students who participate in JEP.

## Appendix A

### *Journal Questions:*

**Week One - The Setting:** What are your most vivid first impressions of the site? Describe settings, people, actions and positive or negative feelings you are having.

**Week Two - Players in the Drama:** Describe who you work with, their lives, their views, their goals in life. Include some personal reaction to the individual or individuals with whom you are working.

**Week Three - The Plot:** What activities have you been doing with the person(s) with whom you have been working? Describe your relationship.

**Week Four - The Plot (continued):** How do the student(s) with whom you work react to you? Cite specific examples. How does their reaction make you feel?

**Week Five - The Action:** How do you think your presence in the community impacts the person(s) with whom you work? What impact has this assignment had on you? Illustrate your points with experiences you have had this semester.

**Week Six - The Script:** Describe in some detail a JEP session, including bits of conversation or, if you are working in a school, a sample of work in which you and the kids have been involved. Be creative. What is the significance of that which you have described?

**Week Seven - Analysis:** After being in the community for several weeks now, how have your initial impressions been altered? If they have not changed, describe observations that confirmed your initial impressions.

**Week Eight - Critique:** Write a summary on your eight weeks. What was learned by both you and the person(s) with whom you worked? Include any special experiences or highlights you might have had.