

Assessing Community Impact after Service-Learning: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Service-learning integrates experiential learning with community service, yet its community impacts have not been systematically studied. This may reflect the lack of a conceptual model for impact assessment, and failure to investigate the end-beneficiary's perspective. This study proposes a tripartite model, in which the community impact of service-learning is analyzed from three perspectives: that of the community partner, the end-beneficiary, and the service-learning intervention itself. The model identifies three impact domains salient for the community partner: the level of capacity for service; goals and value achieved; and new knowledge and insights gained. For impact domains salient for the end-beneficiary, the model utilises the needs fulfilment matrix developed by Max-Neef (1991), along with the concept of quality of life. It is argued that the model can accommodate the community impact generated from the community partner, the end-beneficiary and their interactions.

Keywords: *Service-learning; community impacts; the community partner, the end-beneficiary, needs fulfilment.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Service-Learning as a Developmental Pedagogy

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection, intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). McCarthy et al. (2002) viewed the community as an important part in the service-learning equation. Eyler and Giles (1999) concluded that whether service-learning addresses needs identified by the community, predicts students’ personal development. This view has been widely shared (e.g. Geschwind et al., 1997; Holland & Gelmon, 1998; Jacoby, 1996). In order to make service-learning successful, arranging for the involvement of community stakeholders in setting up the projects and evaluating the community impacts (both positive and negative) appears essential.

1.2. Limited Prior Research into Community Impact and Obstacles to Researching It

There is evidence that service-learning programs can deliver positive impacts for the community (Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Chan et al., 2016). There nonetheless remains a dearth of research (see Cruz & Giles, 2000; Farahmandpour & Shodjaee-Zrudlo, 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), despite a long-standing call for such research (Giles & Eyler, 1998). This absence may reflect universities’ preoccupation with academic outcomes (Cruz & Giles, 2000), along with methodological challenges such as defining “community”, and determining target impact domains and assessment methods, and the lack of an adequate conceptual framework. Significant weaknesses of extant studies is that they have focused on short-term impacts and have not solicited the perceptions of end-beneficiaries, possibly because of communication difficulties and vulnerabilities among some of the latter.

1.3. The Current Research

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for systematic measurement of the community impact in service-learning. Some theoretical frameworks or models addressing the perspective of the community partner already exist (e.g. Clarke, 2003; Gelmon, 2003) but directly measuring impacts on end-beneficiaries remains a challenge. The framework developed here comprises three components that drive community impact, namely the community partner, the end-beneficiary, and the service-learning intervention. For the community partner component, we reviewed previous models. For the end-beneficiary component, we derived insights from human needs research. The relationships between the three components will also be postulated.

2. Conceptualisation of Community Impact

2.1. From the Community Partner's Perspective

Some theoretical frameworks have already been developed for the community impact of service-learning. Driscoll et al.'s (1996) model sought to measure impact on students, faculty, community and institution. Clarke's (2003) 3-I model features the three following factors. First, Initiators of the service plan the projects and set the goals. Second, the community service Initiative denotes the activities or content of the projects from the perspectives of the community partners and the university. Third, the community Impact of the service comprises the results achieved for the community as viewed by the community partners and the university. Clarke (2003) designed different indicators and measurements for the three Is. Gelmon (2003) offered a theoretical framework from an inter-institutional perspective.

Table 1 summarises these three frameworks. For our own framework, we shall include the following impact domains within the community partners' perspective: perceived capacity; benefits in terms of furthering mission and values; and new operational insights.

2.2. From the End-beneficiary's Perspective

We propose that the end-beneficiaries' perspectives on their needs fulfilment and quality of life enhancement arising from the service-learning should be assessed. This need-fulfilment approach has also been proposed and accepted in the past, as in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970).

For this purpose, we have adopted the theoretical framework developed by Max-Neef (1991) for classifying human needs. In this framework, needs include aspects of deprivation and aspects of potential, reflecting axiological and existential needs, respectively. Nine types of axiological needs are identified: Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Participation, Leisure, Creation, Identity and Freedom. People fulfil axiological needs through various means called "satisfiers", which are individual or collective forms of existential needs: Being, Having, Doing and Interacting, resulting in 36 specific needs (see Table 2). For example, in order to fulfil Subsistence needs, one must remain healthy (Being), have food and shelter (Having), maintain one's life by feeding, resting and working (Doing), and reside in a good social setting and living environment (Interacting) (32). Max-Neef claimed that this classification of needs is understandable, specific, operational, critical, and propositional, and may serve as an instrument for policy-making and action. Table 2 depicts the overall classification system.

Table 1. The Comparison of Domains of Community Impact from the Community Partner’s Perspective.

No	Driscoll et al. (1996)	Items of Clarke (2003)	Gelmon (2003)
1	Nature of partnership	Helped relationships with university	Nature of community-university interaction
2	Community involvement	Community participates	
3		Project serves community	
4		Community gained access to resources	Capacity to fulfil organisational mission
5	Economic benefits	Community was served	Economic benefits
6	Social benefits	Community was served	Social benefits
7		Helped me be active	
8		Helped residents with control	
9		New operational insights	
10		Project worked well	
11	Awareness of the university	University source of help	Nature of community-university partnership
12	Establish relationships	Partnership improved	Sustainability of partnership
13	Identification of prospective employees		
14	Satisfaction with the university interaction		Satisfaction with partnership
15		Community satisfied	
16		Additional student projects	

Source: Driscoll et al. (1996); Clarke (2003); Gelmon (2003).

Service-learning can be regarded as providing a choice of means for the end-beneficiary, i.e. satisfiers, to meet their needs. By meeting those needs, the quality of life of the end-beneficiary will be enhanced. For example, a service-learning project, in which students utilise their gerontological knowledge and interview skills learnt in class to assist in interviewing the community elderly to produce a memoir for each interviewee, covers the fulfilment of the needs for affection, understanding, creation, leisure, and identity. This occurs through various satisfiers, such as helping the elderly to recall their old times (Leisure, Doing) which results in a state of tranquility as emotion can be expressed (Leisure, Being); and through involvement in creating their own memoir (Creation, Doing) in a productive setting (Creation, Interacting), which results in their memoirs being created (Creation, Having). Table 3 illustrates how the conceptual framework fits in the example.

Table 2. The Matrix of Needs and Satisfiers

	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Subsistence	1. Health	2. Food, shelter, work	3. Feed, procreate, rest, work	4. Living & social setting
Protection	5. Care, autonomy	6. Social security, health systems, rights, work	7. Co-operate, take care of	8. Living and social space
Affection	9. Self-esteem, respect, passion	10. Partnerships, family	11. Take care of, express emotions, share, cultivate	12. Privacy, intimacy, space of togetherness
Understanding	13. Curiosity, rationality	14. Education, communication	15. Investigate, educate, analyse	16. Interaction setting, schools
Participation	17. Adaptability, willingness,	18. Duties, rights	19. Co-operate, interact	20. Participation setting
Leisure	21. Imagination, humour, sensuality, tranquility	22. Games, peace of mind	23. Memories, fantasies, fun	24. Privacy, free time, space of closeness
Creation	25. Passion, imagination, inventiveness	26. Abilities, skills, methods	27. Invent, build, design	28. Productive and feedback settings
Identity	29. Sense of belonging, consistency, differentiation	30. Language, religions, habits, reference groups, values	31. Integrate, know oneself, grow	32. Settings which one belongs to
Freedom	33. Autonomy, open-mindedness	34. Equal rights	35. Dissent, choose, disobey	36. Plasticity

Source: Max-Neef (1991).

Table 3. An Example of Service-Learning Creating Impact on Needs Fulfilment.

	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Affection	Self-esteem, respect	Relationships with students	Sharing	Spaces of togetherness
Leisure	Tranquility	Peace of mind	Recall old times	Spaces of closeness
Creation	NA	Memoirs	Build, design	Productive setting
Identity	Sense of belonging	Values, historical memory	Get to know, recognise themselves	NA

Capturing community impact from the end-beneficiary's perspective by employing this conceptual framework carries several advantages. First, it is the most direct, understandable, and intuitive way to access the perspective of service recipients. Second, classifying the needs and satisfiers into operational types makes direct measurement more systematic. Third, the identification of multiple types of needs and satisfiers can enable the measurement of community impact to transcend monetary terms, i.e. going beyond the issue of how efficiently the funds for service-learning projects are being spent, from the institutional (e.g. the university and community partner) perspectives. Fourth, this classification also allows the assessment of community impact to go beyond the direct service type of service-learning. For example, the needs for Creation can be applicable to many innovative service-learning projects, whereas the outcomes arising from addressing the needs for Understanding can be assessed when evaluating the impact of advocacy-based service-learning projects.

3. Putting it Together: A Tripartite Model

The perspectives of the community partner and the end-beneficiary, along with the service-learning intervention, produce a tripartite model shown in Figure 1. The model regards both community partners and end-beneficiaries as recipients of the community impacts created by service-learning. The model also subsumes the role of community partners as mediators between service-learning interventions and their impact on end-beneficiaries. On the operational level, we propose to measure impact on the community partners across three categories of outcome: capacity level, knowledge and insights gained, and contribution to their goals and values realisation. We propose to measure impact on end-beneficiaries according to the fulfilment of targeted needs within the Max-Neff's framework, and we will also ask an overall question about the enhancement of quality of life for the end-beneficiary.

Given likely variety of targeted impacts for different sets of end-beneficiaries, this model envisages the use of multiple measurement methods for assessment, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, on-site observation, and analysis of extant data, depending on the context. The first phase of the assessment sequence is an initial qualitative study to identify the apparent intended outcomes. The second phase involves using the conceptual framework, adapted if necessary, to guide the creation of a quantitative measurement instrument for surveying and clarifying stakeholders' expectations. The resulting instrument will provide a concrete framework and set of guidelines to be employed in subsequent phases of interim and post-service evaluation.

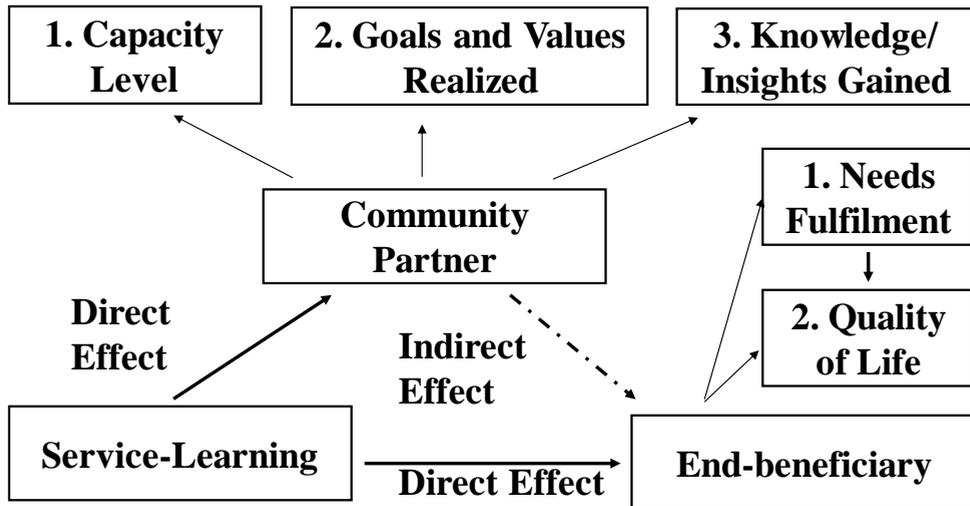


Figure 1. The Proposed Tripartite Model for Assessing Community Impact.

4. Conclusions

This paper outlines the importance of measuring the community impacts of service-learning. We have proposed a tripartite framework that encompasses the service-learning intervention, the community partner, and the end-beneficiaries for developing assessment tools for measuring community impacts of service-learning from both the community partner's and the end-beneficiary's perspectives. The model assesses the impact on a community partner in terms of enhancement of capacity, new knowledge and insights gained, and whether the service-learning project assists in advancing the community partner's goals and values. The model employs the concept of needs fulfilment of Max-Neef (1991), to indicate the nature and extent of the community impact for the end-beneficiary arising from service-learning projects, which we envisage can be effectively captured by customising a set of survey items for measuring need fulfilment.

Since service-learning projects and their intended community impacts are tailored, we have proposed a two-phase approach for designing impact assessment methods. We have recommended a pre-service qualitative study for identifying intended community impacts through focus groups, interviews, and extant data analysis. To this end, a qualitative study investigating whether the model proposed in this paper corresponds to the desired outcomes opined by community partners in service-learning, is underway. Thereafter, drawing on the conceptual framework, potentially modified in light of the qualitative study, tailored sets of survey items and focus group guidelines can be developed for interim and post-service evaluation.

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