

## Preface

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The diversity of author perspectives and cultural contexts represented in these articles is a wonderful illustration of service learning's global distribution and impact. While reading these articles, I was inspired to reflect on the many different purposes that have been attached to service learning and community based learning around the world, and how far we have come to understand the impacts of this mode of teaching as well as the quality practices that produce those benefits.

In my own presentations on engaged learning techniques, I often highlight for the audience how widespread service learning is around the world (in schools and tertiary institutions) and people are always a bit surprised to learn of its extensive distribution. I suspect the surprise comes, in part, from the intensely local effort often required to launch service learning models in a particular school or university and to win sufficient support to sustain commitment. Usually led by one, or at most several, instructors who are passionate advocates for community based learning strategies, the effort to make the case for this time intensive form of teaching can be a long and often very local process of demonstrating techniques and measuring learning outcomes so as to demonstrate the potential benefits. Leaders and practitioners often are so absorbed in this work that they may not typically be aware of the overall growth in the field, especially in the literature highlighting research and case studies of effective models around the world.

For more than seven years in the USA, I had the opportunity to lead national scale efforts to expand both the quality and the quantity of community based teaching, learning and research strategies, including service learning, across every level of education and in every type of community. Through several years of work in Australia and participation in several international networks and associations, I've also learned a great deal about the progress of engagement in other national and educational contexts. From reflection on these experiences, some observations emerge about the challenges of making the case for service learning, building its quality and sustainability, and sharing discoveries and techniques with colleagues. Many of these points are reinforced by the authors of the articles included in this issue of *Issues in Educational Research*.

First, the language of service learning and community engagement is increasingly consistent across nations. Although, as will be discussed below, different purposes can be attached to these engaged teaching and research techniques, the understanding of core principles, terminology, and best practices are well established and widely understood. This is an important achievement in a field where definitions and terms were hotly debated for more than twenty years and still can be confusing to those who are new to the concepts. The extensive discussion of definitions and terminology were important to frame this new pedagogy, and built the foundations of what is now a significant body of literature affirming a convergent view of language and practice. This

edition of *Issues in Educational Research* advances that body of work and affirms the increasingly international exchange of ideas.

A second observation is that while the field has achieved greater consistency in its understanding of key concepts and practices, a particular strength of service learning is that it can be implemented to address many different learning and developmental outcomes. In this issue, the reader finds examples of effective application of service learning as a means to help student participants develop civic engagement, social responsibility, cross cultural understanding, an awareness of issues of social justice in their community and education as a tool for social change. In this context of service learning in teacher education programs, authors describe positive, even transformative effects of service learning on their students' development of confidence as future teachers including a sense of their own teaching style and teaching values.

A third observation is that service learning, when well designed and implemented, is transforming to all involved – the instructor, the students, and the community involved in the activity. More research is needed on which aspects of service learning have the greatest effect on particular learning or developmental outcomes, such as skills in confidence, communications, self esteem, empathy and collaboration. However, common sense would suggest we need to investigate how this method of teaching and learning changes the learning dynamic by giving learning a purpose and context. In other words, service learning helps students (both the pre-teaching students and their school students) experience new knowledge concepts and skills through collaborative work that has consequences. For many students this practical learning that is of value to others beyond one's self is an essential complement to more abstract ways of learning and exploring knowledge.

To that end, a fourth observation is that there is global consensus that partnerships are the foundation of effective service learning and community engagement endeavours. However, building and cultivating partnerships that ensure the activities are truly mutually beneficial and reciprocal can be a challenge. Educational institutions, schools and universities alike, have unique organisational cultures, calendars of operation, legal and fiscal constraints that can make it tricky to develop external partnership relationships for the purposes of enhancing student learning through service and community engagement activities. The cultivation and maintenance of engaged partnerships is often the most time consuming aspect of service learning design but one could argue that it is also the aspect that produces the greatest transformation in student learning and development. To reinforce the role of partners in the point made above, the transformation comes from the students' realisation that their effort made in a service learning project is of value and of consequence to someone else, and that in that process they have also learned something from the interaction. This is the essence of service learning and engagement – that all participants are learners and teachers, and through collective action, all benefit from a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and wisdom.

Finally, the articles presented herein help us observe the importance of both implementing service learning and community engagement to better prepare future

teachers for the realities of the community contexts in which they will teach, but also the importance of teaching future teachers how to use service learning to improve learning outcomes for their future students. In recent years, service learning has grown as a learning strategy in teacher preparation programs, but few new teachers enter their schools prepared to implement service learning in their own classrooms. An important next challenge for service learning in teacher education is to embed it more deeply in the context of both content acquisition and pedagogical techniques. Recently, some examples also have emerged where service learning methods are being incorporated into professional development for experienced teachers and principals and the positive response suggests this is an area for expansion in the near future.

Overall, the state of service learning and community engagement has benefitted from the increase in networks, associations, journals and conferences that facilitate the sharing of research and practice and the building of the core body of literature to support improvement and performance measurement. For example, the Talloires Network (<http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/>) is an “international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education”. Recently, the Talloires Network has worked to find and connect regional networks and associations of educational institutions to encourage mentoring, sharing of practice, and exchanges around the world. Regional networks now exist in North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South America, Australia and parts of Asia. Some of these are small and just beginning, but their future is bright and Talloires is taking the lead in encouraging their dialogue across regions.

Several years ago, the *International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement* was created as a member association from a conference and book series (<http://www.researchslce.org/index.html>). Today the association attracts several hundred members from more than twenty nations - scholars and practitioners conducting research on school and higher education service learning and engagement.

The idea for this issue of the journal arose from the *Second International Conference on Service Learning in Teacher Education*, held in June 2009 in Galway. In its short history, this conference has become an influential international platform for exploring the impact of service learning on the teaching profession and has contributed to improved practices and wider implementation.

This is not a complete list of new academic networks that are emerging, but in each of these few examples, one can see that the creation of associations or the fostering of academic networks has been an important intellectual contribution to the building of the field of engagement and service learning, especially in two areas critical to the acceptance of any innovative concept in education. First, these associations and networks create the refereed conferences and journals that are the essential venues for the rigorous foundational research needed to understand the concepts and practices of service learning and community engagement. Second, the conference presentations, journals, and related professional development services ensure the exchange of ideas between researchers and practitioners, thus strengthening the dissemination and application of the research findings, such as those shared in this issue of IIER.

The development of international networks of scholars and practitioners may be the most significant observation of all regarding the state of service learning and community engagement across nations and across educational sectors. The level of implementation is extensive and continues to grow, driven in part by the increasing quality of research that helps improve partnerships, and in part by the growing evidence of the impact of consequential and collaborative learning on student outcomes and attributes.

These instructional methods expand our traditional views of learning through experience by helping students focus on the value of their knowledge to the lives of others. Therefore, these ways of teaching and learning are especially important instructional strategies in the realm of teacher education and professional development. Based on evidence to date, the growing implementation of service learning will likely have a transformative impact on future approaches to the preparation of teachers and on the partnership relationships among schools, higher education institutions, and their communities. The authors represented in this issue have made significant contributions to the literature that will inform these future developments.

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