Education for the Public Good: Is Service Learning possible in the Australian Context?

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Abstract

Many Australian universities are looking for models of community engagement that are not “third stream” or somehow independent of core business but, like Work Related Learning and collaborative research, essential for the development of graduate attributes and the achievement of graduate outcomes. Ostensibly the concept of service learning provides one of these models.

In the United States, service learning has grown rapidly for a variety of purposes: as a means of engaging students with communities, promoting civic and social responsibility and enhancing student learning of academic content. Service learning is a usually defined as a credit-bearing activity and is integrated into existing subject units. Students apply what they have learnt in the classroom to address priorities in the community in partnership with that community. Service learning, therefore, requires a partnership relationship between the educational institution and community partners, with the intent of mutual benefit. An emerging body of research into service learning methodology and outcomes has documented positive outcomes related to retention, learning, and development of pro-social behaviors, and identifies best practices. Professional associations, publications, and email groups support the service learning educator.

Interest in community engagement and service learning has fostered national conversations about higher education for the public good (Benson & Harkavy, 2002) and about the human drive “to create, maintain and develop the Good Society that would enable human beings to lead long, healthy, active, virtuous, happy lives” (Chambers, 2005, p. 3). However, this concept of service to others and the wider community and the importance of values education is not a given. Public higher education in the US is more likely to shy away from service learning goals related to values or citizenship and to emphasize service learning as an active learning pedagogy (the idea of learning by doing articulated by John Dewey) with benefits to academic learning and professional development.

Much of the interest in engagement (see Kellogg report of 1999: Returning to our Roots as an example) arose from a national policy environment that positioned higher education as merely a private benefit to the students. During the 1980s, federal and state policy changes greatly increased the proportion of educational costs borne by students and reduce public funding to universities. These policies created a more vocational view of the purposes of higher education. Some higher education leaders, beginning in the 1990s, posited that engagement in community issues would be an effective strategy for renewing higher education’s larger role in creating public good by addressing critical public issues through partnerships.

But can the American service learning be transplanted to the Australian context where a culture of education for democracy and citizenship is at odds with a culture of education for private benefit and vocational outcome that has increasingly seized the policy agenda? Are Australian universities ready to come down from their sandstone towers and work with, rather than just for communities?
This paper looks at the relevance of service learning in the Australian context, factors that may hinder its wider adoption and asks the question whether Australian universities are ready to become truly engaged in service learning.

**Education for the Public Good: Is Service Learning possible in the Australian Context?**

**Introduction**

Notable scholars from the United States including Ira Harkavy, Barbara Holland and Judith Ramaley have shared a perspective of university community engagement at the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA), Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF), Inside Out and other conferences. Their insight has added weight to the groundswell of academic interest in the scholarship and impact of community engagement in Australia.

Influences upon the national dialogue are not only from the United States but also from the United Kingdom; scholars including David Charles, John Goddard and David Watson have also added value to the national discussion over the last five years. However, the emphasis in the European context - engagement for the purpose of regional development - produces differences in approach to engaged scholarship and student learning. Engaged student learning is important in both milieus, however the development and embedding of service learning has largely taken place in the United States although it should be noted that versions of service learning can be also found in South Africa, Japan, India, Argentina, Spain, and Mexico.

The growing interest in service learning in Australia extends beyond universities. In many private schools community service is being reinvented as service learning and in July 2006 on behalf of the National Youth Careers and Transitions Advisory Group, the Australian Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) commissioned a scoping study of service learning. A paper produced to support the study sees service learning as a key methodology for connecting young people to their community and engaging them in education and training that must be externally accredited. The paper poses the key question: *To what extent is there scope for a national approach to Service Learning so that though it all Australian young people can learn, apply and contribute to the values of their society develop positive understandings about citizenship and be supported into fulfilling working lives?* (Atelier Learning Solutions, 2006, p. 3). In addition, two national conferences (2005 and 2007) have been organized on the theme of service-learning in Australian schools.

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**Service Learning in the United States**

In the United States, service learning has grown rapidly for a variety of purposes: as a means of engaging students with communities, promoting civic and social responsibility and enhancing student learning of academic content. Service learning is usually defined as a credit-bearing activity and is integrated into existing subject units. Students apply what they have learnt in the classroom to address priorities in
the community in partnership with that community. Service learning, therefore, requires a partnership relationship between the educational institution and community partners, with the intent of mutual benefit. An emerging body of research into service learning methodology and outcomes has documented positive outcomes related to retention, learning, and development of pro-social behaviors, and identifies best practices. Professional associations, publications, and email groups support the service learning educator (for example, listserv, HE-SL\(^1\); Campus Compact\(^2\); Community-Campus Partnerships for Health\(^3\)).

Interest in community engagement and service learning has fostered national conversations about higher education for the public good (Benson & Harkavy, 2002) and about the human drive “to create, maintain and develop the Good Society that would enable human beings to lead long, healthy, active, virtuous, happy lives” (Chambers, 2005, p. 3). The concept of service to others and the wider community and the importance of values education is a given.

It could be hypothesised that service learning has its cultural roots in one of the key historical drivers of higher education in the United States, the nation building mission of the land grant universities. Further, the influence of the philosophers John Dewey, Benjamin Franklin and Frances Bacon could be seen to have been strongly influential in a higher education agenda that is focused on the improvement of the human condition (Harkavay, 2005).

There are others however, who would identify more recent influences on the development of service learning. Private good, or benefit to the individual, still drives aspirations to attend the most prestigious Higher Education Institutions in the United States. The 1980s were perceived as a decade of greed and faculty and administrators in the United States searched for ways of encouraging their students towards public service.

Perhaps motivated by desire to get into the best schools, a little over 90 percent of college bound high school students report doing volunteer work (Lenkowsky & Waislitz, 2007). When it is noticed that the most educated (and it could be presumed most informed) members of the community do not vote in a system where voting is not compulsory, there is also a democratic driver for engaging higher education students in some form of service learning. The link between personal values, commitment and employment outcomes is also apparent; employers will look for evidence of commitment and contribution to community, “I don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care” (Holland, 2001).

Institutional drivers in the United States highlight the importance of local relevance and connection; public funding for higher education comes primarily from the State so accountability resides at the State, rather than Federal level. The tertiary sector is large and diverse and includes both private and public universities and liberal arts colleges which have been the type of institution that has embraced service learning in particular. A long history of philanthropic funding for higher education is also conducive to support for service learning.

Although current trends see students in the United States increasingly working, commuting to university and studying part-time, Service Learning has been enhanced because of the historic nature of campus life in the United States.

1\(^{\text{http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/service-learning/pages/resource_e-mail.htm}}\)
2\(^{\text{http://www.compact.org/}}\)
3\(^{\text{http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/index.html}}\)
Sporting teams tend to be university rather than township based. Many students live on campus and allegiance is built by the experience of life on campus.

It is not surprising then that alumni contribution to universities is significant or that over 50 percent report students participate in one kind of civic activity, although this is sometimes in return for financial assistance to meet tuition costs. In the United States philanthropy is growing; donations from individuals, foundations and business corporations (excluding corporate sponsorship and volunteering) increased 6.1% in 2005 to $260 billion, doubling over the decade (Lenkowsky & Waislitz, 2007).

Thus in this context Service Learning is a credible and legitimate scholarly activity, although not without controversy; many academics worry it lacks intellectual rigor and see it as an attempt to give credit for volunteering. The individual institutional approach to Service Learning can vary significantly but will be characteristic of those institutions who choose to embrace engagement with their community. The Carnegie Foundation in 2006 adopted an elective classification system for universities who choose to develop community engaged mission as a component of their university’s strategy. That framework evaluates how the institution categorises community engagement scholarship and includes a set of self assessment questions on curricular engagement or service learning (how many formal, for credit courses; in how many departments, how many students participating, learning outcomes etc).

The university experience in Australia
The traditional underpinnings of Australian culture are significantly different from those of the United States. Although the United States also began colonially, an independent republic was established relatively early. Historically the tradition of education for the public good and advancement of learning for the progress of mankind have been integral to the development of the American nation. This has been strongly influenced by the politics and writings of ‘founding father’ Benjamin Franklin who believed that attention to civic duty and virtue were essential for the survival of the newly established republic. Australia has no such tradition and, as a relatively young country, may owe more to its convict beginnings. The European influence can be seen in the Platonic notion of scholarship where logic and dialectic could be seen to dominate the scholarly agenda.

The Platonic influence contributes to a perception of universities as aloof and independent, committed to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. However, Smith argues that vocational outcomes have always been a driver of universities; at Bologna (the first European university) rhetoric and grammar were preparation for the profession of law and philosophy was preparation for the profession of medicine because of the Aristotelian link to physiology (Smith, 1991, p. 70).

The rise of the Australian university in the second half of the 19th Century can be seen to be part of larger educational campaign to reform and govern the colonies. The argument in 1849 for establishing Australia’s first university was that the university would remove the convict “taint” from the colony and combat crime and ignorance (Smith, 1991, pp. 77-78). The rhetoric in the University of Sydney Act (as amended in 1989) does include a “commitment to the development and provision of cultural, professional technical and vocational services to the community” and indeed provisions like this are included in the Acts of Parliament that have established the State of Victoria’s twelve universities include some sort of commitment to community.

However it can be argued that vocational and financial drivers are far more influential than any sense of nation building or community responsibility.

The last half of the 20th Century saw Australian Universities reshaped. The Murray Report on Australian Universities (1957) had successfully argued for increased
Commonwealth funding for universities. The Martin Enquiry into the future of Tertiary Education in Australia in 1961, recognised that non-University courses were a major source of supply of large part of Australia’s professional and para professional workforce. Technical Colleges and professional bodies would accept nothing less than degree granting status in engineering (Rasmussen, 1989, pp.140-159).

A number of reports and enquires led to the promotion of Colleges of Advanced Education and Technical Institutes. The Dawkins Report in 1987 heralded an era of amalgamations and establishment of new institutions which would see the number of Australian Universities grow from eight to thirty-nine. However unlike the United States where there are both private and public universities with a significant proportion of funding of the sector coming from endowments and the individual bearing the cost of his or her own education, the university sector in Australia is largely government funded (although students are increasingly contributing to the meeting the costs of their university education through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme).

The federal approach to policy and funding in Australia works somewhat against that sense of accountability at the local level because all the rewards are at the federal level. With the exception of two, Australian Universities are publicly funded. Financial imperatives and emphasis on accountability mean that funding attaches to performance. Rankings in the form of league tables have become the “ultimate performance indicator” for universities (Marginson, 2007). Australian universities compete for international fee paying students and research universities compete for a place on the Shanghai Jiao Tong or Times Higher Education Supplement ranking. Community engagement or democracy and citizenship outcomes are not measured on these scales nor are they measured by DEST who focus on student satisfaction, graduate employment and research performance. Although the developing Research Quality Framework (RQF) aspires to measuring impact, the traditional measure of competitive research grants and peer reviewed publications remain paramount. In this environment, status and prestige is imperative as universities compete for students and for dollars.

The student experience
Campus life in Australia also differs markedly from the United States. Students rarely live on campus and indeed time spent on campus has decreased over the last decade. In the context of a deregulated educational industry, students are increasingly considered to be consumers within a marketplace that tailors educational services to fit the needs of its client base. Students increasingly expect the University to fit with their lives rather than vice-versa (Mclnnis, 2001, p. 3). Yet a number of concerning trends have emerged with regard to the nature of student engagement with the educational/learning process.

Students are less involved with their Universities, and are performing poorly compared with previous generations. Students are spending less time on campus and more time in paid employment. Overall, an increasing number of activities and priorities are competing with the demands of University. Students have indicated that they find it difficult to find the motivation to study, are less likely to study on weekends, find the study workload difficult to manage, miss classes and increasingly rely on friends or on-line facilities for course materials (Mclnnis, 2001, p. 4).

Mclnnes, James, and Hartley (2000, p. xii) found a trend of decreasing attachment and commitment to a range of aspects of university life and academic work on the part of those who work long hours in paid employment. Mclnnis and Hartley (2002, p. 15) found that paid work is the only or main source of income for 75% of respondents
and a minor source for a further 23% of respondents; 26% rely on Youth Allowance or Austudy as their only or main source of income; and roughly 24% of students rely heavily on income from parents or other family members.

This all represents a huge challenge for Australian Universities. In 2006 a study of community engagement, *Beyond Rhetoric: University- Community Engagement In Victoria*, found that Victorian Universities articulate a desire to be engaged with their community but noted the context “where universities have had to become increasingly entrepreneurial there is a risk that the educational social and economic benefits of community engagement will be undermined by policies which emphasise competitiveness, commercialisation and cutbacks” (Winter et al., 2006, p. 6).

**Democracy and citizenship**

Political landscapes will always have an influence on key community institutions. When politicians also hold the purse strings that influence is magnified. Australian universities can be seen as always having been conservative and controlled by government with the activism of the 1960s an aberration rather than the norm (Smith, 1991).

Australian universities are largely not sites of political ferment and social change although universities can be seen as laboratories of new ideas, measuring these ideas against the wisdom of the past (Lenkowsky & Waislitz, 2007). Less certain is the connection of these ideas to communities directly impacting upon progress. It is easy to see why DEST (and Melbourne University, for example) are more comfortable with the concept of knowledge transfer than community engagement. This concept is however problematic when viewed through the community engagement lens.

Community engagement theory has been evolving over recent decades. Arnstein (1969) developed the “ladder of citizen participation” as a measure of the quality of community participation. Rocha’s ladder of empowerment (1997) looks again at community participation in the context of political empowerment. The International Association of Public Participation has developed the Public Participation Spectrum used internationally as a tool for increasing the level of public impact. In this spectrum participation moves from the one way process of informing and consulting to involvement, collaboration and ultimately empowerment. If the new knowledge universities develop is to have impact, if progress is to be made the community must be engaged.

Similarly students must be engaged and this purpose is one of the most powerful arguments for the development of Service Learning. As indicated earlier, there is evidence that Australians value contribution to the public good and this will engage students. Students need to be engaged as citizens in the democratic process. In the United States, voting is not compulsory and so the lack of engagement in the democratic process is immediately evident. However, compulsory voting masks the levels of participation in democracy in Australia. A survey undertaken by the Department of Victorian Communities (DVC) in 2004 revealed that only 59.6% of Victorians felt they had an opportunity to “have a real say on issues that are important” (DVC, 2005, p. 15 & 36). This result is one indication that our citizens my not be as democratically engaged as we may assume.

If this is true, then at least one of the imperatives for engaging students in democracy and citizenship is hidden and without data like the United States participation in optional voting, the issue and outcome may appear nebulous to decision makers in government and universities alike.
Service Learning in Australia
There is evidence that Australians value a contribution to the public good. The Australian population is very similar to the United States in at least two measures that evidence valuing the public good, or benefit to the nation and community in general. The organisation Giving Australia estimates that Australians donated $11 billion in 2005 exclusive of donations to assist victims of the tsunami, an 88% increase since 1988.

In one measure of volunteering, 41% of Australia’s population volunteered. This represents a larger share than the US who pride themselves on being a “nation of joiners” (Lenkowsky & Waislitz, 2007).

However, given the political drivers, competitive context and lack of history, the concept of service learning is not readily understood or embraced widely in Australia. Engagement is best understood when it means partnerships that will enrich research and/or learning and teaching; when the outcome of the engagement will bring direct and often private benefit to the partners.

Thus the Service Learning in Australia may be interpreted as philanthropy or social obligation; an add-on or extra that is not really part of core and accountable businesses. In this scenario the benefits of service may be argued and understood but will not be part of a convincing institutional business plan.

Alternatively, the concept can be re-interpreted to match the Australian context, where a case can be made for curriculum enhancement and the development of credit bearing courses. These courses are often best placed in a multidisciplinary environment but this will depend on the capacity of the university to both identify discipline or degree specific outcomes from the curriculum and the individual skills and attributes to be developed by the graduate. This requires innovation and flexibility.

A good example of an Australian University who has embraced the challenge of developing this sort of curriculum is the University of Western Sydney where a program, “Learning through Community Service,” where students can choose to join one of 12 cohorts undertaking a 20 credit point elective. The units involve a compulsory three day symposium, online learning and two face to face tutorials over the course of the semester. During the semester students are expected to undertake a total of 100 hours work with clients or in service agencies. The units also involve five assessment tasks.

This approach sits comfortably with a University like Western Sydney which has a well established co-operative education program. These programs are able to demonstrate a strong relationship to student employment outcomes. It is interesting to note that cohorts focussing on student mentoring and Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) are included in the Learning Through Community Service Program. In this way students are able to achieve academic credit for a program which would be an optional extra in some other universities.

Conclusion
Despite the desirability of engendering the student outcomes associated with service learning, there are significant barriers to the transplanting United States programs. The Australian University context, competition, performance indicators and financial

http://www.uws.edu.au/about/adminorg/devint/ord/students/learningthroughcommunityservice
drivers mean that the private good dominates and initiatives working for the public good are less likely to be developed or supported.

There are signs that service learning is part of an emerging educational discussion possibly more focussed at school level, which recognises the need to engage students in issues relating to the public good. However, to be successfully adapted to the Australian university environment, programs must be strongly linked to vocational outcomes and graduate attributes and given the scope for misunderstanding and trivialisation, the terminology or nomenclature must be changed.

Strong leadership, financial support and evidence of outcome will be needed if Australia is to embrace service learning widely.

Biography

Anne Langworthy
Establishing the Centre for Regional Development over five years ago, Anne has developed a wide range of collaborative partnerships between the university and key regional stakeholders, local government, business and community organizations and fostered work related student projects in the community. She has led the regional campus interest in university–community engagement and participated in statewide and national research into the role of universities in regions and with communities. Her research and development focus has also included other issues related to regional development in particular sustainability and indicators of community sustainability.

Anne has been involved with AUCEA since its inception and is secretary of the committee of management.
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