

## *Live, Learn, Serve: Life Lessons Through Service*

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Service learning is the active participation within the community and the ability to relate the experiences back to the course content, to form a bond between “service” and “learning”. Interdisciplinary in scope, service learning can translate into any field of study within a university. As students and later teaching assistants in the service learning program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, we had the unique opportunity to experience the significant benefits of service learning first-hand.

In many important ways, VCU’s service learning program will seem familiar to readers. Students who take a service learning course rather than a traditional college course are offered a different method of learning that includes service with designated community partners outside of the classroom for a minimum of twenty hours throughout the semester. Working with a wide range of partners such as nursing homes, environmental cleanups, medical fundraisers, and soup kitchens, classes are given many opportunities to experience various components of their community. There are many classes designated as service learning at VCU, ranging from English to Religious Studies. The service work and classroom experience are enhanced by personal and group reflection in oral and written format. Students are given a chance to become actively involved in their surrounding community and form critical networks that will be beneficial for future professional opportunities. Additionally, students, teaching assistants, and instructors develop a sense of global citizenship that allows them to relate their experiences to others and appreciate diversity. Students taking service learning courses receive immediate benefits that include leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving skills.

Our focus in the current essay is not only the opportunities afforded to students but also their teachers, specifically those involved with VCU’s unique Service Learning Teaching Assistant (SLTA) Program, which offers undergraduate students an unique opportunity to assume a leadership role in a service learning class. In this article, as three former SLTA’s, we will reflect on the benefits of service learning, through sharing our personal experiences from the field. In that capacity we served as liaisons between the professor, students, and community partners. In addition, we also assisted with numerous activities associated with our courses by tracking student hours, facilitating reflection, and handling service logistics. Sabrina found many service experiences rooted in the concept of critical thinking. Yeimarie saw the role that many took on in regards to responsibility, both for themselves and others. Holly was able to develop her own leadership skills further, as well as help others to showcase this important skill. As service learning teaching assistants we serve as student leaders on campus, but are also given professional development opportunities outside of the classroom to foster our own leadership, responsibility, and critical thinking skills.

As a professional development opportunity, we had the chance to attend the William and Mary Active Citizens’ Conference in February 2012 as guest speakers where we spoke on the benefits of service learning. This allowed us to reflect on our own personal experiences and growth through the program. Through our “Learn, Live, Serve” session at the conference, we strengthened our leadership skills and became true advocates of service learning to educate our peers on the importance not only for the students, but everyone involved. Indeed, there are a

multitude of benefits that service learning offers and critical thinking, responsibility, and leadership epitomize what service learning is truly all about.

### **Critical Thinking**

The service learning course I (Sabrina) assisted with was Focused Inquiry, a freshman-level English composition course. Through my experiences over a year and a half, I witnessed the important role that critical thinking played in shaping the experiences of the students and my own experiences. Our Focused Inquiry students provided service to Evergreen Cemetery as part of Focused Inquiry's theme of History, Memory, and Possibility. Evergreen is a historically African-American cemetery in Richmond, Virginia where a lack of ongoing maintenance has resulted in it being about ninety percent overgrown. The damage done to the cemetery over time meant many families have been unable to locate the graves of loved ones. Our service learning class led by Professor Mary Shelden helped bring attention to this cemetery near VCU. Students thought critically about possible solutions to the problems that plagued the cemetery and assisted with the clean-up process. Alongside these students, I witnessed a community reunited with a past long buried from view. Especially notable in this respect is the emotional reunion of Mr. Williams, an elderly Richmond resident, with the memorial to his mother—a tombstone no one had seen for decades. For me, this significant reunion - along with many additional results of the students' efforts throughout this course - epitomized not only the important role played by civic engagement more generally but also the implementation of the skills of critical thinking and problem solving to make the community we live in a better place for all.

Critical thinking expands beyond ones' own immediate needs to that of their community and transforms the way that improvement and change can be implemented to create a better living environment for all. Another service partner I chose to work with was Boaz and Ruth, an organization designed to help recently incarcerated individuals reenter into society. It was a challenging and thought-provoking organization with which to work. Many students were reluctant to work among the recently incarcerated. There is a clear stigma in society towards this population, and these ex-offenders are often misunderstood and shunned. The uncomfortable feelings my students felt when entering this environment had a positive outcome. Feeling uncomfortable can often lead to critical thinking about ones' own thoughts and beliefs. The majority of our students at Virginia Commonwealth University would never think about entering the neighborhood that houses Boaz and Ruth, let alone get out of their cars and take a walk inside the organization. Confronting my own fears and helping my students confront theirs was truly eye opening. Speaking with women and men who had been incarcerated and were desperately trying to turn their lives around allowed this population to connect with the VCU community. Instead of referring to them as "recently incarcerated people," we learned their names, stories and struggles. Thinking critically about the ways in which this population often lives a vicious cycle between being incarcerated and released and incarcerated again, brought up great discussion and reflection. Instead of looking down on this group of people, two of our students wrote research policy papers on the economic implications of the released individuals. The job market is often dire for them, and too often ex-offenders turn back to the activities that got them in trouble in the first place. Our students were able to see the importance of allowing these individuals to become productive members of society and the psychological benefits that gainful employment offers them.

Our students were given an opportunity to work together as a team with their classmates. Groups were decided on by common interest in a particular service partner, in my case a local,

historically segregated cemetery and a reentry program for recently incarcerated community members. Being part of a particular group gave me and the students with whom I worked the opportunity to plan schedules, work with new people, and assume different roles. Over the course of my teaching assistantship, issues such as scheduling conflicts, transportation to service sites, and coordination with community partners proved to be a great opportunity to problem solve.

On a deeper level, our students were required to use their critical thinking skills to assess their service. In short, students in this course were required to serve the community and reflect on that service throughout in both information and formal writing assignments. “What, So What, and Now What?” were important questions raised in this reflection process. “What?” is the introduction of the reflection process, where students summarize their service experiences. Every Tuesday, we would spend the beginning of class discussing any service events that occurred within the last week, which allowed other students to gain insight into experiences they may not have participated in directly themselves. These sessions include summaries of experiences with the *entire* service learning process, which may include the people involved and sometimes results in some rather frank and often sensitive conversations. Every such conversation, however, can be an opportunity for problem solving and, therefore, critical thinking. In one session, for example, a student shared concerns about what she saw as a lack of organization on the part of the volunteer coordinator. Her dismay at the situation was a perfect opportunity to talk about the roles of volunteer coordinators. Instead of approaching it from a negative position, the class thought about why a volunteer coordinator may appear unorganized. Questions of understaffing, too many volunteers, and low pay were all brought to the table and made for a valuable conversation.

The next step in this reflection process for us is the “So What?” question. Here, we ask the students to reflect on how that experience connected to their course content. Our students did this in a big way when they participated in a Focused Inquiry Expo at the end of the year, which allowed them to show others what they gained through their service learning. They created tri-folds demonstrating their course content, as well as the service they performed and then connected it together to share with the campus and surrounding community. The final step in the reflection process is the “Now what?” question, which forced students to think about how the service they did would inform their future decisions, both academically and personally. Writing policy proposals for their final course paper requires students to tackle this “Now what?” question directly, taking their personal experiences in the community and the knowledge learned through course content to produce a written piece of work with real-world implications and evidence of sustained academic inquiry. These questions provide a foundation for framing the Focused Inquiry course experience within the context of service.

### **Responsibility**

One of the benefits of participating in a service learning course is that students develop a sense of responsibility. The sense of responsibility to their community becomes tangible when they experience the needs of their community specific to their service partner. On the most immediate levels, personal responsibility is derived from students’ obligation to their teammates to complete the tasks assigned. That has been my (Yeimarie) experience as a teaching assistant for a year-long freshmen-level English composition course. From this perspective, I learned that responsibility is a benefit that is exposed gradually as the semester evolves. It is not uncommon

for there to be some resistance from the students regarding the service learning model as they are unfamiliar with what it will mean for their learning.

The students I worked with chose to work with the American Cancer Society's Relay For Life event. This event allowed students to work together to form a team and fund-raise to ultimately participate in the Relay For Life event in the Spring. These students took the initiative to organize their teams and came up with strategies to fundraise throughout the semester and the day of the event. The process is lengthy and requires an incredible amount of brainstorming, teamwork, and organization. The bulk of the work that is completed with this service partner is completed among the students and they have to be able to complete their service work in a timely and effective manner. The students are responsible to themselves and their teammates and they quickly begin to realize that not fulfilling a task that is assigned to them will directly affect the success of their team as a whole.

In addition to personal responsibility, students begin to understand the responsibility they have to their communities. Through this partnership, students began to understand why fundraising is vital for organizations. Not only does the American Cancer Society help fund potentially lifesaving cancer research, but it also provides services to local cancer patients and survivors. This became real to students as they listened to survivors share their stories at the Relay For Life event. A student's personal and communal responsibility does not always come easy or without a fight, but it does usually arrive through taking a service learning course. While it is often challenging being a teaching assistant, I also witnessed the evolution within students as they begin to see their place in our social system and what they can do to better their own community and those within it.

Upon beginning the Relay For Life fundraiser, there was a student that outwardly seemed absent and uninterested. She joined the Relay For Life team, but still was not vocal or engaged during meetings and lacked an interest in participation. After the first couple of meetings, she must have sensed that someone needed to take a certain leadership position to help her team remain on track and she reluctantly filled the position. However, as the semester continued she attempted to remind her peers of the tasks that were going on and she helped find meeting times for everyone. She later spoke up and shared with her peers her own family's battle with cancer and how important this cause actually was to her. This student realized that her team needed her and that this kind of service to her community is what may help other families battling cancer. A student's growth happens over time and although at times their lack of engagement in the beginning is disarming, the ultimate growth is rewarding. They begin to understand the importance of their place in their group, as well as within their community.

## **Leadership**

As a student and a service learning teaching assistant for my undergraduate Introduction to Human Geography course at Virginia Commonwealth University, I (Holly) experienced service learning as a combination of active involvement within the community, critical thinking, problem-solving, responsibility, personal growth, and empowerment. All of these benefits together help students become leaders on campus and in the community.

My own experience has been my personal growth and confidence in my leadership style. I firmly believe that the best way to lead is by example, but I wasn't always confident enough to walk the walk. My service learning class was a great experience, and it helped me overcome my shyness. In the beginning I was so scared to go into the elementary school, where I was scheduled to tutor three English as Second Language (ESL) second graders for my Introduction

to Human Geography course. I was the student sitting in the back waiting to be told what to do and scared to step up and take action. You can see my growth in the way I lead today, because I feel comfortable working with elementary students and being proactive in teaching. This new sense of confidence in my service, as an Elementary Education major at VCU, has given me hands-on experience in a school, and has allowed me to network with other teachers early in my collegiate career.

When reflecting on my service I learned things about myself I never knew. For example, while working as an ESL tutor, I had to find creative ways to teach new concepts, when the ones planned weren't working. Having confidence in myself, my ideas, and my leadership style, I learned to be flexible, patient, open to new ideas, and proactive. This new understanding has empowered me and helped me grow as a leader.

After finishing my first service learning class, I felt compelled to share my excitement and love for service. This passion led me to become a service learning teaching assistant (SLTA) for my Introduction to Human Geography professor, Dr. Helen Ruth Aspaas. As an SLTA, I have had the honor of educating students on service and encouraging deeper thinking about their experiences. I have been a vital link between the students, our professor, and the Richmond Public School community partners.

For me, the most enjoyable part about being an SLTA is leading oral discussions. During this time, my role is to lead a discussion about a specific community partner with a small group of students. Students are asked to reflect on their course material and their service. This is where I allow each student to voice their thoughts and lead the discussion in their own way. My role is more of a facilitator, who prompts students who are not connecting their service to the class. During an oral discussion, with a group of students who worked in the Richmond public schools as ESL tutors, one student shared observations of the students' culture and how these cultural differences made it hard to accelerate at the same rate as other students. This student truly connected the class concepts of culture, from our Introduction to Human Geography course, to their service and to their broader goal of being an elementary education teacher. It is invigorating to see students flourish and finally make the connection. I feel this student now has a better understanding of the issues many immigrants face when coming to the United States, and as a future teacher will be more knowledgeable about ESL students.

Thomas J. Watson said, "Nothing so conclusively proves a man's ability to lead others as what he does from day to day to lead himself." During my journey of service I have learned that being a leader does not mean you have all of the answers, but that you are willing to find them, ask questions, be humble, and be empathetic. Service learning has revealed my passion for service and the aspiration to be involved with my community. This desire led me to become a volunteer for Virginia Commonwealth University's AmeriCorps program in 2010, where I volunteered in the Richmond Public Schools as a reading tutor for two years, helping to increase literacy rate in kindergarten through second grade. I was given the opportunity to be a team leader for AmeriCorps, and like my role as a service learning teaching assistant, I worked directly with AmeriCorps members who were college students. In this role I organized and facilitated team meetings where we reflected on our service. I encouraged my members to step out of their box by allowing them to come up with their own creative ideas for tutoring and letting them have a say in how our team worked. In this capacity as an AmeriCorps team leader and a service learning teaching assistant, I allowed others to lead and was able to guide them by showing how I lead myself.

When I reflect on what it means to be a leader and serve, I feel that one must understand the issues in the community, ask what they can do to help, and actively act on those issues. Service learning provides a place for students to learn the skills necessary to be a leader and an active citizen in their community. I may not be changing the world, but as a leader I believe I making a difference one step at a time.

### **Conclusion**

After experiencing service learning as both students and teaching assistants, we are convinced of service learning's many benefits. Critical thinking, responsibility and leadership are important to having a meaningful service experience and reflection in the classroom and beyond. Through our personal experiences, we have each grown and evolved into leaders who hope to empower others to take on roles within service learning and the community. The skills developed in the service learning setting do not stop when the course ends. Sabrina graduated from VCU in May 2012 with a degree in History and Religious Studies and received a full-time position working for the Oral Health Promotion and Community Outreach department at the VCU School of Dentistry, allowing her to continue assisting students who participate in service learning. She also is working on her Master's Degree in the service field of Gerontology. Yeimarie graduated from VCU in May 2012 with her degree in Social Work and is currently pursuing a Master in Social Work at University of Michigan. In her graduate program, she is an active member of Social Work Allies for Immigrant Rights, an immigrant rights advocacy group that brings awareness of this important social problem to students on campus and also the community at large. Holly is currently pursuing her undergraduate degree in Early Elementary Education at VCU, and is working as a service learning teaching assistant for Professor Erin Brown in the new Live and Learn Aspire program at VCU. She resides as the Program Assistant for VCU AmeriCorps, where she volunteered as a reading tutor for two years. She is the site coordinator for six AmeriCorps teams, serving in the Richmond Public schools. At an important time in world history, with globalization and internationalism displayed around the world, building strong character is undoubtedly essential to our future. Fostering these skills, while educating students in their studies, is effective and necessary. It is our hope that more colleges will implement service learning as an option in their course listings. We have seen the change service learning makes in our own lives, as well as in the lives within our community. Changing the world one person at a time will make all the difference.