

Community Service as a Lifelong Learning Practice: Themes and Hypotheses

Yahui Su

Liyia Feng

Teacher Education Center
National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Taiwan
No. 1, Sung-Ho Road
Hsiao-Kang Chiu
Kaohsiung
Taiwan

Abstract

Researchers have highlighted the importance of community service as an integral component of the educational process. This paper considers community service as a part of lifelong learning. Community service, which occurs through an individual's engagement in community relationships and interactions, could become a key "participatory learning" practice, contributing to lifelong civic action. The notion of community service as a lifelong, sustainable learning practice is rarely addressed. As an initial step, a pilot study is conducted, using a questionnaire that has been tested for clarity, validity, and economical use of time. Four hypotheses, which might be tested via further study in the future, are presented. It is assumed that community service can be viewed as a lifelong learning practice, one that has potential long-term effects on those who participate in and benefit from it.

Key Words: community service, lifelong learning, service learning

1. Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is currently seen by many as a necessary response to changing times. Lifelong learning does not refer simply to a continuation of learning or an extension of the learning process. Rather, it signifies a mega-paradigm shift from hierarchical learning to individualised learning (Edwards & Usher, 2000: 77; Jarvis, Holford & Griffin, 2003: 89; Su, 2007; Usher, 1999). Through the individualisation of learning, individuals decide what they learn and what constitutes knowledge (epistemological discourses) rather than depending on general collective guidelines or patterns. Individuals become authoritative centres of action in making judgments and decisions about learning; they focus their learning energy on the development of their life-worlds, which one must attend to. Lifelong learning "becomes the norm, life itself; a process, not a discrete educational event" (Bennetts, 2003: 476).

As "an improvised practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the broadest idea of "learning" includes diverse everyday practices; learning "is everywhere, it envelops us and pervades our everyday life" (Renshaw, 2003: 358). Alternatively, as a lifelong practice, learning is recognised as "a specified task to be undertaken and pursued with attention" (Oakeshott, 1975: 24). Delorset *al.* (1996) propose the notion of "four pillars of learning" that support learners in meeting the challenges of knowledge-based societies: *learning to know*, *learning to do*, *learning to live together*, and *learning to be*. These four pillars do not provide a sense of learning *what* (i.e., something that has already been decided); instead, they focus on learning *how* through purposeful processes. To achieve success and gain confidence during times of change, individuals are expected to develop "lifelong learning competencies" (European Commission, 2002), which include the ability to effectively apply knowledge and skills relevant to their lives and work situations.

2. Community Service and Learning

Effective interaction and involvement with others is among the lifelong learning competencies that individuals are expected to develop. As a learning activity, community service is linked to social interaction rather than defined in individual terms. As Ben argues, "if learning is seen as a function of social relationships rather than as an essentially individual activity, then the concept of lifelong learning is extended beyond solely the acquisition by individuals of formal qualifications" (quoted in Crowther, 2000: 481).

Learning often occurs through human interaction (Bennetts, 2003: 458), a view that entails that “social activities [are] constitutive of learning” (Renshaw, 2003: 360). In this way, community service, which potentially promotes learning through an individual’s engagement in community relationships and interactions, could become a key practice that links individuals to “participatory learning” and its production (Botkin, Elmandjra & Malitza, 1979), thus qualifying as a form of civic action and involvement (Davies, 2006).

Scholars have highlighted the importance of community service as an integral component of the educational process, with some claiming that “learning is less effective when the individual is isolated...Learning should take place in interaction with other learners and with real world contexts in both formal and informal settings” (Zhu & Baylen, 2005: 252). Learning through involvement in community service, as a form of voluntary engagement in a real social environment, differs from learning in a school context. Community service is a potential source of genuine learning that arises through real-life experiences (Dewey, 1938). Learning through community service, which is categorised as a type of informal learning from experience, however, “is greatly neglected in comparison with that which takes place in the formal classroom” (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993: 2). In developing lifelong learning practices, informal learning, including community service, should arguably be recognised as equally valuable to formal and non-formal learning in the overall lifelong learning process (Moreland & Lovett, 1997).

The community service to which I refer in this paper does not necessarily involve “service learning”. Rhoads (1997: 4) distinguishes community service from service learning, suggesting that

Service learning combines community service with a learning component and in the collegiate context typically is supervised by a faculty member or a student affairs professional and often carries with it academic credit or is part of a course requirement or option. Some service learning activities may have prescribed learning objectives as part of the experience and may include students writing a reflection paper describing their experiences.

Service learning is designed to effectively enhance an educational process that combines community work and academic learning. The notion of “service learning” or “community service learning” is integrated into the curriculum, and hence, it is often discussed in an educational context. If it is not linked to a formal course, community service often depends on volunteers (e.g., members of Community Service Volunteers (CSV), the UK’s largest volunteer and training organisation), and its ultimate purpose involves the community itself; however, community service through service learning is always understood as a component of a formal course.

Learning from community service activities is a type of community learning. Community learning includes all occurrences of learning through individuals’ engagement in the community in various forms and thus includes community service. Falk & Harrison (1998: 614) view community learning as a name “for those individual and group processes which not only produce, but also *sustain* community development outcomes” (emphasis in original). They emphasise the “community development outcomes” that are achieved through individual engagement in collective efforts. The community serves as a context that “offers learning opportunities outside the educational institutions and in informal settings” (Zhu & Baylen, 2005: 254). As a consequence, individuals and the communities in which they serve produce outcomes that have meaning for themselves and for the communities.

3. The Aim

In this paper, I view community service as a potential learning practice that occurs in informal settings outside of educational institutions. The first question I examine is the following: In what ways do individuals, as community service providers, relate to community members who are the recipients of that service? The second question I examine is the following: Given the diverse ways in which individuals engage in community service, how can community service experience be sustained and transformed into positive lifelong learning practices? The term “community service” appears to have both prescriptive and descriptive connotations. It implies good intentions and suggests participants’ concern for others. Community service appears to be innocuous, and there appears to be no reason to resist it. However, does community service necessarily derive from, or lead to, an ethic of care or concern for others? I am interested in exploring how individuals, with autonomy and without academic compulsion, perceive and understand community service and what they usually learn from such service experiences. In addition, I would like to examine to what extent community service learning enables change in the individual and in the community. As this research is in its initial stage, I present here a pilot study from which further study might evolve.

4. Methodology

The same event may affect different people in different ways. For example, if two individuals participate in community service, one may be profoundly affected by the experience, while the other may be affected hardly at all. What matters is not exposure to an experience but how an individual responds to that experience. The impact of community service largely depends on an individual's personal reflections on how the experience affected him or her.

One issue that arises is how to make informal community learning visible, as it is often not included in institutional, accredited learning practices (see McGivney, 1999: 78). Informal learning modes are diverse; for example, informal learning may occur when an individual joins a community "clean-up" activity. In the present study, I wish to focus on "significant learning", which produces within-person changes that transform the ways in which individuals view themselves and the world, thereby affecting their actions within it. Community service learning in an informal setting is made visible through individuals' self-evaluations of their participation in community service. The transitions, if any, reported by respondents are also evidenced by the visibility of such transitions in their lives and in the community.

The pilot tool was a questionnaire consisting of 9 open questions, inviting participants to provide full responses. In June 2010, I asked 20 of my university students to complete the questionnaire. The purpose of their participation in the pilot study was to test the clarity and validity of the questionnaire and to help me develop related ideas through reading and considering their responses. The use of "open" questions, a bottom-up approach, gave respondents the freedom to respond in their own words and alleviated my concern that closed questions, a "top-down" approach, would constrain respondents' thinking. I encouraged them to reflect on the questions prior to answering, allowing time for retrospection, as some had previous community service experience. The results produced from the analysis were therefore not pre-determined by the researcher. Each formulated question, adapted from Bennetts (2003), was tightly based on the objectives of this study. The questionnaire content can be found in the appendix together with the rationale for each question. To enhance the clarity and validity of the questions, the questionnaire will be revised based on respondents' responses. Without giving respondents a time limit in advance, it is estimated that the time required to complete the questionnaire is typically 40 to 50 minutes.

5. Presentation

This paper focuses on how participants perceive community service as a helpful event that enables them to learn through self-evaluation of their community service experiences. The three questionnaire items that prompted the most remarkable respondent answers are presented below. The questions and responses are followed by a summary and discussion of the responses.

What factors do you think were most influential in your decision to participate in community service?

- concern for others (7)
- opportunities provided by school (5)
- time available (2)
- parents (2)
- relationships (1)
- desire to interact with those whose lives are different from mine (1)
- personal growth (1)
- past personal experience (1)

Hellman, Hoppes & Ellison (2006: 29) suggest that "a sense of community connectedness, cost and benefit considerations, and the seriousness of community needs are significant variables in explaining variance in the intent to engage in community service". The factors listed here more or less correspond to these suggestions. The categories are derived from participants' own words, not from pre-set responses. One student viewed developing concern for others as an aspect of personal growth. I thus attributed this factor to personal growth in this case.

What, if anything, do you think you have learned from your community service experience?

- an understanding of diverse people (6)
- how to care for people (with empathy) (6)
- the importance of collective action and selfless contribution (3)
- the importance of community connectedness (3)
- the importance of appreciation (2)
- learning to be a person (2)
- how to think differently (1)
- how to teach (1)
- the community-building process (1)

These categories are also derived from respondents' own words, and some participants listed more than one concern. Two respondents used affective words (e.g., "warmth", "love", "concern", and "sentiments") to describe their community service learning experiences. Four respondents observed that concern for others cannot be learned in the classroom. One respondent did not refer to community members or the community itself but instead emphasised the skills she had acquired.

In what ways do you think your community service experience has affected you and the wider community? Provide examples, if possible.

Yourself

- ideas and attitudes towards others (e.g., care and patience) (6)
- self-fulfilment (e.g., happiness) (3)
- thinking about life (e.g., goals) (3)
- appreciation (1)
- interpersonal skills (1)
- self-understanding (1)
- "no pain, no gain" (1)
- sensitivity to the environment's sustainability (1)
- lifelong service (1)

The Community

- no influences or changes in my life or the community (4)
- social cohesion (2)
- quality of community life (1)
- warmth experienced by community members (1)

Participants' increased care and patience with others fall into the "ideas and attitudes towards others" category. Three participants reported that community service experiences have affected how they think about their lives and life goals. Of the four participants who detected no significant influences or changes in their lives, one observed that he perceived no significant influence or change because such things require time. Another noted that her community service experience occurred long ago and that she could not recall any impact it may have had on herself or on others. A third participant perceived no continuing influence, and the fourth stated that there had been little impact, as she had had too little community service experience for any effects to appear.

6. Themes Arising from the Inquiry

Despite the aforementioned statements, strikingly, most students claimed that overall they had gained limited understanding from their community service experiences. Additionally, they reported few "significant" changes that affected them and the wider community. It appears that, as Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1986) argue, not all individuals obtain a "deeper" understanding of what they learn from involvement and participation in socially interactive life-worlds. Although community service has been linked to a deep form of engagement or participation through which learning can occur, "[the] participation metaphor as a way of explaining learning is not entirely helpful", as Edwards (2005: 59) has argued, "because it can appear to suggest that we do not need to examine what learning is in order to think about how it might be enhanced". It may be that individuals feel unable to engage or contribute in meaningful and productive ways.

Community service may not generate a “more caring sense of the self”, as Rhoads (1997: 92) believed it would, but instead merely involve superficial engagement with the community. To further explore the issue of deep community service engagement, we focus on four themes that arise from the pilot study presented in this paper.

Theme 1: Does commonality matter?

Community service may generate an experience of difference through a participant’s “encounter with strangers” (Radest, 1993). What if we offer service to a community in which the people are like us? According to some students, if the people to whom they commit themselves and interact with are not very different from themselves, they feel that their activities are less meaningful, as they expect to learn less from people with backgrounds similar to their own. They tend to perceive community service as a process of working with minorities or the disadvantaged, groups that they view as *different and needy*, making their service activities seem more meaningful. In this sense, community service is viewed more as a charitable act than as an act of community building that benefits everyone, regardless of the particular beneficiaries of community service. Within the context of community service relationships, the ethic of care for others becomes conditional on beneficiaries’ needs.

Theme 2: One-way or two-way relationship?

It follows that community service as an act of charity may foster a one-way relationship in service activities and thus fail to encourage the intimate connections characteristic of two-way personal relationships. Rhoads (1997: 150) observed that

community service ideally ought to involve a degree of mutuality in which reciprocity exists between the community service workers and the community members... Too often, service is undertaken as a patronizing endeavor in which community members – those designated to receive – rarely are consulted about what their real needs are.

On the basis of mutuality, community service should perhaps be reconceived as working *with* people in need rather than working to serve them. Such a relationship involves dialogue between community service workers and community members. However, how can individuals enter into dialogue if no consensus has been achieved regarding what is really required for community development? As communities become increasingly diverse and complex in changing times, an affective rather than a rational form of engagement (Yorks & Kasl, 2002) may be key to bridging the relational barriers posed by the postmodern condition.

Theme 3: For whose good? Ours or others?

Students recognise not only the need to care for others but also the positive feelings experienced by community members as a result of their efforts. While students greatly appreciate and cherish the warm sentiments occasioned by their work and involvement, some students had difficulties determining whether community service is egoistic or altruistic. One female student described struggling with confused feelings about community service:

I admit that I do this for my own benefit. Involvement in community service provides a sense of meaning *in me*. I make the recipients of the service feel cared for in order to make myself feel better and identify myself as a good person. I cannot help but wonder who is being served by all of this.

It is thus questionable whether community service experience necessarily helps one develop a “caring self” (Rhoads, 1997). This issue concerns what we really mean by civic participation through acts that aim to benefit everyone, both the acting individual and others. The assumed dichotomy between egoism and altruism may not be helpful in fostering a sense that community service can improve other people’s lives and promote personal satisfaction.

Theme 4: How might community service be sustained as a lifelong learning practice?

The pilot survey finds that male students (3 out of 6) are more likely than female students (0 out of 14) to speak favourably of the need for and importance of community change and even larger societal changes. Some male students, speaking in rational tones, expressed concern for others and the community, while others (both male and female) observed, in more affective tones, that their engagement was more about connecting with themselves (i.e., personal growth). It is expected that students with feminine perspectives will tend to reflect on their community service experiences in terms of personal growth, while students with male reasoning patterns also consider how community service affects the larger world, often pondering possible changes that it could effect.

One female student expressed doubt that her community service efforts could result in any changes in the community:

I am not sure if I am of any help. I hesitate to believe that I can somehow make a difference.

Such a perception may determine whether an individual can sustain community service participation as a lifelong learning practice. Workers may stop participating in community service if they do not believe that their actions can effect change. It is expected that an awareness of the link between community service experience and the social world—rather than a specific event or experience—fosters deep development of a participant’s learning. A participant with such an awareness would value community service as a recurring lifelong activity, which would thus become a lifelong learning practice. Additionally, those who develop community service as a lifelong learning practice are perhaps those who seek new insights, actively reflect on their experiences, and take responsibility for themselves and their environment instead of simply learning through service participation. I have noted that those who were more interested in learning and had a holistic perspective of the link between their community service experiences and the wider world provided richer descriptions in the pilot reports.

7. Conclusion

We can now venture some hypotheses for future empirical testing:

Hypothesis 1: If community service is viewed, in the present times of change, as a lifelong learning practice, no common values or beliefs will be observed, except for the importance of on-going dialogue as a basis for community building.

Hypothesis 2: When participants undertake community service as a “service” activity rather than a “community” activity, interaction and engagement with community members becomes a task and does not foster an ethic of care.

Hypothesis 3: Participants fail to learn from community service, as they do not reconsider their sense of self in light of those they encounter in such service. Their sense of self is rooted in a more or less atomistic notion of the individual. The “other” is often envisioned as a “generalised other” instead of the “particular other” with whom they are interacting.

Hypothesis 4: Transforming community service into a practice of lifelong learning is ultimately rooted in values – individuals discovering what is important and meaningful to them, what they value, and what their learning and life development are directed toward.

The development of lifelong learning is closely and essentially related to one’s social practices and “social learning capability” (Wenger, 2009), which are deemed necessary for social inclusion and democratic participation. Community service must be perceived as a lifelong learning practice to have long-term effects on citizens who serve and are served in the community; it naturally takes time to effect changes or make any significant difference in people’s lives and the community. Participants evaluate changes in themselves, along with associated benefits, by determining whether they have learned to know, to do, to live together, and to be (Delors et al., 1996). The changes may not be limited to new ways of viewing the world; they may also impact how people approach and live in the world. Individuals with a comprehensive vision, who habitually reflect on potential changes in the community and even the larger world (rather than focusing only on personal changes), are likely to be more inclined to consider community service as a sustained learning practice.

References

- Bennetts, C. (2003). The impact of transformational learning on individuals, families and communities. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22 (5), 457-480.
- Botkin, J. W. et al. (1979). *No limits to learning: bridging the human gap*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Walker, D. (1993). *Using experience for learning*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crowther, J. (2000). Participation in adult and community education: a discourse of diminishing returns. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19 (6), 479-492.
- Davies, L. (2006). Global citizenship: abstraction or framework for action? *Educational Review*, 58 (1), 5-25.
- Delors, J. et al. (1996). *Learning: the treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.
- Edwards, A. (2005). Let's get beyond community and practice: the many meanings of learning by participating. *The Curriculum Journal*, 16 (1), 49-65.
- Edwards, R. & Usher, R. (2000). *Globalisation and pedagogy*. London: Routledge.
- European Commission. (2002). *eEurope 2005: an information society for all*. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.
- Falk, I. & Harrison, L. (1998). Community learning and social capital: "just having a little chat". *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 50 (4), 609-627.
- Hellman, C. M., Hoppes, S. & Ellison, G. C. (2006). Factors associated with college student intent to engage in community service. *Journal of Psychology*, 140 (1), 29-39.
- Jarvis, P., Holford, J. & Griffin, C. (2003). *The theory and practice of learning* (2nd edition). London: Kogan Page.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McGivney, V. (1999). *Informal learning in the community: a trigger for change and development*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Moreland, R. & Lovett, T. (1997). Lifelong learning and community development. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 16 (3), 201-216.
- Oakeshott, M. (1989). A place of learning. In T. Fuller (Ed.), *The voice of liberal learning* (pp.17-42). New Haven; London: Yale University Press. Radest, H. (1993). *Community service: encounter with strangers*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Renshaw, P. D. (2003). Community and learning: contradictions, dilemmas and prospects. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 24 (3), 355-370.
- Rhoads, R. A. (1997). *Community service and higher learning: explorations of the caring self*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Su, Y-A. (2007). The learning society as itself: lifelong learning, individualization of learning and beyond education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 29 (2), 195-206.
- Usher, R. (1999). Identity, risk and lifelong learning. In P. Oliver (Ed.), *Lifelong and Continuing Education: what is a learning society?* (pp.65-81) Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2009). Social learning capability: four essays on innovation and learning in social systems. *Social Innovation, Sociedade e Trabalho*. Booklets 12 – separate supplement, MTSS/GEP & EQUAL Portugal, Lisbon.
- Yorks, L., & Kasl, E. (2002). Toward a theory and practice for whole-person learning: Reconceptualizing experience and the role of affect. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(3), 176-192.
- Zhu, E. & Baylen, D. M. (2005). From learning community to community learning: pedagogy, technology and interactivity. *Educational Media International*, 42 (3), 251-268.

Appendix

1. What does “community service” mean to you?

The aim here is to determine how participants perceive their community service experience.

2. What factors do you think were most influential in your decision to participate in community service?

The aim here is to determine the motivation behind the push for action.

3. What, if anything, do you think you have learned from your community service experience?

The aim here is to elicit responses about significant individual community service experiences.

4. What changes, no matter how small, have occurred for you as a result of your community service experience?

The aim here is to address incremental change.

5. In what ways do you think your community service experiences have affected you and the wider community? Provide examples, if possible.

The aim here is to elicit awareness of benefits to oneself, others and community.

6. In what ways, if any, has your life been significantly altered by your participation in community service?

The aim here is to identify examples of significant learning.

7. If you have experienced some kind of significant change, what do you think is most responsible for this change?

The aim here is to get participants to identify and isolate how these changes occurred.

8. Do you think you will continue with community service in the future? Why?

The aim here is to consider the possibility of participants sustaining community service as a lifelong learning practice.

9. What are the major activities that represent your lifestyle? Please list five.

The aim here is to determine whether participants perceive learning activities or practices as valuable lifelong activities.