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THE GIFT OF ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING

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Although the vast majority of America's colleges and universities utilize Academic Service Learning (AS-L) in their curricula offerings, it is still often regarded as a relatively new and developing area within higher education. Many will agree that the AS-L movement emerged as a result of concerns and activism of the 1960's and early 1970's, however it should also be noted that the theoretical construct of AS-L theory is built upon the work of many individuals. Of particular note is how John Dewey's beliefs that combining knowledge and skills with relevant experiential activities is critical to learning, and David Kolb's and Donald Schon's significant work on the importance of reflective thinking, have both been utilized by AS-L pioneers (Flecky, 2011).

A review of the St. John's University website reveals that at our institution Academic Service Learning is defined as *"a classroom experiential-site based program that involves students in some form of required community service that benefits the common (public) good and uses service as a means of understanding course concepts. The service activity meets course objectives and through reflection students examine issues pertaining to social justice and responsibility."* This definition, like the definition used at most institutions of higher learning, is complex in its simplicity. The positive impact on student learning and their future lives as well as the lives of the individuals whom they serve are often impacted in ways not considered or easily assessed in the

course evaluations. It is the impact upon one's heart, the palpable, intangible and often most dramatic outcome of this *"classroom experiential-site based program"* that makes AS-L one of the most significant, academic experiences that both students and faculty engage in today.

The ultimate benefit of AS-L will be seen in the lives of those served and the lives of our students and faculty who are engaged in this extraordinary means of teaching and service.

The AS-L literature is rich with descriptions of innovative and new developments. We read of different models- the philanthropic, civic engagement and communitarian models- that are used to conceptualize this teaching/learning approach. While theoretical constructs are important, it is equally important to also focus on the extraordinary learning and service that occurs. Many reviews of AS-L clearly demonstrate that students learn

and the people with whom the students come in contact through their AS-L activities are served, however it is also important to remember that it is not only the serving activities, or the giving of the student that facilitates the learning. Students also learn critically important course concepts and more important life lessons from the people whom they serve as their clients also give back much in return. Perhaps recognizing how fortunate we are and how much more we need to do to make the lives of others in need better is the greatest learning outcome of AS-L. While the relationship to course content must always be considered when engaging in AS-L, this component of this educational experience brings the learning in AS-L to a much more introspective place and heightens the reflective component of the assignment.

The beauty of, and to some degree the greatest challenge to measuring this learning outcome, is that it will ultimately be demonstrated over the student's lifetime long after the class has ended. But that too may be the greatest gift that engaging in AS-L gives to our students.

This issue of JoVSA includes reports and commentaries on outstanding examples of faculty and students engaging in collaborative AS-L research activities. These accounts not only serve as a means of sharing best practices and new knowledge but give us hope as they provide evidence that the learning and the lives of both students and clients have been enhanced. The ultimate benefit of AS-L will be seen in the lives of those served and the lives of our students and faculty who are engaged in this extraordinary means of teaching and service. That article continues to be written and fortunately has many authors.

References

Flecky, K. (2011). Chapter 1, Foundations of service-learning. In *Service Learning in Occupational Therapy Education* (pp. 1-18). Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning. Retrieved from http://samples.jbpub.com/9780763759582/59582_CH01_FINAL.pdf