



Service Learning RESOURCE GUIDE

Vol. 2, No.1

May 1999

INTEGRATING REFLECTION ON ETHICAL ISSUES TO PROMOTE CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

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One of the important goals of service learning is promoting civic responsibility. This outcome, however, is usually undefined, and consequently some people assume that it can be achieved just by having students do community service. While students who engage in voluntary service can be expected to become more connected with the community, that is not all one expects to happen under the rubric of attaining civic literacy. What more should happen and how can service learning experiences be structured in such a way as to achieve civic literacy?

Ethics and Civic Responsibility

It is important first to clarify the concept of civic responsibility. Drawing upon the civic republican or citizen democracy tradition of writers such as Barber (1984), Boyte (1989), and Sandel (1996), most faculty and administrators want their students not only to feel a greater connection with their community, but also to attain an understanding of the importance of creating sustainable democratic communities. This is citizen-driven democracy. To attain this goal, students need to acquire some civic skills, such as the ability to engage in continuous critical thinking or to engage in effective democratic decision-making activities (Lisman 1998).

Such skills can help students develop a civic conscience. To have a civic conscience is to become a democratic self, that is, to be a person who is disposed to consider what is in the best interests of all concerned in practical situations.

Ethics Discussion in the Classroom

One way to integrate ethics and civic responsibility into the classroom is to use a reflective component in which the instructor identifies the ethical dimensions of the course through presenting ethics case studies (see examples below). As applied to ethics, the case method attempts to provide concrete examples of ethical issues or dilemmas in which students can develop ethical insights as they analyze the case studies, gain practice in ethical decision-making, and choose a course of action.

A dilemma is an ethical situation in which two or more values or principles are in conflict or where it is difficult to apply a value or a principle to a situation. Ethics cases are essentially stories or vignettes in which individuals confront an ethical dilemma or decision. Case studies can be as simple as a few sentences in which an ethical conflict is presented. For example:

A medical doctor told his female fertility patients that he was providing anonymous donor sperm when, in fact, he was providing his own. Did he do the wrong thing?

A detailed case study can also be used, as shown on page 3.

Types of Ethical Dilemmas

Applying a valid principle to a new situation

Contrasting the right thing to do against one's perceived self-interest

Identifying a conflict between principles independently accepted as valid

There are three basic types of ethics cases that can be considered.

- *Application of a moral principle to a situation that is complicated by other factors*, such as technology. The use of animal organs in human transplants is an example of this kind of case. Leaving aside the difficult moral question of the ethics of harvesting such organs, inserting these organs in humans raises a serious ethical question. People believe strongly in the principle underlying such transplants, namely to uphold the Hippocratic oath and alleviate or prevent suffering. However, are there limits to what lengths modern medicine should go to carry out this purpose? If using animal organs does not present any serious health risk, are these transplants compatible with the dignity of individuals?
- *Conflict of self-interest against respecting the interests of others*. For example, someone has an opportunity to benefit from insider trading information in a stock deal, or a student is tempted to cheat on an exam. Research ethics involving issues of honesty is an important topic for the natural and social sciences and might be a good way to incorporate ethics discussion into any number of science and social science courses.

- *Conflicts of moral values or principles*. The euthanasia issue illustrates this type of ethics case. Most people agree on the underlying principles of respect for life and obligation to alleviate suffering, but euthanasia features these two principles in conflict. For example, someone who is suffering terribly from a terminal illness may wish to end his life and asks the attending physician to help. The physician may be torn between the commitment to saving life and the commitment to alleviating suffering. Which principle should get precedence—the right to life or the right to be free of needless suffering?

Many important questions of the day, and those within academic disciplines, are these types of dilemmas. Using the case study approach involves selecting personalized and contextualized examples of these three conflicts and providing an opportunity for students to analyze and discuss them.

Ethics and Service Learning

Boss's (1994) research has concluded that engaging students in community service activities can promote moral development. Faculty using service learning can assume that the curricular integration of service will contribute to moral development. But it can do so much more powerfully as faculty find ways for students to reflect upon the discipline-appropriate ethical dimensions of their service experience. Classroom ethical reflection also helps students understand the social responsibilities of professions associated with the academic content they are studying.

In a sociology course, ethical issues concerning racism or poverty can be highlighted. Students who may be serving in a soup kitchen or assisting the homeless could provide case studies of their experiences and the ethics dilemmas that they have confronted. Environmental issues, such as the conflicts of providing a sustainable environment against interests of economic development, can be discussed in conjunction with service projects in a science class. In a history course, students can gain research

Ethics Case Studies

The best ethics case studies for student reflection are real-life situations involving conflicts of interest or questions about the right thing to do in specific situations. Practice in discussing and reflecting on ethical dilemmas that simulate situations students may confront has two benefits. It will help prepare students to handle ethical situations that may arise during a service activity, but it also will introduce students to ethical issues relevant to the discipline they are studying.

Case Study A: Ethics and Social Science

A student working with a social caseworker learns that one of their clients is secretly playing in a band two nights a week and earning \$20 a night. Since the client is physically disabled and receiving full welfare benefits for himself and his family, he is required by law to surrender any other income to the welfare department. He is breaking the law by keeping the money. The caseworker, knowing that the welfare benefits are based on an unrealistically low cost-of-living index, does not want to report the man. The caseworker asks the student to go along with this plan. What should the student do? (Adapted from Ruggiero, 1992)

Case Study B: Ethics and Science

A student is assisting a lab technician in a blood bank as a service project for her biology class. The student knows that the technician is going through a pretty tough divorce and that his work hasn't been up to par. She accidentally learns that the technician has mixed up several patients' blood samples. If the student corrects the errors, the director of the blood bank will find out and the technician will be fired. If she doesn't correct them, several doctors will receive incorrect information about their patients' physical condition. What should the student do? (Adapted from Ruggiero, 1992)

Case Study C: Ethics and Mentoring

A college student is serving as a tutor with some fellow students in an after-school program. They are being supervised by a parent volunteer, with a public school teacher on call. The student-tutor discovers that the parent seems to have an aversion to working with a few of the children, who happen to be members of an ethnic minority group. The parent continually assigns the college students to work only with the non-minority children, and is short-tempered with the minority children. The tutor is concerned about what to do and brings this item up for discussion in the college English class for which he is doing his service project. A number of students exhibit racist attitudes, claiming that for the most part minority students are not in school to work and that it is best not to expect much of these children. They side with the parent's behavior. An argument ensues. How should the instructor handle this discussion?

experience through collecting and documenting oral histories in minority or immigrant communities. As the students document these stories, they can compare these kinds of historical narratives with the ones presented in history textbooks. The professor can challenge the students to think about their ethical obligation to write history from an inclusive perspective, rather than from one that favors one economic or ethnic group over another.

Achieving civic responsibility involves more than promoting a civic conscience; it also involves helping students acquire the skills to promote sustainable democratic communities. When possible, students need to become engaged in projects that go beyond providing direct delivery of service, such as tutoring in the schools or serving food in the soup kitchen. Faculty and colleges need to partner with community-based organizations to help improve community life, incorporating group or democratic decision-making activities such as helping teach a micro-enterprise class at a family center or community school or supporting an effort to improve housing conditions (Lisman 1998).

The challenge of this kind of community work for faculty is not only to develop campus and community partnerships, but also to ensure that students work on activities relevant to the academic content of their courses.

Students can reflect on the challenges of helping people at a family center, community school, or nonprofit community development corporation while learning how to develop their own home-based businesses. Students learn by teaching and mentoring, and gain real-world experience in the complexities of business development. Students also contribute to the empowerment of community members to become more economically self-sufficient as a pathway toward developing sustainable democratic communities. As students examine these community-directed activities in the classroom, they can see the relevance of what they are learning to help improve civic life.

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