January 2004   www.universityaffairs.ca

Educating Citizen Jane

Community service learning, a teaching model that combines volunteer service with academic work, aims to instill in students a sense of citizenship and civic engagement

by Léo Charbonneau

On a grey Saturday morning, 23 students assemble at the offices of the University of British Columbia's Learning Exchange, a community outreach centre in the heart of Vancouver's seediest neighbourhood, the notorious Downtown Eastside. A local resident asleep in the doorway underscores the fact that this is a world far-removed – literally and figuratively – from UBC's leafy, affluent main suburban campus. That's part of the idea.

The students are here to attend one of the weekly orientation sessions for the Learning Exchange's Trek Volunteer Program. The program provides UBC students the opportunity to offer their services in schools, non-profit organizations and community centres in the inner city. Its aim is to give students real-life experience in the community while raising their awareness of health, social, economic and political issues.

UBC Trek Program students Anthony Steinruck, Annes Song and Mwalu Peeters in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside where

Francy Hayward, a UBC student with a first degree in sociology, is the orientation leader. She explains the goals of the Trek program to the volunteers – predominantly women and science students – and discusses some of the issues facing residents of the inner city. The session is designed to gently introduce students to a different reality – a world of substance abuse, sex trade workers, homelessness and grinding poverty. Asked to explain why they decided to volunteer, one female student says, "I drive through here from my home in North Vancouver on my way to UBC. I wanted to know more about the scene that I'm seeing. Most of us just pass through."

The Trek program forms the foundation of UBC's commitment to a pedagogical model that's proven popular south of the border and is quickly making inroads on Canadian campuses. Called community service learning, or simply service learning, it combines students' community volunteer activities with their academic course work.

"There's this whole continuum of experiences and opportunities at university, from volunteering at one end all the way to co-ops and internships at the other end, and I think service learning falls in a very balanced place in the centre," explains Cheryl Rose, the coordinator for citizenship and community-based education at the University of Guelph.

Service learning is meant to benefit not only the recipient of the service, but also to provide an important learning experience for the student in a formal, structured way. That's what distinguishes it from straight volunteering. The students are prompted to make the link between what they learn in class and in the community – between theory and practice – through a process of reflection that may include such things as journal writing, group discussions and written reports.

"This very strong, intentional effort to ask the students to reflect on their experiences and the critical thinking involved in this self-reflection . . . that's where the opportunity for deep learning occurs," says Ms. Rose.

Sara Dorow is spearheading a service-learning initiative at the University of Alberta. Martin Garber-Conrad of the Edmonton City Centre Church Corp. is a community representative.

But most people involved in service-learning initiatives in Canada say such programs play an even deeper role: to create more active and well-rounded citizens. "I take really seriously the notion that we have to be educating people to think critically and to be informed, engaged citizens," says Ann Wilson, an English and drama professor who teaches a service-learning course at Guelph. "And I think you have to put your money where your mouth is and give students the opportunities to be engaged citizens."

Ms. Rose says Guelph is fortunate to have a champion in Alastair Summerlee, the university's president. "He has such strong commitments to the civic engagement of the students and of the campus community. We certainly feel support there."

The same is true at UBC says Margo Fryer, director of the Learning Exchange. "Our president Martha Piper talks a lot about global citizenship and the strengthening of civil society," she says. "She's providing an overall intellectual argument and a context."

East coast pioneer

The acknowledged pioneer in service learning in Canada is St. Francis Xavier University. It introduced the concept in 1996, adapting a model from a U.S. college. "Students didn't have a lot of opportunities for experiential learning, especially community-based. So we looked at this model and found that it fit quite well with our philosophy," says Marla Gaudet, program officer for the service-learning program. A five-year, $1-million grant from the J.W. McConnell Foundation helped expand the program.

StFX offers a voluntary or mandatory service-learning component in nearly 50 courses in a wide variety of programs involving 900 students out of a population of 4,000. Venues where students volunteer their time, usually a few hours a week, include local schools, nursing homes, group homes, food banks and a women's shelter. Students also may act as consultants in areas related to their studies. For instance, a nutrition student might help with a meal plan in a group home or a business student might help to develop a community group's strategic plan.

The StFX Service Learning team (from left): coordinator Ann Sherman, immersion service learning program officer Brenda Berthiaume, and course-based service learning program officer Marla Gaudet.

Lauren Coyle, a fourth-year nutrition student at StFX, participated in four service-learning projects, through a psychology course, two nutrition courses and an upper-level course called Service Learning Theory and Practice. She says they're the courses she'll remember the most from her university years. "I loved it," she adds.

In her theory and practice course she worked with the elderly, while in the psychology course she helped in an after-school arts program for kids. "We got to look at children develop their arts skills, so it really applied to the course. But at the same time it was fun and we were providing a service to the school that they otherwise wouldn't have."

At the other end of the service-learning equation is Blaine Chisolm, program manager at Celtic Community Homes in Antigonish. His organization provides support and housing for adults with mental-health issues and has partnered with the university's service-learning program for several years.

"It's been a great experience for everyone involved," he says. "It gives students a chance to meet people with serious mental-health problems and gives them some idea of what's going on in the community. . . . It puts a face on mental illness."

Mr. Chisolm says the students often show up not knowing quite what to expect. He tries to gauge their interests and learning goals and attempts to accommodate them as much as possible.

Last year, a number of physical education students asked to set up an exercise program. "I thought, 'we'll try this, but it's not going to work'," says Mr. Chisolm, because he knew that people with mental-health problems often lack motivation. "But it worked really well. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed it. The students were so well prepared."

StFX also offers an "immersion experience," where small groups of students provide a service in another culture for the full week of spring break. This year, the university is organizing experiences in Guatemala, Grenada, Cuba, Mexico, Romania and . . . inner-city Toronto. (For some students from small-town Nova Scotia, notes Ms. Gaudet, inner-city Toronto is just as foreign as the other destinations.)

Now there's even a Service Learning Student Society at StFX that organizes non-academic community work for students who, for whatever reason, are unable to take part in an academic service learning opportunity. One event saw students throw a Christmas party at a seniors' home, with the added twist of bringing in children from a local daycare. It was such a hit that the students repeated it several times.

Starting out

At the University of Guelph, course-based service learning is still quite rare. The university just began the service-learning component in the third year of an interdisciplinary bachelor's of arts and science program. For an hour and a half each week the students help to deliver a remedial reading program for struggling adolescents at a vocational high school. They also take two hours of instruction each week on issues of literacy and models of teaching.

"It's an amazing experience, both for me teaching but really for the students," says English and drama professor Dr. Wilson, because "it makes the learning that's going on in the classroom seem a lot less abstract." Often by this point in the semester students are stressed out and "selectively engaged," she says. "But in this course, the students are fired up. . . . The material matters to them now."

Starting out. Jen Joedicke, a human kinetics student at StFX, assists at kindergym, a physical activity program for preschoolers. Photo: St. Francis Xavier

Guelph offers other service-learning opportunities, including a week-long immersion program similar to the one at StFX called Project Serve Canada. Organized in collaboration with UBC, the program rotates between Vancouver and Guelph. Students keep daily diaries of their experiences working with community organizations and also follow faculty-led workshops on broader social issues. The immersion aspect of the program, says Dr. Fryer at UBC, "magnifies the learning experience for students. The learning payoff is enormous."

UBC has a very ambitious service-learning program. Last year, the Trek Volunteer Program had 300 students partnering with 30 organizations, up from 30 students and 10 non-profit groups when it started in 1999. The ultimate goal is to have "at least 10 percent of the UBC student population involved in community service-learning activities by 2010," says Dr. Fryer.

However, like Guelph, formal course-based service learning is new to UBC, with just one pilot course last year and five this year. "You can take any course and turn it into a service learning course," says Dr. Fryer, but faculty need to be educated about the concept.

The U.S. has a much longer experience in this area, says Sara Dorow, a sociology professor at the University of Alberta who taught courses with a service-learning component while at the University of Minnesota. A national service learning network in the U.S. has a membership of some 700 colleges and universities.

Dr. Dorow inquired about starting up a program in her department at U of A and within a few weeks had recruited a number of interested colleagues. "There are always going to be some faculty who immediately grasp the concept and find it appealing," she says. As well, many universities probably have at least a few faculty to draw on who are already offering service learning, whether they call it that or not. Starting this year, U of A has three pilot courses that offer a service-learning component, involving 40 students working with eight community organizations.

There are, however, "real barriers" to setting up a program, says Dr. Dorow. It takes time and effort to contact community organizations and arrange appropriate projects. What she'd like to see is a centralized office on campus "so faculty feel like they're not having to start from scratch." At the very least, she says, there needs to be a community liaison officer to avoid a duplication of efforts. "You don't want organizations to get calls from several different departments."

UBC student Aaron Wong volunteers part-time at the Dr. Peter Centre, a Trek Program partner organization that provides comfort care for people living with HIV/AIDS.
Photo: Chloe Lewis

Dr. Wilson at Guelph says it's beneficial to find partners who have a history of using volunteers and who understand the need to offer students a good learning environment. "I'd be hesitant to send them into a situation where they're, I don't know, raking leaves," she says. On the other hand, universities must be mindful that community organizations often have limited resources and may even feel reluctant to participate for fear of being subsumed by the university.

In Peterborough, Ontario, these types of issues are managed through an independent non-profit organization called the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education. The centre's board, made up of representatives from both Trent University and local community agencies, strives to have neither side dominate. "We very consciously try to strike a balance between community development and educational goals," says the centre's director, Jennifer Bowe.

Undergraduate research

The Trent centre is unique in another way: it focuses solely on community-based research. The centre works with the community groups to develop relevant research proposals and then matches these proposals with Trent students, who carry out the work for credit. Ms. Bowe says the program demonstrates to students the value of their liberal arts and sciences education.

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Laura Mayo, who recently graduated with a BA in psychology from Trent, took part in the program last year, conducting a research project on the history of mental health services for the local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. "I really felt like I was taking on a thesis. It was huge," she says of her experience.

While she learned a lot about how to conduct research and be resourceful, she says she was hampered because the association didn't have a clear idea of what it wanted. But she's forgiving. "These organizations seek people out because they don't have the resources to hire their own researchers. They're already overworked and underpaid."

Opinions differ on how a student's performance during a community service experience should be measured, particularly when it's part of a course. In some places, such as Trent, students actually create a project. Or they might have to write a paper or make a presentation, which professors can then grade. Faculty may also ask the community organization to fill out a student evaluation form. However, "the degree to which faculty

take that [evaluation] into account in the grading varies quite a bit," says Alberta's Dr. Dorow. Some professors don't want to include it at all, while others feel it's important.

"We all know of classes at university that don't require a lot of you. This isn't one of them."

Back at UBC's Learning Exchange, students are asked to discuss their views on community service and their perceptions about the Downtown Eastside. Then, just as they are getting warm and comfortable, the student leader Francy Hayward introduces the issue of safety, presenting her charges with two pages of guidelines and rules. Volunteers are cautioned about bringing valuables with them and told to be "mindful that you're a guest in the community."

After they've discussed the 22 safety guidelines, the volunteers divide into groups of four or five and set out on a self-guided walking tour. For second-year engineering student Kevin Wong, the tour was the highlight of the orientation session. "At first our group was worried about our safety," he says, "but we became quite comfortable. I found that the Downtown Eastside wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

Ms. Hayward has volunteered with the Trek program for three years. This past year she helped organize the reading-week project with Guelph. She says her experiences with the program have given her "a sense of community" and taught her "how people are interconnected."

Rupinder Sohal, another student orientation leader, says students can become too immersed in ideas while at university. "I think at some point it's useful to see those theories in practice and to see their successes and failures." This semester Ms. Sohal is volunteering at a hospice, and "every person I meet there leaves me with something to think about."

Asked what she might say to someone who's interested in service learning, but hesitant, Ms. Hayward advises, "Stop thinking about it, just do it. You have something to give and something to gain."

With files from Howard Fluxgold.