What Do You Mean by “Service” – and What Do You Want “Service” to Mean?

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I have participated in the field of service-learning since 1989.

Over the years, I have observed that much of the emphasis in the field of service-learning is on the “-learning” side of the term. I believe this focus is appropriate, given the importance of helping educators and the wider community understand that service-learning can be a solid, even rigorous, educational methodology.

On the other hand, I have also observed that service-learning practitioners do not always identify and wrestle with the “service-“ side of the term. There is a tendency to assume that we all agree on what “service” means. Yet I find, both within my own work and within my conversation with other practitioners, we do not always agree on the meaning of “service” – and even when we do, our articulation of it is not always sufficiently clear.

The following article invites the reader to explore what “service” means to them, and to participate in the process of developing a shared articulation of its meaning.

Considering Your “Definition of Service”

I often begin presentations with students and workshops with educators by inviting participants to write down, and then to dialogue with one another about, their definition of “service.”

I then write the following definition on the board, indicating that it contains several ideas that I often hear:

“Service” means “doing something for – or giving something to – a person/people in need”

Next, I offer the following five scenarios – all of which, at least on one level, fit this definition, and yet also contradict many people’s sense of what “service” truly means.

Scenario #1: Students were invited to participate in a school’s annual holiday food drive. To make sure that everyone did not bring in the same food item, a list of different foods was circulated at the beginning of the drive, and each student signed her/his name next to one of the items. As the homeroom teacher was collecting the donations in a large box, one of the students held out a bag of croutons. The teacher was confused, unable to recall croutons as being one of the listed items, and looked back at the list. Sure enough, the student had signed up to bring stuffing, so the teacher pointed it out. Looking the teacher straight in the eye, the student dropped the bag into the box and said, “My mom says that beggars can’t be choosers.”

Scenario #2: A student participated in his faith community’s “community meal” program, which provided a free meal to people in low-income situations. The following week in class, he shared...
about the experience with his classmates and teacher. He began by describing the process of food preparation and the people with whom he worked. Next, he related what it was like to serve the food to the people who came. (It was done cafeteria-style.) “It was going really well,” he said. “Everyone was saying ‘thank-you’, and I could tell they liked the food. . . . Then this really fat lady came in, with three little children. They were so obnoxious; she must have been a single parent. When they came through the line, not one of them said ‘thank-you.’ And when they sat down, I saw her take a cell-phone out of her purse. No wonder they’re poor.”

The teacher was stunned, and unsure how to respond. Fortunately, one of the other students raised their hand and said, “Excuse me, but did you ever consider what it might be like if your family were homeless, and your parents were looking for work, and they had to be out of the shelter during the day? How would they know they were being contacted for a job interview if they didn’t have a cell phone?”

Scenario #3: "As a high school senior, [Peggy Scherer] got involved in what was called the Main Street Bible Project . . . . She particularly remembers a skinny, pale 10-year-old child she was assigned to tutor. 'I remember anticipating how grateful Belinda was going to be for my kindness. Full of a sense of my own goodness, I moved towards Belinda, and she hauled off and gave me a kick in the shin that I will never forget!' Peggy looks on that kick as a sign from heaven. 'It jolted my view of myself as 'the giver'. I began to realize that I was the one who had a lot to learn - things more valuable than any I had to teach. It was Belinda and people like her, their lives sharpened by poverty, who could teach me what I needed to know.'" (Bob Reilly, "The Catholic Worker Turns 50," Saint Anthony Messenger, May 1983)

Scenario #4: In a unit about homelessness, a teacher promoted an opportunity for students to serve a meal at the local emergency shelter. The teacher said, “This is a wonderful chance for you to help out those who are not as fortunate as you are. It’s our responsibility to help them out.” When the teacher came to school the next day, there was a typed note under the door. “I am unable to participate in the service project you told us about – but I want you to know why. My family and I are currently living at that shelter. I’m one of the ‘them’ that you were talking about. Maybe I don’t belong in this class.”

Scenario #5: A service-learning practitioner doing research about the effects of service-learning programs on college students around the country found a pattern that disturbed her. “I’ve heard from a number of people, in different colleges and universities, that their experiences of working in shelters for homeless people ‘are so powerful and moving’ that they ‘hope their children will have the same opportunity to do such service-work when they are in college.’ It reminds me of what Paolo Freire [the Brazilian popular educator] once said – that ‘poor people were not put on this planet to be the object of our service.’"

After sharing these stories, I invite participants to re-examine the definitions they had been developing, and see whether or not they would adjust them in any way.

Following some time for individual reflection and paired sharing, I then open the floor for proposed adjustments to the general definition I had written earlier on the board.
Some Essential Qualities of “Service”

The following is a list and brief description of some ideas that have emerged from such sessions, as well as from my own reflection on these scenarios and on other experiences of service.

Service is primarily about “being-with”, not “doing-for” or “giving-to”

When I was in grade school, I can recall several occasions when a teacher would share with us that someone very close to one of our classmates (e.g. a grandparent, a parent, a sibling) had died. S/he would also tell us about where and when the wake would be. I remember a series of thoughts and feelings whirling around inside me – that being around people who were struggling emotionally really bothered me, that I could think of nothing that I could possibly say or do that would take away their suffering (and that whatever I would say would probably make things worse), that being around a dead body was eerie. I concluded that it would be best if I did not go to the wake at all.

What I have learned since that time, from people who have had family members die and thus been at the wake waiting for people to come (something I had not then, nor even yet, experienced), is that it does not really matter what a person says or does; what truly matters is that they are there.

I have heard a similar message from people who are suffering in other ways – e.g. from poverty, from violence, from discrimination -- and from those who work with them.

I recall the line from a poem written by a woman sitting in the waiting room at a local food shelf. “When was it that the axe did fall,” she wrote, “severing us from the rest of a real humanity, casting us adrift in a boiling sea of wasted lives?” The food shelf coordinator who shared the poem with me explained that, more than the food they received, what those who came sought most was a sense of connection to other human beings.

Service is a way of connecting/relating that involves “encountering”

Tracy O’Connor, a student in the Sales and Management program at the St Cloud Technical College where I work as Coordinator of Service-Learning, shared the following perspective with me:

>[Service-learning experiences] help me not just learn to go outside of myself, but [they] help to remind me that there’s something out there bigger than me, and there are people out there other than me . . . There’s a connection in the community that needs to be made, and it can only be made when people step outside of themselves and what’s going on in their own little world, and go out and do something for others.”

When I first wrestled with that series of thoughts/feelings about attending a wake, I believed that I was being sensitive to the needs of those who were suffering. Looking back, I realize that what I was focused on was barriers within myself that I have needed to overcome in order to truly “be-with” people in such situations.
I needed to be willing to encounter the person in their situation – not merely to think about, observe, or respond to it from a distance.

Moving towards such encounters can certainly have a physical dimension, as did my need to actually go to where the wake was being held. I believe that, whenever physical distance can be overcome, it is generally desirable to do so. Yet there are also factors that can make it impossible (e.g. the time and expense of travel; the vulnerability of the person who is suffering; unsafe aspects of their situation). In such situations, there are other forms of encounter that can be provided – e.g. listening to their stories, poetry, music; participation in simulated experiences.

Yet engaging in authentic encounters requires more than just physical proximity. There are other forms of distance that must be overcome, including:

- **intellectual**: addressing one’s prejudices about people/situations and preconceived notions about responses/solutions
- **emotional**: being willing to allow the other person’s experience to shape one’s emotions as well as one’s mind
- **social**: transcending social barriers that segment communities and stratify society
- **spiritual**: being willing to allow one’s beliefs and values to be tested, even transformed

Just as my ability to go to a wake involved addressing some of these internal barriers, so too the process of preparing people for experiences of service requires attentiveness to all of these factors. Such preparation is essential to minimize the possibility that attitudes such as “beggars can’t be choosers” and judgments such as “people deserve to be poor” will be present and reinforced.

**The encounters in service are not between “I/we” and “them”, but between “us”**

One of the greatest internal barriers that we need to overcome is the framing of the encounter – and the world – as being between “I/we” and “them”.

“Other-ing” people objectifies and distances them.

It is certainly true that there may be genuine differences – e.g. in background, in life experiences, in knowledge and ability, in access to resources and opportunities. These differences must not be ignored; being color-blind, or ignoring the realities of gender, class, ability, etc, will perpetuate them.

Yet we share a deeper humanity.

**Entering and engaging in the process of service requires awareness of each participant’s gifts and hopes, as well as each participant’s needs and the challenges they face**

Consider the following quote, from Omraam Mikhael Aivanhov:
“Not only must the most privileged feel 
they are brothers and sisters of the most destitute, 
but the most destitute must feel as well 
that something within them makes them equal to the greatest sages and geniuses.”

And consider this quote, which is attributed to an Aboriginal woman:

“If you have come to rescue me, then you are wasting your time. 
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, 
then let us work together.”

A “rescuing” approach is premised on a way of seeing a situation that divides participants between “those who are secure/have resources” and “those who are vulnerable/lack resources”.

Yet all human beings have gifts and hopes, all human beings have needs and challenges, and the development of healthy relationships and life-giving communities requires attentiveness to all of them. That is what Belinda awakened Peggy to recognize, and what the teacher promoting the project at the emergency shelter had failed to see.

One of the perspectives that can increase participants’ ability to relate to one another in this way is the concept of “accompaniment” – of relating with others in ways that allows them space and support to contribute their gifts to the process of addressing the situation.

Another perspective that enables participants to think and act in this way is the concept of being an “ally”. The gifts and hopes of those who are marginalized or excluded are more fully recognized and supported when they have central, even leadership, roles in articulating, analyzing, and addressing the situations that oppress them, and when those who seek to support them operate as allies rather than leaders (in the traditional sense). The teacher of the unit on homelessness failed to frame the project at the emergency shelter as an opportunity for becoming an ally, and did not even offer an avenue for the leadership potential of the student who wrote the note to be valued and supported.

Entering and engaging in the process of service also requires awareness of where in the social systems each participant is located

In our society, there is a widely-held belief (at least among those of us whose gifts are fairly-well utilized and whose needs are generally met) that social stratification does not exist, and that as long as we treat one another in interpersonal interactions as equal human beings, we have done what is necessary.

This belief fails to take into account that the development and utilization of our gifts, and the addressing of our needs, is significantly affected by factors beyond our individual control – e.g. the ways in which we are treated by family members, the belief systems into which we are socialized, the ways in which economic policies of our society impact our family’s income level, the ways in which systems that promote cultural values and norms address our situation.

There are different ways that the effects of these factors are described – that some people are advantaged while others are disadvantaged, that some are more privileged while others are more marginalized, that some are oppressed while others are in the position (whether intentionally or not) of being oppressors.
It seems to me that, while the degree and nature of the differences caused by such factors can be debated, the fact of the differences – and the fact that they have real effects on whether or not our relationships with one another and our communities will become more or less healthy and life-giving – is indisputable.

Therefore, just as it is important to enter the process of accompanying and developing relationships with others with an attentiveness to each person’s gifts and needs, it is essential to be conscious of how factors such as those described above impact the experiences and situations of each person.

Service is a process that addresses both the immediate situation and the underlying causes of the situation

The service-learning practitioner who shared with me the troubling pattern she discovered in her research (Scenario #4) believed (as do I) that realities such as poverty, violence, discrimination, and environmental degradation need to not only be addressed in terms of their immediate and evident consequences, but in terms of their underlying causes.

To do so is challenging. It is much easier to donate to a food drive or to provide a meal at a homeless outreach center than it is to discern and address the causes of hunger and homelessness. It is also more socially acceptable to do so. (Dom Helder Camara, former archbishop of Recife, Brazil, once said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why people are poor, they call me a communist.”)

Yet to point to those challenges does not mean that it is necessarily harder or more important to address underlying causes than it is to respond to immediate situations. A friend of mine once asked me, “Which is more difficult – to lobby state legislators for increased funding for HIV/AIDS research and treatment programs, or to be frequently called in the middle of the night to be with someone dying with AIDS?”

Service requires both dimensions, and each has its challenges.

A person’s capacity to effectively engage in “service” involves competencies in several key areas, including intellectual, emotional, relational, and behavioral

When I entered the field of service-learning, my initial focus in terms of preparing participants and assessing outcomes was on the intellectual dimension. Did students understand the issues involved? Did they know how the organization with whom they would be working operated? Did they learn important information and concepts?

Staff in community-based organizations made me aware that I also needed to value the behavioral dimension. Were students sufficiently prepared to engage in the activities that would be required? Did my processing with students and assessment of their performance sufficiently attend to what they were able to do, and not merely what they said they had learned?

Student sharing awakened me to the importance of attending to the emotional dimension of service. While their intellectual discoveries gave them a sense of direction, the emotional impact of their experiences often provided them with a source of energy to invest themselves in moving in that direction, even to overcome significant internal and external obstacles. I have also observed, within myself as well as others, that reluctance to engage in service is more often
rooted in emotional factors – e.g. fear, guilt, despair – than it is in a lack of intellectual understanding.

Students have also helped me recognize the significance of the relational dimension of service. I have seen how authentic encounters with people who know an issue from firsthand experience have enabled students to break through stereotypes, prejudices, and fears. The ability of students to move into efforts to address systemic dimensions of issues is often rooted in their discovery of how such systems impact people about whom they know and care. And when individual situations of suffering or systemic issues that cause them seem overwhelming, it is the sense of connection – to those who are suffering, and to others spread out over space and time who have been and are involved in addressing such situations and issues – that compels and sustains their involvement.

**Essential effects of service include an enhancement of the well-being of the individual participants and a positive contribution to the well-being of the wider community:**

Having entered the field of service-learning as a teacher in the formal education system, my initial focus was on student-learning and personal development. When I heard about students judging those in poverty, my concern was about their failure to understand. When reading journal entries like Peggy’s, I wrote notes affirming such discoveries. When hearing about how moved someone was by an experience of working in a shelter for people experiencing homelessness, I celebrated their sense of personal growth.

It took me a while – and I am still learning how – to pay an equivalent amount of attention to the impact on the well-being of those that students encounter, and on the wider community as well.

My initial thought was to make sure I invited staff in the community-based organizations to provide feedback about these aspects of students’ work. Yet while obtaining such feedback has given me glimpses of these other effects, it has proven insufficient.

And it has revealed other questions, such as:

- What role do community voices play in the process of discerning on which situations/issues I ought to have students focus?
- What role do those whom students will encounter and the community organizations with whom they will collaborate play in constructing the preparation process (including the academic content covered in my course)?
- How do I cultivate a sense of accountability – within students, and within myself – to the well-being of those they encounter and the wider community?

**So what do you think?**

I am reasonably convinced that each of these principles regarding “service” are essential elements of the meaning of “service” -- though, in the interest of ever-deeper learning, I am very open to considering others’ perspectives about these principles.
I am absolutely certain that the above list does not exhaust the list of implications raised by the four scenarios I offered – and I am very open to learning of additional principles that others have found in reflection on their own work and lives.

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