Leadership Skills Development Through Service Learning

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Abstract

The engagement of students in service learning will help them acquire and improve on necessary leadership skills required of them upon graduation. This is essential to help prepare and put the graduates of the Industrial Technology (IT) program at the forefront of employment in the new industrial revolution. It is therefore important that IT majors should participate in service learning so as to improve their leadership skills. This paper addresses the development of leadership skills through service learning and learning communities.

Introduction

The integration of the learning communities during students' engagement in service learning will help students acquire and improve on necessary leadership skills required of them upon graduation and employment in the future. Therefore, IT majors should participate in service learning for feedback on their level of leadership skills as observed by the learning communities involved. Therefore, collaboration between the educators and the organization where the service would take place is required for the success of this project.

Service learning (SL): What is?

Bradford[2] (2005) defined service learning as an educational method by which participants learn and develop through active participation in service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community. According to McPherson[7] (2005) "Service learning is a method of teaching through which students apply their academic skills and knowledge to address real-life needs in their own communities." Eyler & Giles[4] (1999) highlighted the importance of service learning as "a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems, and at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves." It is essential therefore to provide a structured environment in which participants will be able to discover their own styles of leadership, what works, and new approaches to explore through constructive criticism from the learning communities that includes faculty, students (peer groups), and the community they serve. Therefore for this article, learning communities will be defined "as groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning" (Cross[3], 1998).

Service learning at Jackson State University

The mission of the Department of Technology is to provide a nationally accredited program, which serves the technical, managerial, and communication needs of persons desiring to enter or advance professionally in an industrial technology related career. The Division of Student Life at Jackson Student University supports the intellectual, career, personal, social and cultural development of students. As a partner in the educational process at Jackson State University, the division supports the academic programs of Jackson State University by providing efficient and effective services for the holistic development of students. Through its programs and services, students are enriched by experiences acquired in ethnically and culturally diverse environments. In addition, the Center for Service Learning under the auspices of the Division of Student Life at Jackson State University supports faculty, students, and community in a common effort to integrate academic study with responsible community service, given the fact that an active learning strategy connects students to the school and the real world. Most importantly, students at JSU are required to have a service learning experience prior to graduation. Over the last two years at JSU, more than 1,500 students have engaged in service learning courses, contributing more than 7,000 hours in the community. For more information on how service learning is integrated into coursework visit - http://www.jsums.edu/~announcements/StudentLife-StudentHandbook.pdf.

Why service learning?

Service learning avails to students the opportunity to develop leadership skills, discover talents, and gain meaningful personal insight about who they are, what they are capable of, and who they want to become. In addition, it helps students to shape their values, aspirations, and career paths. A service learning program develops leadership skills in students as they learn to work collaboratively with the community. They learn that the most effective leadership is that which encourages the active participation and indeed, leadership of others. As a result, the Department of Technology is applying the pedagogy of service learning in a wide variety of situations and through various models, particularly, the learning communities.

Enhancing leadership skills by students in IT program

According to Goetsch[5] (1992), "Leadership is the ability to inspire people to make a total and willing commitment to accomplishing organizational goals" (p. 40). Most organizations today demand, among other things, effective leadership skills from the industrial technologists. Hence, it is imperative that graduates of industrial technology program should earn the following supervisory skills upon graduation:

> Technical knowledge (machines, processes, production methods)
> Human relations knowledge (human behavior, working well with people)
> Administrative knowledge (understanding the organization and how it works)
> Decision making and problem solving (analyzing information, reaching a decision)
> (Rue[8], 2007).

Service learning in higher education would enhance the development of these leadership skills through 'learning and action.' This real life experience is an opportunity to enhance critical

thinking and organizational leadership skills necessary to manage both personnel and materials in the organization. Since people still hold the key to significant productivity improvements, attempts at improving productivity with primary focus on technological improvements should be extended to the improvement of people (Goetsch[5], 1992, p. 429). What is of greater importance is to know the people that work for you so as to as to be successful as a supervisor. Therefore, a manager should be well versed in different ways in which employees' productivity can be improved. Some of the more widely used strategies for improving people productivity that a service learning program should be able to demonstrate are summarized below:

Use work measurement techniques
Encourage employee participation
Arrange training for employees
Implement incentive programs
Use method improvement techniques
Encourage motivation (Goetsch[5], 1992, p. 435).

Assessing students' leadership skills development in service learning

Students' leadership skills could be assessed through many ways such as co-operative education, internships, job shadowing, and many more. Given the fact that most students in the industrial technology program have not been able to put into practice their leadership skills before graduation, the integration of service learning and learning communities have been of immense benefit. While service learning has provided the avenue for students to put into practice the knowledge gained in the classroom and laboratory, the learning communities have functioned in the capacity of facilitators and mentors by giving constant feedback on students' performance while engaged in service learning to enhance their leadership skills. Student's leadership skills development is assessed in ITC 400 – Technical Communication based on the following criteria:

Daily Journal of Activities:	25%
Weekly presentation to faculty and students:	20%
Supervisor's final evaluation:	30%
Final Report	25%
	100%

The *Daily Journal Activities (DJA)* consists of: 1. List of the activities participated on a particular day; 2. Identification and description of special learning experiences; 3. Identification of specific links to student's academic instruction; and 4. the questions or concerns that emerged during the service learning experience and how they were solved or planned to be solved. The DJA will be graded by the course instructor.

The *Weekly presentation (WP)* consists of the list of specific goals or outcomes from the service learning as they relate to students area of concentration or program of study and the list of planned activities that will help to reach these specific goals. The WP will consist of a professional 10-minute digital presentation (e.g., PowerPoint, etc.) as well as a printed "pitch book" that provides greater detail to the presentation. The WP will be graded by the course instructor.

The *Supervisor's final evaluation* will measure the performance and contribution level of each student and will account for a significant portion of the course grade (30%). This will be a constructive criticism and feedback on student's technical and leadership skills/competencies required of them to be able to perform well on the job as a potential leader.

The *Final Report* will be documented and will be graded by the course instructor. The report will be a self-study report by the student "postmortem" / "lessons learned" assessment which details the relative successes and failures encountered throughout the service learning experience, as well as recommendations for future participants.

Faculty Participation

The course structure consists of daily journal of activities and oral presentation of service learning experience throughout the semester by the student. Faculty participation in the service learning experience is in the context of mentoring and oversight in the following areas:

1. Guide students as they proceed with the service learning.
2. Criticize constructively with immediate feedback.
3. Present methods of writing technical reports.
4. Provide an opportunity for presentation of the final report.

At the end of the semester, each student is required to prepare and deliver a PowerPoint presentation to the class (oral presentation) on their service learning experience.

The integration of service learning and learning communities

The term learning community describes a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, and participate in decision making. The integration of service learning and learning communities is essential and requires the participation of the employees of the organization where service is rendered and the students. Therefore the required learning communities for this experience are:

Student peer groups among participating students
Peer groups among faculty to foster the implementation of this framework
Peer groups among faculty and employees of the organization where service is rendered.

The characteristics of learning communities as informal groups are summarized below:

These groups are formed voluntarily by employees of an organization
Members share a purpose or concern
These groups are formed around mutual interests and fill important social needs
These groups often develop where employees work closely together in the same field (Rue[8], 2007, p. 168).

The integration of service learning and learning communities should assist students to behave and think like leaders. Most importantly, participating students would successfully:

Generate ideas and make decisions with appropriate facilitation by learning communities
Correctly interpret student's experiences in line with research-based models for leadership with high quality feedback
Effectively communicate orally and visually to an audience of students, faculty, and workers in the organization where service is rendered
Set realistic, individualized goals for leadership development in line with research-based principles of emotional intelligence.

Result from service learning participation

Students in the industrial technology program that participated in service learning have improved their leadership skills as evident in the feedback received from their employers. Since most of the students entering the industrial technology program have had little or no "hands-on" experience, the department of technology has partnered with the Office of Computing and Communications of the institution for internships opportunity for students, particularly those specializing in computer technology. To this end, it is interesting to see how students are willing to take extra time from their busy undergraduate schedules to pursue industrial internships. In addition, this on-campus internships opportunity is extended to all students from sophomore level upward to help prepare them with the necessary hands-on skills and as well as professional positions that require this kind of hands-on experience.

Conclusion

The integration of service learning and learning communities will enable students in the industrial technology program to gain valuable leadership skills. Through participation in service learning, students are enabled to develop problem solving, critical thinking, public speaking, and interpersonal skills. Particularly, the implementation of learning communities in service learning helped to refine communication, team building and leadership skills through effective feedback.

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