

BOOMER SERVICE LEARNING: ENLARGING THE CIRCLE OF COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The ASSETS project at GateWay Community College, a small urban institution with a balance of academic and technical programs, focuses on getting boomer-aged individuals involved in community service and in creating projects that serve the needs of boomers in the community. Students get involved in service learning projects in their classes such as sociology, psychology, social work, and community health. As a sociology instructor, my focus is on ways the sociology curriculum invites us to deal with the increasing complexity and alienation of society and on building meaningful family and community relationships through intergenerational outreach and projects, especially those that target baby boomers and boomers who are re-careering.

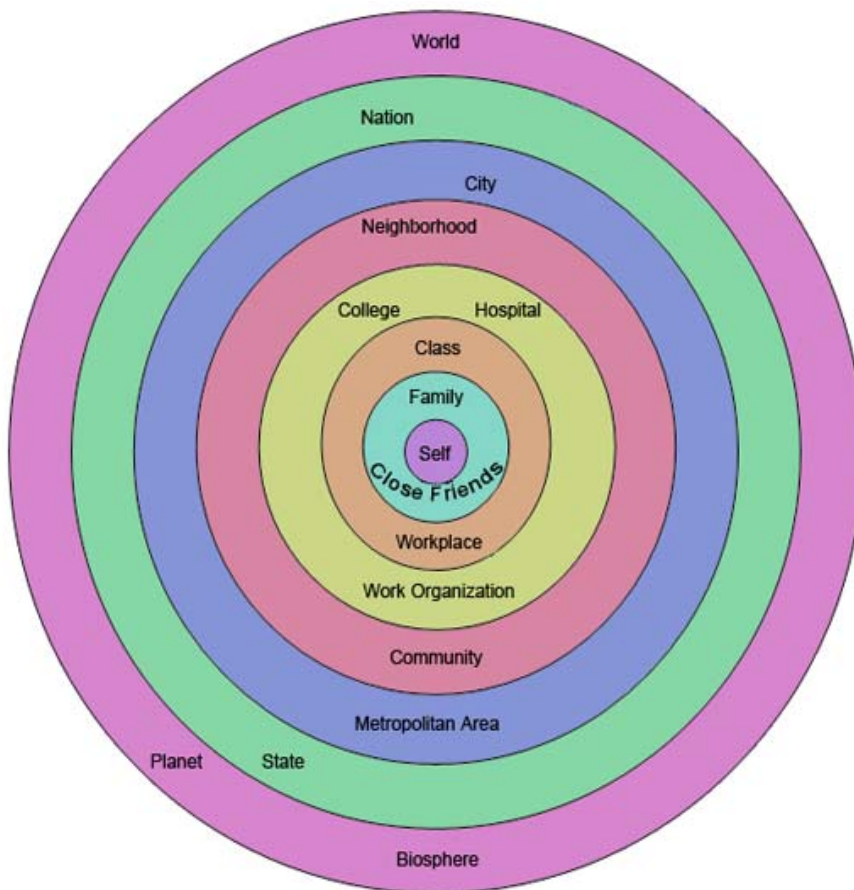
At the beginning of the semester, it can be difficult getting student buy-in to service learning. Anyone who has tried to generate excitement in the classroom for a service learning project is familiar with “You want me to do *what*? How can you ask this of me? I already do so much!” I would like to share an approach that builds interest in service and engages students in intergenerational community building. This approach has been developed over more than ten years of classroom-community practice, and is discipline-specific.

SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND SERVICE LEARNING

Although sociology has long been regarded as service learning friendly because of its socially-oriented curriculum, there are specific aspects of the sociology curriculum which not only support a service learning pedagogy but are *best demonstrated* to students through the psychological and emotional responses they normally experience when asked to engage in service to their community. As a sociology instructor, I’ve learned that recognizing the truth of the overcommitted student creates opportunities both to teach traditional sociological concepts and to introduce community building and civic engagement.

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On the whole, students are usually open to the idea of helping others and building community—it’s the burden on their time that is the issue for them. Sociology gives us the opportunity to understand the students’ plight in the context of the social structures and dynamics of our society. The forces that keep our hands from reaching out to one another in service are the same forces that keep us from eating dinner with our loved ones, having time to talk, or being able to think quietly about the meaning of our lives or our sources of inspiration.



The following diagram is a view of social structure that we explore in sociology. At the center of this view of social structure is the self. The self is situated within primary groups, such as family and close friends.

Individuals also spend much of their time in secondary groups such as their classroom, workplace, or faith community. These small secondary groups are situated within larger, less personal secondary groups and formal organizations such as their college, work organization, or faith organization.

In turn these organizations are situated in increasingly complex circles of neighborhood, metropolitan area, state, and nation. Ultimately, all individuals, families, and bureaucratic and political structures comprise an interrelated world, about which it is possible to develop a global sensibility and awareness.

Many people, when thinking about their life in terms of these spheres of activity, discover that they rarely stretch outside the first three circles. People tend to keep to their family and friends, visit their accustomed work settings, and when at school attend only their own classes. Although many people report feeling a sense of alienation toward their society, few people feel empowered to reach beyond their own primary groups and smaller secondary groups either to establish meaningful relationships or to take positive action toward creating a more healthy society. Service learning is the opportunity that both challenges and liberates students in reaching out to take meaningful action to build community. The contrast between the desire to help create a better social situation and the difficulty of reaching out past one's accustomed groups is in itself enlightening.

Students often express feelings of frustration and of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of current social problems. Students will assert that there is little that they,

as individuals, can do about these issues. Drug abuse, alienation, and crime are examples of social issues that can be discussed in terms of social organization. In traditional agricultural and even hunter-gatherer societies, alienation, drug abuse, and suicide were not social problems. However, in larger and more impersonal associational societies, these same issues have become significant problems. Is it possible that human relationships themselves offer us a context for creating a meaningful life that in some way builds meaning for both individuals and groups that can strengthen their resistance to certain social pathologies? Having raised this question, students can begin to talk about addressing these feelings and problems through taking action that involves individuals in more meaningful relationships with others, stretching us toward involvement in larger spheres of action.

THE BOOMER GENERATION AND SERVICE LEARNING

Our ASSETS project focuses on getting Boomers involved in community service and in creating projects that serve the needs of boomers in the community. The service learning project targets re-careering baby boomers and provides opportunities for them to get involved in community service and civic engagement options as they consider, or become involved in, midlife career transitions. Service learning is viewed as an important strategy for connecting disadvantaged or re-careering boomers with opportunities in the workplace and the nonprofit sector.

Service learning opportunities can give boomers who are enrolled in a community college class or workshop the opportunity to transition their skills to appropriately support the nonprofit environment. Boomers have the opportunity to augment and reframe their existing skills while doing service learning.

Nonprofit organizations have many needs for skilled volunteers, effective planning, management and coordination strategies, accounting support, and specific skills in the arts and sciences. However, the nonprofit sector is different from the for-profit sector in many ways. Often a nonprofit role requires workplace skills to be used in a way that may be new to the boomer. Currently, systems that connect nonprofits seeking senior leaders with talented people are largely non-existent.

Students such as Meghan Desplanke, through the outreach projects of her faith organization, work with high school students in the South Mountain area of Phoenix, Arizona. She connects with them several afternoons each week during after school programs. An aspect of her project is to increase the high school students' communication with their parents and grandparents, who are often boomers, as well as encouraging the parents to communicate more with the students.

For Meghan the involvement of parents is vital to the success of the high school students. This multi-generational project is designed ultimately not only

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to support the success of the high school students, but to strengthen the bonds between the high school students and their parents. Meghan sees this holistic and community-building approach as essential to the success of both groups.

Debra Phillips is a boomer student who also has created a multigenerational service project. The focus of her efforts is to serve the needs of HIV positive clients and their families. To do this, Debra works through Body Positive, a Phoenix based health and human services organization, to provide outreach, information and education, access to counseling and health services, and to plan and implement fun and entertaining family activities, such as holiday parties. Debra is passionate about creating happy times that help families relax together and bond. Like Meghan, Debra sees the success of her clients as an aspect of holistic involvement and as an outcome of community building activities.

CONCLUSION

As both these projects demonstrate, projects involving boomers in volunteer service may be multigenerational projects benefiting more than one group. Community building is a positive outcome of such efforts. These projects, framed and envisioned by the students themselves, involve students' reaching past their accustomed circles of community involvement, enlarging the circle of their engagement. By involving themselves with these community building processes, students can experience an antidote for anonymity and alienation as they come to realize the ways that meaning and wholeness can be created and shared in an associational society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Martha Bergin is a faculty member in communication and sociology at GateWay Community College in Phoenix, Arizona. Dr. Bergin has been involved in service learning since 1997, when she served as Assistant Director of the Center for Public Policy and Service at Mesa Community College, coordinating Mesa Community College's service learning programs. She has also served as vice president of the Maricopa Community Colleges Adjunct Faculty Association. Martha received her Ph.D. in Communication from Arizona State University and her M.A. in Sociology from Sacramento State University. Her current research investigates social networks in Phoenix grassroots neighborhood organizations.



Picture of GateWay Community College students (from left) Sandra Nacy and Theresa Beale holding gift packs of donated bath salts for a garage sale to benefit Singleton Moms, an organization which raises funds and donates time in support of single moms who are fighting cancer.



Picture of GateWay Community College students assisting in the cleanup of sections of south urban Phoenix by gathering and organizing pollution data and making it available to the public on the internet.