

Service Learning Through the Looking Glass: Shifting Grasps on Service Learning Reality from the Rearview Mirror

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Service learning is a rapidly growing program that assists students in the comprehension of course materials. This technique allows students to learn about a subject both in a traditional classroom setting and through community-based research, or through serving at a site that provides valuable information which helps exemplify the concepts of a particular course. I first became acquainted with the service learning program at Oglethorpe University when I enrolled in BIO 224—Cancer Biology. This course, and many others like it, focus on how service complements and enhances conceptualization of course material, which helps students to achieve a better understanding of the subject matter. This alone would have been an effective learning experience, but it turns out that, for me, service learning in BIO 224 had an unanticipated benefit. While at Oglethorpe, I participated in athletics, the Center for Civic Engagement program, and the University's Biology and CORE course programs. While these seemed like separate activities to me at the time, it later became clear that they were in fact interconnected. My service learning experience within the Cancer Biology course provided me with the opportunity to reflect on past experiences of seemingly separate learning and service opportunities, which, in turn, allowed me to make an intuitive connection between the services I rendered and the themes presented in my college courses. Therefore, I discovered that service learning not only has the traditional classroom approach, but it also has an unconventional intellectually driven approach that is possible through reflecting on past experiences.

I chose to take Cancer Biology because I had recently lost my grandmother to a brain tumor and wanted to know more about why and how it happened. Learning how the cellular processes of her cancer worked appealed to me intellectually; furthermore, the chance to better understand the reasons why the cancer appeared appealed to me emotionally. This intellectual and emotional appeal helped me gain the knowledge and understanding of why and how the cancer struck my grandmother, and, in turn, provided me with further closure about her death. At the time of my enrollment in this course, I had no idea that it incorporated an actual service learning requirement. When I found out I was pleasantly surprised. We were given a variety of cancer-related service projects to choose from and a set number of service hours to have completed by the end of the semester. It was under these circumstances that I took part in four different programs: Hospice Atlanta, American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge, a hospice pediatric fundraiser called "The Big-To-Do," and a Relay for Life event.

While providing the needed services at Hospice Atlanta, my fellow classmates and I participated in a weekend-long training session that informed us about their policies, history, and available health programs. Throughout the training, I began to realize that some of the programs that hospice offers are not well known by the public. For instance, they offer bereavement or grief counseling to the friends and families of recently deceased patients. I was not offered such a service when my grandmother passed away; however, the temporary discussion that was held during our training was therapeutic and therefore it allowed me to realize its importance. The realization that other patients and loved ones affected by cancer may go through an ordeal similar to mine was heartbreaking, and it allowed me to understand that the public is poorly educated about cancer, including ways in which to cope with the disease. The lack of accessible

knowledge about cancer is a problem when it comes to public health; therefore, it is important that we continue to raise awareness about available programs for assisting patients and families living with cancer. By distributing ads for services, like those sent by Hospice Atlanta, through fundraising events like the “Big-To-Do,” and activities like the Relay for Life, the public can become more knowledgeable about the options that are available to them.

Moreover, when the hospice training was over, it was time to embark on the service portion of my learning experience. One day, at Hospice Atlanta, I was informed that a patient needed company while she waited on her friend to come and take her home. To my dismay it seemed as though my presence agitated rather than comforted her and so the encounter was slightly abrasive. It was only after spending time with her that I was notified that she was a cancer patient who had the disease throughout her body including her brain, which accounted for her agitated state. This unexpectedly sharp encounter stirred up recent emotions that I was still dealing with from the passing of my grandmother. While I was emotionally recovering and packing to leave, one of the patient’s friends and one of her nurses began comforting me. They reassured me that she was once a hospitable and warmhearted woman, but that the cancer had taken its toll on her. Through this conversation I was later able to draw congruencies between this patient’s actions and those I had observed in my grandmother. Both individuals were once cordial human beings who rarely became angry, but because of the disease they exhibited personality changes. The similarity of their personality conversions helped me further understand the concept that genetic alterations such as mutations in signaling pathway regulators can lead to manifestations of cancer hallmarks, which, in turn, can lead to more visible changes such as abnormal behavior.

Comparatively, Hope Lodge, run by the American Cancer Society, had a much more integrated feeling about it. This establishment gave us the opportunity to prepare dinner for and interact with cancer patients and their loved ones directly. The people present were extremely appreciative that we would take time out of our day to be with them. Some of the families had just recently arrived at the Lodge while others had been there for a while. Because of this, everyone had different stories to tell, including ones of sorrow, hope, and faith. Through these interactions I began to understand that even though cancer is a devastating diagnosis to many, there are people who can find hope in a bad situation. I believe that these people have a lot to teach us about struggling through the consequences of cancer without giving up hope. They shared stories of successes of novel treatments, sorrows of low points of the disease, and faith that they would make it through these troubled times. Their stories allowed me to better understand the scientific concept that the disease is extremely diverse between, and within, cancer types. The many variations of cancer such as the specificity of its location, the aggressiveness of its growth, and the different genetic pathways from which it originates became clearer to me. Furthermore, even with cancer’s diversity, new innovative treatments have fueled stories of hope and faith.

Before BIO 224 ended, I had only understood service learning as an in-the-moment classroom approach, but as I reflected on my past experiences in seemingly separate programs I was able to recognize hints of an unofficial service program. Two of the many service projects that I had participated in previously were an alternative winter break to New Orleans and an ecological service project at Blue Heron Nature Preserve. These service opportunities helped me to better grasp concepts that I had learned in classes throughout my freshman, sophomore, and junior years including two courses in the CORE curriculum program: Conservation Biology and Ecology. The CORE curriculum at Oglethorpe is a unique program in that it explores traditional

core courses in a way that also enhances students' abilities to convey their knowledge of course content through written and oral reports. The curriculum offers the general themes that all majors require, but it does so in a way that encourages critical thinking in oral and written formats. Each year of the CORE program has its own subject matter, plus an additional three courses that encompass the culture of a society and a community's charisma through art, music, and math.

In fact, it was the music appreciation CORE course that I connected with the most mentally while in New Orleans for an alternative winter break service opportunity. The vibrancy of the culture could be felt everywhere in the city, but the most concentrated experiences of it were in the French Quarter. The pure volume of jazz music within the Quarter was dazzling, and the fact that this facet of the community was generations old allowed me to further appreciate the ideas that the music oriented CORE class was trying to teach me. The course, COR-103 Music and Culture, teaches that music is an essential part of how cultures are formed. I do not believe that I would have appreciated the connections between music and history if I had not participated in that service project. Through the inherent connection of the aspects of two separate programs, a music CORE class and a service trip, I was able to have an unexpected learning opportunity.

Similarly, memories of the trip allowed me to draw further relationships between the trip and what I had learned in my freshman, sophomore, and junior CORE courses. These courses help students develop identities as individuals, become more involved socially and politically in local communities, and recognize the historical changes in different societies that helped develop their modern identities. Reflecting on the trip offered new insights into each of these course themes. The trip consisted of educational tours, documentaries, and service projects that included, but were not limited to, assisting staff at the Boys and Girls Club with the kids' educational, creative, and physical activities, collaborating on efforts to provide maintenance at community farms, restoring still damaged houses in the lower ninth ward, and assisting with public awareness efforts about the lingering effects of Hurricane Katrina. The combination of the educational outings and service events allowed me to realize how devastating a natural disaster like Katrina can be on an individual, and also a community, and how it can change a society's character. Subsequently, I was able to connect the separate aspects of the service trip and the required CORE courses. The CORE courses motivated me to recognize that we live in a privileged society that has historically allowed social hierarchies and politics to dictate how a community is shaped and built. With this new awareness I was able to grow, and appreciate my growth, in a way that I believe would not have been possible without being a part of that service trip.

Finally, I also made connections between my Biology major courses and previous service sites. The First Year Seminar Course is designed to help freshman students find positive ways to integrate into Atlanta. The course was effectively a semester-long service project that allowed students to meet new people within the community and the university. The service was rendered at Blue Heron Nature Preserve, which is an area of urban-greenspace in Metro-Atlanta that allows visitors to have a personal experience with nature. The tasks that we, as a class, were delegated to complete consisted of helping the preserve conserve natural animal and plant habitats, cleaning trash from creeks, making soft natural pathways for visitors, and removing environmentally harmful objects. These necessary service steps allowed me to better understand themes I later encountered in my Ecology and Conservation Biology courses. The preservation of natural habitat and management of wildlife is a major component of the Conservation Biology course; statistics used to monitor the proliferation or decline of wildlife species is an aspect of the Ecology course. Therefore, the First Year Seminar's required service allowed me to relate

better to the themes found in the Conservation Biology and Ecology courses that I enrolled in as a junior and senior.

In conclusion, service learning is a multi-faceted program that is usually experienced as a component of a classroom-based requirement, but as a recently graduated senior I can say with confidence that this is not the only way to experience service learning. The Center for Civic Engagement program at Oglethorpe University allows students to realize an unanticipated side of service learning. By reflecting on my campus activities with athletics, class trips, and service projects, I realized that there was an unexpected connection between the service and learning opportunities found in these seemingly separate programs. While writing and reviewing the example reflections described in this essay, I began to think that if other students looked back at their different experiences like I had then maybe they would also begin to make their own academic and service based associations. Through experiencing unconventional service learning first hand it is my belief that there could be an educational benefit to implementing a more reflective aspect to students' coursework. Furthermore, I believe that a service learning option or an active Center for Civic Engagement should be an opportunity for all students to choose from because the lessons and real-world experiences acquired from studying course material alongside service can have major impacts on lifelong learning.

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