Service-Learning in Deaf Studies: Integrating Academia and the Deaf Community

Jody H. Cripps and Sheryl B. Cooper
Towson University

Abstract
The pedagogy of Service-Learning is a new addition to the field of Deaf Studies. As a new and non-traditional course, the implementation of a Deaf Studies Service-Learning course is a challenging task. One challenge is to develop several multi-directional relationships between the faculty member, students, deaf consumers, and community partners from deaf-related rehabilitation agencies. Another issue is addressing the major challenges identified in the Service-Learning literature. Utilizing recommendations made by an experienced faculty member, these challenges are surmountable. This combination of in-class and out-of-class pedagogy enriches Deaf Studies students’ learning experience serving the deaf consumers in “real world” settings.

Keywords: service-learning, pedagogy, Deaf studies, critical thinking, reciprocity

Introduction

The field of Deaf Studies is typically defined as the study of the signed language, history, literature, community, and culture of deaf people through the considerations of sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives (Marschark & Humphries, 2010). Deaf Studies students will ultimately pursue careers in a variety of disciplines serving or working with deaf people such as teaching, counseling, social work, rehabilitation, and research. Careers in any of the above fields will require the ability to apply knowledge of the experiences of deaf people and the cultural aspects of the deaf community. In teaching Deaf Studies, some academic institutions are implementing a unique pedagogy called Service-Learning, which allows the students to enhance their linguistic and cultural skills on a personal level with deaf people while still pursuing their academic program. This paper will explain how Service-Learning can provide a multi-directional approach to learning and teaching, allowing students to learn from faculty, community partners from various community rehabilitation agencies, and individuals in the deaf community. Simultaneously, deaf individuals have the opportunity to learn from the students. Finally, students have the opportunity to provide actual services to deaf people in the community, allowing them to learn from their own experiences.
This paper will also address some of the challenges confronting implementation of Service-Learning in a Deaf Studies program, focusing on four specific challenges, which will be described. Working within a university with a mission of community involvement, Service-Learning in Deaf Studies has led to strong reciprocal partnerships with community partners including a variety of state and private rehabilitation agencies working with deaf people. The Deaf Studies’ Service-Learning course supports the goal of preparing students to become active global citizens (Jacoby and Associates, 2009), teaching them to advocate together with deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL) through guided interactions in the deaf community. The concept of Service-Learning provides an opportunity for students of Deaf Studies to ameliorate social welfare issues through hands-on action with this microcosm of American society.

Service-Learning in Academia Settings

In the twenty-first century, “civic engagement” was introduced to the academic environment, which changed the ways Americans involved themselves in civic and political activities (Jacoby, 2009). Experts in higher education have noted that colleges and universities were investing in innovative efforts to bolster the civic services and duties of their institutions at that time (Gibson, 2006). The program discussed in this paper is situated in one of many American universities promoting strong relationships between the university and the community. Programs and courses in the university utilize a philosophy of civic engagement, fostering opportunities to enrich the academic and life experiences of students, and enrich the quality of the community. An innovative type of teaching called Service-Learning was developed to provide a specific link between colleges and the needs of the community (McEwen, 1996).

Jacoby (1996) defined Service-Learning as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p. 5). The two key concepts behind Service-Learning are reflection and reciprocity. Reflection involves students applying critical thinking to social issues and how this applies to the needs of the community. It includes the in-depth understanding of the historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political issues that need to be addressed. The second concept, reciprocity, involves the learning process for the service providers (e.g., students and employers) and the person or group
being served (e.g., individual community members). In this case, students, community partners, and community members learn from each other to develop relationships where students are impacted as a result of the learning process involved (Jacoby, 1996; Karasik, 1993; Kendall, 1990).

The initial efficacy of implementing Service-Learning in a Deaf Studies curriculum has already been shown (Hansmann, Saladin, Shefcik & Garza-Gutierrez, 2009; Hansmann, Saladin and Quintero, 2011). These articles focus on the value of using Service-Learning in an undergraduate Deaf Rehabilitation program. Their papers outline a curriculum for an undergraduate program teaching students how to work with people who are deaf and hard of hearing, using Service-Learning for the capstone experience. The present paper, which incorporates Service-Learning as the focus of one class within a Deaf Studies Program, goes beyond the work of Hansmann. Using the Service-Learning experience as one “building block” course to provide the necessary preparation for community work with the deaf population, this paper will focus on multi-directional opportunities for reciprocity, and address suggestions for meeting some of the major challenges faced.

**Service Learning in Deaf Studies**

The bachelor’s degree program in Deaf Studies described in this paper was established in 2000 with a skeleton curriculum, mostly focused on learning ASL. Over the years, more content courses and additional major tracks were added to provide students with more choices of specialization, and a more comprehensive education regarding the lives and culture of deaf people. The “Social Services in the Deaf Community” course was developed as a requirement for the Human Services track (one of the tracks in Deaf Studies program) in order to prepare students for work in human service and rehabilitation-related fields. This course is required in the middle of the “Human Services track” curriculum in order to give students formative hands-on exposure to the language and cultural issues of the deaf community, unlike the program described by Hansmann et al., which occurs at the end of the program. The Deaf Studies program also requires an internship for students in all tracks at the end of the program, an off-campus capstone experience in the deaf community, which will not be discussed in this paper.

This Service-Learning course includes a pedagogical classroom setting with 30 or more students. In class, students learn about a variety of social
welfare issues such as education, poverty, literacy, racism, sexism, health care, aging, and mental health (Zastrow, 2008), and how these impact deaf people. In addition to readings and lectures, students participate in weekly in-class activities to develop sensitivity toward each of the social service issues discussed in class. For example, students participate in activities such as preparing household budgets, and role-playing experiences demonstrating the impact of unemployment, mental health issues, substance abuse, illiteracy, and diversity.

Simultaneously, students have the opportunity to apply these concepts on-site at a variety of non-profit and rehabilitation agencies. This off-campus experience brings didactic learning to life, applying knowledge to actual issues with people in real-life situations. Students are assigned to responsibilities such as deciphering complicated mail for deaf and deafblind consumers, transporting individuals to appointments, supporting deaf individuals in mostly-hearing community rehabilitation programs, providing companionship for home-bound individuals, and facilitating communication during religious services. Other assistance to deaf individuals includes tasks such as volunteering in the food pantry of the “deaf church,” and serving meals after the church service. In this reciprocal arrangement, the consumers benefit from the students’ skills, while the students benefit from the consumers’ expertise in ASL.

Goals for students in the Service-Learning course in the Deaf Studies program include enhancement of students’ signed language skills through personal interactions with deaf people, development of students’ intercultural sensitivity and competence, and incorporation of signed language and deaf-related educational objectives with meaningful service to the community. This creates a dual focus on academic learning and authentic volunteer projects. It is expected that student work in the community, based on the academic learning from the classroom, will strengthen their thinking skills in developing empathy, personal ethics, and the habit of advocating for and within the community, all skills needed for a successful career in rehabilitation-related fields.

Relationships and Collaborations

This partnership involves several individuals and organizations all working together toward the common goals described above. Representatives from the university (including faculty, administration, and students), rehabilitation
agencies, and individual members of the deaf community must all be invested in the success of the program, and be willing to work together. Ongoing communication among the faculty, students, rehabilitation agency representatives, and consumers is a key factor for success. Figure 1 describes the relationships among the parties involved.

![Figure 1: Model of the Student-Centered Service-Learning](image)

The cycle begins with the faculty member contacting community partners to determine appropriate placements for students. Simultaneously, students provide input to the faculty member regarding their time and geographical preferences. Once the placements are made, the faculty member meets with the students in class weekly to check on progress and to discuss student reflections on their experiences. The faculty member coordinates all paperwork regarding contracts and agreements, liability insurance coverage, and evaluation forms. The faculty member remains in frequent contact with the community partner to keep abreast of any issues that might come up regarding the overall experience.

The community partners work closely with the faculty member to design experiences that will be beneficial to the agency, the consumers, and the students. They identify needs of the consumers which are communicated to the students, provide guidance and supervision to the students, and report back to the faculty member regarding progress and any concerns which might arise. Additionally, they check in regularly with the consumers to ensure that the Service-Learning experiences are going well for them.

Deaf consumers first receive explanations from the community partner about the services to be provided by the students. Next, the consumers receive services from the students and develop working relationships. As a result of the developing relationship, in most situations, the consumers
begin to provide informal feedback to the students on their signed language communication skills.

The students play a central role in this reciprocal learning process. They are learners and teachers, givers and receivers, interacting with all parties. Students learn and receive guidance from their faculty members and community partners, while giving to the deaf community and receiving back from them. This student-centered model provides benefits for all involved, but it is not without challenges.

Challenges of Service-Learning in Deaf Studies

The authors acknowledge that there are challenges for all new Service-Learning courses, as well as issues specific to Service-Learning in the field of Deaf Studies. This paper attempts to provide suggestions for other programs to address the four general challenges associated with the pedagogy of Service-Learning while incorporating suggestions specific to Deaf Studies. Morton (1996) identified four major challenges including:

1. Increased need for institutional support,
2. Significant time required to learn new pedagogy,
3. Increased logistical complexity of incorporating partners into the teaching process, and
4. Anxiety associated with less control over curriculum.

Because Service-Learning is new to the field of Deaf Studies, some unique and additional challenges were anticipated. One issue was that students entering this course in its first semester were unprepared for what lay ahead, specifically with scheduling time and transportation for off-campus responsibilities. During the course's first semester, there was no student pipeline of information to prepare them psychologically. Additionally, no textbooks could be found specifically designed to address the social welfare needs of deaf people who sign. While difficult, these challenges are surmountable. The faculty of the Deaf Studies program described herein confronted and found ways to overcome each of the challenges faced throughout the process.

Obtaining Institutional Support

The university has a strong history of civic engagement. The goals of Service-Learning matched the “metropolitan university” mission well, and
many resources were already available to faculty. The university has an office designated to support civic engagement, which supports a “Service-Learning Faculty Fellows Program.” The faculty member for the class participated in this year-long on-campus program which assisted faculty incorporating this technique into their courses, and to provide resources including discussion opportunities, guest speakers for Service-Learning workshops, ideas, formats, rubrics, a bibliography of suggested readings, and templates for faculty new to Service-Learning. These supports allow for maintaining a high level of faculty motivation to ensure the success of Service-Learning experiences.

Support for civic engagement is present across the university, at all levels. The Deaf Studies Program benefits from this philosophy of community engagement. At the college level, the mission includes providing access to an outstanding array of opportunities for internships and practicum in the surrounding area. These experiences also provide exceptional on-campus and off-campus learning opportunities that prepare students for entry into their professions and for ongoing professional development.

The department has a long history of providing service to the community through its on-campus speech and hearing center, which serves the community. Since its inception in 2000, the Deaf Studies program has sought ways to provide similar services to the community. Over the years, the department’s administration has been very supportive of the Deaf Studies program’s growing efforts to work with the community in the areas of ASL and deaf awareness through internships, independent studies, and now Service-Learning.

As the Deaf Studies Service-Learning course developed, additional support was needed from other campus resources. One need was transportation. The faculty member chose to include field trips to local agencies serving deaf people as part of the course. After a semester of students getting lost, never arriving, or not being able to find parking in urban areas, the faculty member was able to obtain grant money from the university to pay for bus transportation for three field trips per semester. Another need was support for research initiatives. When the faculty member decided to initiate research on the impact of Service-Learning as an educational tool, the Faculty Fellows Program was able to provide suggestions for instruments to measure change in attitudes based on Service-Learning experiences, and assistance with data entry and analysis.
An institution considering establishment of a Service-Learning course related to Deaf Studies may want to seek support from its administration to meet the challenges of integrating civic knowledge and skills. Faculty who embrace the notion of service may lack the pedagogical skills to integrate disciplinary content with civic learning. It is helpful when the institution can provide support for faculty development for course design. Partnerships between faculty and university administrative departments can be cultivated to promote civic engagement opportunities (Welch, 2009). To develop students who will be competitive in today's market, institutions of higher education may choose to support curricula and faculty that empower students to become engaged citizens and critical thinkers, leading to the opportunity for students to become engaged advocates for the deaf community. The model of student-centered Service-Learning, as shown in Figure 1 above, provides students with the tools, confidence, and experiences to meet the challenges of entering today's work force.

As the discipline of Deaf Studies becomes more pervasive on college campuses, it is critical for faculty members to become their own advocates in developing and seeking institutional support for innovative and mutually-beneficial community involvement. When this occurs, faculty challenge the culturally entrenched "top-down" values and norms of the academy, and open opportunities to create students who will become engaged citizens and critical thinkers, changing the infrastructure within the institution and across the community (Welch, 2009).

Time and Logistical Complexity

The initial revision of a course from straight didactic teaching to Service-Learning requires an investment of faculty time for planning and logistics. From the initial understanding of the goals of Service-Learning, through the envisioning, planning, and implementation processes, the faculty member must weigh and balance the learning and service objectives, integrating the goal of developing students' critical thinking skills into the curriculum (Morton, 1996).

The initial development of materials required a significant investment of time, but the faculty member implementing this course found ways to maximize the use of resources. Some tasks were made easier by adapting templates for partnership agreements and suggested thought questions for student journals from existing materials on Service-Learning, from the
Faculty Fellows program. To substitute for a textbook, the faculty member created a course packet of readings to prepare students for the social welfare issues faced in the community. The faculty member reviewed research articles on topics related to social service issues and their impact on deaf people and selected the most relevant and seminal articles as required student readings.

In the beginning of this project, placements were located by contacting sites already in use as Deaf Studies Internship sites. Supervisors working within the community partner agencies were already familiar with the Deaf Studies program, and were generally eager to have additional volunteers with signed language skills in their agencies. When it became obvious that there were not enough deaf- and ASL-friendly sites to place several small groups of students, the faculty member contacted other known social service agencies to locate enough placements for all students. Keeping track of each student's placement (n>30) and service project became both time-consuming and logistically complex, so a new placement design was created with one point of contact during the third year of the program (Fall semester of 2011). To provide a large group of students with personal and meaningful experiences with members of the local deaf community, the faculty member worked with a local community program serving an inner-city deaf population with many needs. The staff of the community program identified individuals in need of specific services, and matched students with appropriate people and families in the community on the basis of ASL skill level, time availability, geographic desirability, and services needed.

Other examples of time and logistical issues were identified from student comments, course evaluations and community partner feedback, encouraging the program design to be revisited each semester. During class discussions in the second year (Fall semester of 2010), it became obvious that students who had more personal contact with deaf consumers were considered to have the richer experiences. To provide equally intimate deaf-related experiences for all students during the third year, and limit the amount of administrative time needed to create placements, the faculty member worked with one social service agency to identify individuals and families with social service needs. This change also alleviated the concern from community partners wanting more guidance regarding students' duties and projects from the academic aspect of the program. Utilization of a single agency coordinating several outreach initiatives significantly reduced the amount of time needed to arrange the logistical complexity of this course.
Reducing Anxiety in Service-Learning

Implementing a new course design uniquely different from every other course in an academic program, department, and college is bound to produce anxiety for the faculty member. Creating a design for reflective journals, and a rubric to allow for grading that focuses on growth and reflection rather than memorization and application, is a faculty member's challenge. The challenge to predict student concerns, and attempting to allay them, was met in several ways.

To address student questions regarding the Service-Learning process, the faculty member began to provide written explanations in the syllabus and pro-active presentations to the class early in the semester about the meaning and goals of Service-Learning. Additionally, the faculty member began to include text in the print and on-line catalog course description to include the words “off-campus Service-Learning experiences required,” providing advance notice to students that they would need to arrange for time and transportation.

The faculty member posted all assignments and rubrics, along with fictitious examples, on the course’s website at the beginning of the semester, which alleviated much anxiety for the students. Unlike in traditional courses, the faculty member utilized class time to explain and describe in detail the objectives and expectations of this type of course, and worked with students both in- and out-of-class to provide emotional support for their off-campus assignments.

Much of the actual learning in Service-Learning takes place outside of the classroom, resulting in the concerns of loss of faculty control of student learning. Faculty members no longer witness the actual learning process of the students, instead depending heavily on student journals to inform the faculty member of students’ insightful moments. Rubrics were developed to provide guidance for students and to make measurement of student progress clear. A challenge for the faculty member is how to assess student progress and achievement. Student growth was measured through journals, feedback from community partners, and presentations to the class based on the Service-Learning experience.

There can be concerns regarding maintenance of relationships with community partners. Unlike in a traditional classroom setting, the faculty
member does not have control of what the students are doing on their sites, and what instruction or supervision is provided off-campus (Morton, 1996). When students were placed with more than a dozen different organizations, it was impossible for the faculty member to check up on each site regularly. In addition to simplifying time and logistical issues, the revised course design utilizing one coordinating organization reduced stress for the faculty member by easing administrative needs. Throughout the process, it has been important to develop a sense of trust, knowing that the supervisors from the coordinating agency would maintain the values and goals of the faculty member. This was accomplished through regular meetings, emails, and phone calls, sometimes involving a series of people.

Often, the community partner staff is present during the students’ volunteer hours. In these situations, it is easy to obtain feedback on the specifics of what each student is doing and learning. However, there are times when the community partner staff is not present, which provides its own challenges. In one placement, students were assigned to visit a deaf person in his supervised group home with all hearing people. In this placement, the deaf person was benefiting by having regular visitors to help him with his independent living skills, such as explaining the legalese in his mail correspondence. Simultaneously, the students were benefiting from the opportunity to improve their ASL skills while providing the service of helping him with his independent living skills. In this setting, neither the faculty member nor the community partner was present. However, the house manager was used to coordinate all visits, and was able to document times that students arrived and left, as well as activities that she witnessed. While only their presence can be documented when the community partner is not present, the learning process is enabled as students learn from their own experiences. One such experience is explaining the complicated content of business mail to consumers with very low reading levels.

Typically, students find this type of learning experience more motivating and thus are more committed to performing their Service-Learning duties. However, there is the freedom for some students to cheat by falsifying their paperwork. For example, students may attempt to fabricate journal entries or adjust time sheets, taking advantage of the independence of the Service-Learning experience. The course faculty member must carefully review paperwork for peculiarities indicative of falsification, stay in regular contact with the community partners, and take punitive measures if needed.
Overall, Service-Learning seems to be a good fit with the field of Deaf Studies. The linguistic and cultural benefits available to students outweigh the challenges of this type of pedagogy. Incorporating relationships with outside organizations provides both the immediate benefits of the Service-Learning experience, as well as future networking opportunities for graduates. Service-Learning in Deaf Studies allows the university to partner with community agencies as part of a model of civic engagement that benefits both students and the community.

Future Directions

As the concept of Service-Learning becomes more entrenched in the field of Deaf Studies, programs can diversify their offerings. Programs may consider branching out to additional types of services. Students can become involved with rehabilitation programs with the potential to serve deaf individuals, reaching out to encourage and enhance those services. For example, students might provide consulting to agencies on how to recruit and serve deaf community members, and provide cultural awareness and sensitivity training and possibly work-related signed language training to staff. The teaching and learning processes involved are likely to create an impact on students in two ways: 1) to develop their critical thinking skills and 2) to become advocates for the deaf population.

Other than the implementation of Service-Learning in the field of Deaf Studies, research is needed to collect empirical data from students, deaf consumers, community partners, and the faculty members. Only one known research project has been conducted thus far. Cooper, Cripps, and Reisman (in press) examined Deaf Studies students’ attitude towards the Service-Learning course by administering the Community Service Attitudes Scale (ShiareUa, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000) during the 2010 and 2011 semesters. Initial findings of this before- and after- survey found that Service-Learning had a positive impact on Deaf Studies students’ attitudes toward community service. Studies similar to this one need to be done using a different validated instrument such as the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale (Reeb, 2006), Service-Learning Benefit Scale (SELEB; Toncar et al., 2006), which would examine students’ self-efficacy and the benefits of Service-Learning. Specific research is needed to investigate the impact of Service-Learning on various constituencies in Deaf Studies. The field of rehabilitation would be enhanced with data measuring the impact of the experience on students’ perceptions toward community service and experiential learning, consumer
attitudes toward receiving services, and community agencies’ experience with students in their work place.

Clearly, Service-Learning in Deaf Studies has many benefits to offer all constituents. The missions of institutions of higher education and academia regarding civic engagement can be achieved through reciprocal and structured experiences such as Service-Learning. This can occur through the involvement of dedicated partners in the rehabilitation community, proactive faculty members with institutional support, and motivated students. Academic programs in Deaf Studies should consider partnering with community rehabilitation resources and offering students’ services to their local and national community to enrich the quality of life for deaf people and the educational experience for Deaf Studies students.

Acknowledgements
We would like to acknowledge Dr. Diana Emanuel, Dr. Samuel Supalla, and Joel Reisman for their significant input to earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Contact Information
Jody H. Cripps and Sheryl B. Cooper
Towson University
Dept. of Audiology, Speech-Language Pathology, & Deaf Studies
8000 York Rd.
Towson, MD 21252
(443) 275-9448 VP
(410) 704-4131 Fax
jcripps@towson.edu and scooper@towson.edu
References


