AC 2008-2457: ENHANCING LEADERSHIP SKILLS THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

James Ejiwale, Jackson State University

Della Posey, Jackson State University

Enhancing Leadership Skills Through Service Learning

Abstract

Service learning has been adopted in the Department of Technology 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 essential that the IT majors should participate in service learning so as to improve their leadership skills. This paper addresses the enhancement of leadership skills through the integration of service learning and learning communities as informal groups, and some of their potential benefits.

Introduction

The Department of Technology has adopted service learning to help prepare students in the program with the 'know-how' of effective performance as leaders in the organization they work for. 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. It is important that the IT majors should participate in service learning to garner the effective feedback on the participant's level of leadership skills as observed by the learning communities involved. It therefore behooves educators to understand the importance, management and the potential benefits of this framework. In addition, a sense of collaboration between the educators and the organization where the service is to be rendered is required to enable the success of this frame work.

What is service learning (SL)?

McPherson[7] (2005) asserted that "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." 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. 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 for them, new approaches to explore through constructive criticism from the learning communities that includes faculty, students (peer groups), and the community they serve.

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 support 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. As a result, service learning is offered in courses of study so that students may themselves elect service learning. 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.

Why service learning?

Service learning avail 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 will help students to shape their values, aspirations, and career paths. 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 works 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 participants should be able to demonstrate are summarized below:

- Use work measurement techniques
- Encourage employee participation
- Implement quality circles
- 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

There are several mediums by which students' leadership skills could be assessed. Some areas are through co-operative education, internship, job shadowing, and many more. Given the fact that most students in the industrial technology program would have not been able to put into practice their leadership skills before graduation, the integration of service learning and learning communities would be of immense benefit. While service learning would provide the avenue for students to put into practice the knowledge gained in the classroom and laboratory, the learning communities would function in the capacity of facilitators and mentors by giving constant feedback on students' performance while engaged in service learning to enhance their leadership skills.

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, visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision making. The types of required learning communities to be implemented are:

- Student peer groups - among participating students
- Peer groups among faculty to foster the implementation of this frame work
- Peer groups among faculty and workers/ administrators 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 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.

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. Since this is the first time of implementing this frame work, there is a need to revise the formal mechanisms necessary to gather member perceptions from service learning experiences. To this effect, a departmental service learning committee has begun the development of means to aid efficient self-reflection and program evaluation survey for assessment and analysis of the project's continued improvement.

References

1. Bonnette, Roy. (2006). Out of the Classroom and into the Community: Service Learning Reinforces Classroom Instruction. *The Technology Teacher*, 65(5), 6-11.
2. Bradford, M. (2005). Motivating Students Through Project-Based Service Learning. *T H E Journal,* 32(6), 29-30.
3. Campus Compact (2001). Assessing service learning and civic engagement. Providence, RI: Brown University.
4. Eyler, J., & Giles, D. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey- Bass Publishing Company.
5. Goetsch, D. L. (1992). *Industrial Supervision: In the age of High Technology*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
6. Kurt, M. (2001). Technology Education Students Make a Difference Through Service Learning. *Technology Teacher,* 61(3), 30.
7. McPherson, K. (2005, October). Service Learning. Retrieved February 26, 2008, from http://newhorizons.org/strategies/service_learning/front_service.htm
8. Rue, L. W. & Byars, L. L. (2007). Supervision: *Key Link to Productivity*. New York: McGraw-Hill.