Business students' experience of community service learning

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Community service learning is the name given to the integration of community service into students' courses. Community service learning can be seen as a subset of work-integrated learning. Most universities include service to the community in their mission statements. The purpose of service learning is to help the community while also helping students to gain professional skills that they might need in the future. Industry requires university graduates to be equipped with technical knowledge and also with graduate capabilities/attributes and/or generic skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills.

This paper explores business students' experience of service learning in the community and investigates the attributes that students report they have achieved from their experience. The research argues that service learning can be used to develop the attributes required by university and for industry.

The paper describes how the community service learning subject is offered at Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Melbourne, Australia. A content analysis was undertaken of the students' reflective reports in order to determine the skills that the students recorded that they have developed through their experience. The findings provide insight into the perceptions of students regarding their community engagement experience and how this links to the graduate attributes that the university is trying to develop in students. Billett's framework for effective incorporation of work integration learning has been used to make recommendations regarding the outcome of community service learning at ACU.

Overall, the community service was a positive experience for business students, increasing their confidence and their ability to work with others. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2011, 12(1), 51-66*).

Keywords: Community engagement, community service learning, generic skills, graduate attributes, reflections.

INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning provides real-world contexts and problems that enable students to integrate theory and practice. There are numerous ways in which this can be achieved and community service is one of those methods (Smith, Kielly-Coleman & Meijer, 2010). Community service learning is a term that is used to describe the integration of community service into the curriculum in such a way that the community benefits and the students learn skills that are relevant to their future profession (Parker, Myers, Higgens, Oddsson, Price & Gould, 2009). While many of the benefits are similar to work-integrated learning for the student, there should also be benefits for the community organisation. It is more than volunteering, as service learning implies equal focus on the service being provided and the students' learning. This learning can be within the discipline or it can be in the development of the generic skills, attributes and capabilities required by graduates.

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Employers want universities to provide them with students who have a wide variety of employability skills (BIHECC, 2007). The language associated with the concept of generic skills or graduate attributes is quite complex and there is no real agreement as to what constitutes these skills, let alone how to validly and reliably recognise them in practice (ANTA, 2003). For the purposes of this study, we will use the following definition of graduate attributes: "Graduate attributes are not discipline-specific, but are intended to reflect broader aspirational, social, ethical or humanitarian characteristics that a society desires of its university graduates" (BIHECC, 2007, p. 12). Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts (2000) suggest that graduate attributes are qualities that will enable students to work as "agents of social good in an unknown future" (p. 2). Both of these definitions are in line with the mission and graduate attributes of our university.

This paper proposes that community service learning can be used to help students develop these attributes. The argument is supported by an analysis of reports and reflections of business students from the Australian Catholic University (ACU) on their community service experience.

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING

Bringle and Hatcher (1995, p. 112) define service learning as an educational experience where students:

    (a) participate in an organized service activity in such a way that meets identified community needs; and

    (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

The definition would suggest that service learning has much in common with work-integrated learning in the type of understanding that students can develop as a result of their experiences. There is also the added dimension that the university itself works with the community to benefit the wider community. The idea that community service and civic duty are goals of education has been in evidence for some time, but the idea that community service can be embedded into a curriculum is relatively new (Parke, et al., 2009). The engagement of individuals with and their contribution to their communities is integral to the core values governments expect of their citizens.

Community service learning at university is not just about volunteering; it is about providing a service while also ensuring that learning happens (Parker et al, 2009). It is about allowing students to contribute to their communities in a meaningful way while they also enhance their own development (Miliszewska, 2008). True engagement happens when there is mutual benefit for the student, the community agency and the university.

Many universities have service as part of their mission statement and include it in the triad of their teaching and research and engagement (Zollinger, Guerin, Hadjiyanni & Martin, 2009). Australian Catholic University's (ACU) mission statement specifically declares:

> Its ideal graduates will be highly competent in their chosen fields, ethical in their behaviour, with a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred in life, and a commitment to serving the common good. (Australian Catholic University, 2008)

One of the ways in which this mission is achieved and demonstrated is through the integration of a community engagement experience within many of the undergraduate courses. This particular research focuses on the graduate attributes that business and information systems students have learnt through their community engagement experiences at ACU.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES FOR BUSINESS

The Business Higher Education Round Table report of 2000 (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2000) states that graduate attributes are the skills and attributes which make the difference between a poor and a competent employee, or a better and an excellent employee. Developing these skills or attributes in our students is important to the students themselves and their prospective employers. Employers want graduates who are able to work confidently and effectively from the time they start their employment (Subramaniam & Freudenberg, 2007).

In 2002, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) created a list of employability skills for the future. These skills were communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, planning and organising, technology, life-long learning, and initiative and enterprise. These skills have been adopted by the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and integrated into their curricula. Freeman, Hancock, Simpson and Sykes (2008) see employability skills as being a subset of graduate attributes which are supported by the report of the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC, 2007) which determined eight employability skills to be included in most university policies, either explicitly or implicitly. In addition, universities also included graduate attributes related to social justice, ethical practice and social responsibility, respect and valuing of cultural and intellectual diversity, and the ability to function in a multicultural or global environment (BIHECC, 2007).

Every university in Australia has a set of graduate attributes that it has agreed all of its students will have developed by the time they graduate (Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009). Recent developments in the Higher Education sector in Australia, with the establishment of the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2011, are promising a closer look at graduate attribute

development and will require universities to demonstrate that they are developing these attributes in their students (Smith et al., 2010).

So, how do students learn these skills and develop these attributes and how does a university prove that they have been given opportunities to develop the attributes? Work-integrated learning and part time work have been shown to help students develop the skills and attributes (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009; Muldoon, 2009). Billett (2009) states that curriculum is something that is experienced by learners and the value of the curriculum (including the various work-integrated learning and service learning experiences) is in what the student is able to construct from those experiences. It is the sum of their experiences that will help to develop a graduate who can make the smooth transition into the workplace.

Smith et al. (2010) make the case for using reflection as part of the assessment, to enable students to become reflective practitioners and to give academics a glimpse into what the student understands as a result of their placement. Reflection has been included in the assessment of the students' experience of community service learning and it is these reflections that are used as a way of determining whether the students' experiences in community service learning are helping to develop the graduate attributes of our university.

COMMUNITY SERVICE AT ACU

Service to the community is a focus of our university's mission, and community engagement is an important part of curriculum design. Many courses at the university have some form of community service embedded within the course thus enabling students to obtain recognition for non-credit bearing activities. By the end of their community placement students should have:

- an awareness of social justice issues and the economic and social effects of modern life;

- a heightened awareness of the responsibility of individuals to the wider community;

- recognised the progress made in their own personal, ethical and spiritual development;

- improved and developed their communications skills;

- acquired skills to work successfully team work environment;

- improved their ability to analyse and reflect upon their experience; and

- developed and improved report-writing skills.

Students should be better placed to ascertain their own strengths and weaknesses from the experiences achieved outside of their academic requirements. As one student commented:

> A big lesson I have learnt through this process is that it is easy to complain about things we don't like about the world, and they will stay the same. However it takes effort to step up to the task and put in the hard work, but it is making a change which is the most important thing.

STUDENT PREPARATION FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE.

Business students are required to complete Professional Experience 1, which requires students to complete 120 hours of unpaid community work of a 'personal service' nature in a non-profit organisation. Students are required to enrol in the subject but no credit points are assigned and no fee is charged. The cost of the subject's administration is borne by the School of Business. An academic and an administration staff member are assigned the unit.

To fulfil the requirements of this subject, students have to comply with various administrative tasks to which timelines have been set e.g. placement proposals and organisation details for insurance purposes. Students are required to have their placement organized within eight weeks of the commencement of semester one. The student has to negotiate their hours of work and duties with the organisation. Billett (2009) states that it is important to help students prepare for their work experience, and provide a framework that can be adapted to the community service experience of business students. The framework promotes the "integration of students' experience in both academic and practice settings" in three stages. Prior, during and after, are "good starting point[s] for considering the effective integration of experiences in university and practice settings" (p. 839). Table 1 expands on Billett's (2009) three stages, showing how they can be adapted to a community service subject. Not all of his suggested activities are relevant for community service as indicated. Billett's framework provides the ability to compare the different stages of the community service experience and determine the strengths and weaknesses of the processes being used.

TABLE 1:
Adaptation of Billett's (2009) three stages of integrating medical practicum-based experience to community service in a business environment.

Prior to practice experience		During practice-based experiences		After practice-based experiences	
Establish bases for experience (practice based curriculum interactions)	Marginal: needs improvement	Direct guidance by more experience practitioners	Achieved by supervisor or mentor	Facilitate the sharing and drawing out of experiences	To be considered

Prior to practice experience		During practice-based experiences		After practice-based experiences	
Clarify expectations: purpose, support, responsibilities	Lectures and workshops: Guest lecturers from the community	Sequencing and combinations of activities	Not applicable	Links what is taught (academy) & learnt (experience)	Link directly to graduate attributes
Inform about role and expectation of parties	Manual is provided to all host organisations	Active engagement in pedagogically rich work activities or interactions	Not applicable	Personal epistemologies	Achieved
Prepare students as agentic learners	Needs improvement	Effective peer interaction (collaborative learning)	To be considered	Critical perspectives on work and learning processes in students	Achieved
Procedural capacities for practice	Requirements and timelines are established	Active and purposeful engagement by learners in workplace settings	Achieved		

PRIOR TO PRACTICE EXPERIENCE

First year students are made aware of their obligation to community engagement during Orientation. Students are required to attend a workshop in week two where they are given an overview of the program, subject outline, and strategies of how to secure a position. Various speakers are invited to address the students regarding community placement opportunities.

Once the student has made initial contact with a host employer, they are required to meet with the subject co-ordinator to discuss the possible position and prepare the necessary paperwork, which includes insurance details, responsibilities of the student and host employer. It is the student's responsibility to discuss the working arrangements with the host employer. If a student is having difficulty in finding a host employer, the university will provide them with contact information for community organisations it has relationships with. This first stage of 'preparation for practice experience' covered by the community service subject appears to fulfil most of Billett's (2009) framework. However, there is room for improvement in the area of preparing the students as agentic learners who can be

pro-active, responsible and self-reflective as the results indicated that several students did not extend themselves.

DURING PRACTICE-BASED EXPERIENCES

Once the student commences their community service it is the responsibility of the supervisor/mentor of the host organisation to provide guidance on the work to be completed. Students engage in a variety of functions for non-profit organisations (refer Table 2), completing various business tasks, e.g. marketing and basic bookkeeping and non-business activities such as clothes sorting, sports coaching and numeracy and literacy tutoring. Because of the wide variety of organisations that require different tasks to be performed by students, it is difficult to fulfil the five areas suggested by Billett (2009) in stage two. One area that can be considered is the 'effective peer interactions' once the students have completed their placement and return to university enabling them to compare and contrast their experiences.

AFTER PRACTICE-BASED EXPERIENCES

On completion of the placement, the host is required to submit a performance appraisal evaluation of the student. One limitation is that not all employers are able to provide the evaluation. The appraisal is then submitted with a 500 word reflective report and a daily journal as an assignment. "Reflection is seen as an important part of assessment in this type of subject as it helps students to understand what they have learnt from the experience" (Parker et al., 2009, p. 591). The assignment must be submitted by the last week of semester two of the academic year.

One area of ACU's community service model which can be improved using Billett's (2009) framework is to "facilitate the sharing and drawing out of experiences" (p. 839). Even though students are required to complete a written reflection, it is felt that more guidance should be given to the students to enable them to become more critical, thoughtful reflectors. Also being considered is the possibility of conducting focus groups to ascertain the future benefits and improvements that can be made to the community service subject.

RESEARCH METHOD

The question this study investigated was whether the Community Service component of the Business course helped students to develop explicit university graduate attributes. The following question is addressed in this paper:

> Do the students report that they are developing specific graduate attributes during the community service component of their course?

Data was collected from the 82 reflective reports submitted using a content analysis process. Content analysis is a method for analysing the content of a variety of data, such as visual and verbal data. It enables the reduction of phenomena or events into

defined categories so as to better analyse and interpret them (Harwood & Garry, 2003).

As part of their community engagement, students were required to write a 500 word reflective report based on their experience and what they had learnt from the experience. No guidance was given to students so as not to influence their reports. A word frequency table was established from the generic attributes and 82 reflective reports were analysed to ascertain the frequency of such words as 'communication' 'teamwork', which are reflected in ACU's graduate attributes.

The reports were analysed to determine how often they mentioned the particular graduate attributes that we were trying to develop within the subject. A content analysis was chosen for this research, as it allowed the responses to be quantified. In addition, specific quotes that illustrated the students' comments were extracted and reported. The following ACU graduate attributes were focussed on when analysing the student reports:

Professional

- Leadership skills
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills (including Teamwork)
- Increased confidence to work independently.

Values

- Spirit of service to the community
- Respect for individuals and empathy with persons of differing backgrounds

These were selected as the most likely to be developed through Community Service and were related to the learning outcomes of the subject.

RESULTS

Of the 139 first year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Business, Bachelor of Information Systems and the related double degree, 82 (59%) students successfully completed their Professional Experience subject on time. An extension of time is granted to a student who cannot complete their placements due to reasons beyond their control, usually related to the employer. Unfortunately, some students fail the subject and have to re-enrol the following year. Table 2 provides a breakdown of Community Service Hosts, along with an analysis of gender preferences for each category.

TABLE 2:
Community Service Hosts

	Non Profit Organisations	Camps	Community Centres	Recreational	Tutoring
	Lions Club Salvation Army Red Cross Epilepsy Foundation YMCA Baptist Church Uniting Church	Edmund Rice Remar	Aged Homes Disabled Hospitals (cancer & re-habitation)	Sporting Clubs (Surf Life Saving & Football Clubs) Former primary & high schools (sports department)	Primary Schools Non-English speaking students
Gender preferences					
Female	10	2	9	4	6
Male	12	5	11	16	7
TOTAL	22	7	20	20	13

Twenty-seven percent of students selected to work at non-profit organisations such as YMCA, Red Cross, Uniting Church and Baptist Church performed various clerical tasks. 25 percent of students chose to work in aged care or with the disabled which seemed surprising given the age disparity and lack of experience of the students. As one student wrote in their assignment:

> I have developed an understanding of other people's situation and I feel that as a society we need to do more.

There is little difference between gender and selection of Community Service Hosts for non-profit organisations, camps, community groups and tutoring. However, 25 percent of the students, the majority of them males, returned to their former primary or high school to complete their service by coaching in sporting activities after hours e.g. Australian Rules football, soccer and tennis, which seems to indicate their reluctance to extend themselves outside of their area of comfort. This does not support the commonly held view that community service is about being challenged and is also about promoting students to be active members of a wider community. Increasing wider participation rates will be addressed in the future.

The number of students who indicated a positive experience was high (62.2%) as shown in Table 3. Only two (2.4%) indicated a negative experience with the remaining 29 (35.4%) not indicating positively or negatively. Many of the students said that they had been negative about having to do the subject, but felt that they had learnt a lot from the experience.

> I honestly wasn't expecting to get too much out of it. However, by the end of my placement I felt that I had gained a wealth of knowledge and experience that would further enrich me as a person and hold me in great stead for the future.

TABLE 3:
Positive and negative experience of community service experience

	Positive Experience		Negative Experience		Did not specify		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No. of students	51	62.2	2	2.4	29	35.4	82	100

Students were not specifically asked to address whether they felt that the experience was positive or negative. It would be interesting to explore further those who did not specify a positive or negative experience to further understand the conditions which promote growth and positive responses. This has not been done for this paper.

An analysis of the students' reports in relation to the graduate attributes is presented in Table 4. The total number analysed was 82. The students were not asked to specifically address any of the graduate attributes in their reports but some students did mention one or more of the attributes. The number of students who made some reference to having developed or used a particular attribute or skill is given, together with the percentage of students who also reported additional information about that skill.

TABLE 4:

Subset of skills and attributes

Graduate Attribute / Skill	N	%
Leadership Skills	21	25.6
Communication Skills	23	28.0
Interpersonal Skills (Teamwork)	10	12.2
Increased Confidence (become a better person)	28	34.1
Community Responsibility	22	26.8
Respect for individuals and empathy with persons of differing backgrounds	20	24.3
Awareness of the Spirit of Community Service	21	25.6

Whilst leadership skills are not explicitly described as a graduate attribute at ACU, it was decided to include this skill in the report as 25.6 percent of students indicated that they had improved their leadership skills while doing their community service. Leadership skills are taught in most business courses in management subjects and also appear in many employment advertisements as desirable attributes.

In addition, excellent teamwork and communication skills are also frequently cited in many advertisements for professional positions as desirable attributes for potential employees. With this in mind, universities plan their assessments to include the fostering or development of teamwork, negotiation strategies, sharing of information, cooperation and participation skills with the overall objective that students will be able refine their teamwork and communications skills, meet deadlines, gain the ability to delegate and respect their fellow team members. As one student wrote:

> I have equipped myself with the skills to work in a team, communicate better and understand the difficulties that people face around Australia. I found that I could give something to another person that would put a smile on their face.

Counter to the researcher's expectations, only 12.2 percent of students mentioned that their teamwork and interpersonal skills for working in a team had improved over the course of their community placement. This suggests that either their skills in this area did not improve, even with experiential learning, or that their perception is that they did not develop.

Although increased confidence is not one of ACU's graduate attributes, a high percentage of students reported that their confidence had increased. To be a confident communicator and be able to work independently is a core industry attribute required by many businesses (Subramaniam & Freudenberg, 2007).

As the students were not directed to mention any of these skills or attributes, it was considered that anything over 20 percent was a good indication that these skills and attributes were being developed through this program. Some student comments are presented below in order to give the reader an indication of how the students expressed their feelings about some of these issues. One of the recurrent themes identified was related to the student having improved or become a better person.

> Within the program I developed many attributes which have helped me to become a better person. The program is a good foundation for students to help become better people in society. I owe a lot to the program which has helped to form me as a person.

> Looking back at my journals I was able to see that one of the biggest things that I have taken from my BIPX100 is the virtue of patience. I was able to see how much I have grown as a person. The experience has offered me some great challenges and experiences all which I will be able to use in both my professional life and also my private life. This has been a very positive experience for me, one which I will not forget quickly.

It was pleasing to note that 25 percent of students have gained an awareness of the spirit of community service and as one student noted "we live in a society and not economy." Below are two quotes from student's reports that also relate to their awareness of community responsibility.

> This experience has taught me a great deal and has been a very meaningful experience. One of its aims was to 'impact on my attitudes and values' and it certainly has. I really enjoyed my time at the …… Community Centre. I was really blown away by their community spirit.

> Overall, it has been a very eye opening and enjoyable experience. I have learnt a lot about the basic needs of society and have had the opportunity to work with many inspirational people. Had it not been for the compulsory completion of this subject it is unlikely that I would have attempted anything like this. Hence, I found this unit beneficial to my personal development.

Australian society is made up of a range of different cultural groups, each of which has its own values, beliefs, and practices. It is, therefore, important for graduates to have an understanding of this cultural diversity and be aware of their needs. ACU's Mission Statement (2008) states that, "it is guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and the dignity of all human beings."

Below are two quotes from students in this regard:

The volunteer work has meant more to me than a bunch of hours recorded. It has broadened my awareness of others, exposed me to the beauty of diversity and strengthened me in my appreciation of the sanctity of life.

I learnt a great deal from my professional experience. Firstly I learnt how to deal with students who have a learning disability and how to understand their needs. It also taught me how to act and react to persons with mental or physical disability and because someone has a disability doesn't mean that they are any less of a person. It also taught me that being active in your community and helping those who do not have the ability to help themselves is a great thing. I knew from the first day of my professional experience that I would like to continue to volunteer there because of the sense of achievement you feel after helping the students is such a great feeling.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Students seem to have learnt much from their community service experience. These skills cannot always be measured and the students may not even be aware of their learning. This research only focussed on what the students self-reported in their reflections, which is a limitation of the research. Billett's (2009) framework was used as a comparison to help establish the efficiency and effectiveness of the subject and possible improvements are acknowledged. Other limitations are that ACU updated its graduate attributes in 2009, thus changing the nature of what might be sought after in future research projects. The limitations of the sample are evident in that the research is limited to one university and only to business and information systems students.

Overall, the community service was a positive experience for students, increasing their confidence in themselves and their ability to work with others. Although interpersonal skills for working in teams was mentioned by less than 20 percent of the students, more than 24 percent said that they had learnt to work with people from different backgrounds to themselves. Additionally, 34 percent of students felt that they had grown in confidence in their own abilities in some way. Students report that they are developing the graduate attributes that are important to our university through their community experience.

The students' reflections at the end of the program were unstructured and unguided. In order to get the students to focus on what they have learnt (including the graduate attributes they have developed), it may be better to structure their reflection around a framework of what we want them to learn. Smith et al. (2010) suggest that reflection should be given a conceptual framework, otherwise students' reflections will become inward looking and uncritical. An unexpected

outcome of this study has been the identification of this issue. It is proposed that students should be given a conceptual framework for reflection in the future. Billett (2009) also suggests giving the students an opportunity to share their experiences with others, thereby helping them to articulate their experience and learn from one another. This should help the students to gain a deeper understanding of what they have learnt from the experience.

Future research would include a longitudinal study exploring students' perceptions of what they had learnt from their experience in third year and after two years out in industry, to ascertain if the professional skills and values had contributed to their profession. Another study might investigate whether the conceptual framework improved students' abilities to apply more critical thinking to their reflections.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

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