

## Academic Service-Learning in the HRD Curriculum

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*Service-learning is a relatively new pedagogy which uses service activities to support traditional teaching methods, giving students a better understanding and ability to remember and carry out functions/skills taught in class. Although its use in an HRD course has rarely been reported in the literature, the teaching methods appear to be ideal for instilling in students the skills and/or traits necessary to be successful in HRD (e.g., intellectual versatility, adult learning insight, and industry understanding).*

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In the early 1900's philosopher John Dewey began writing about experiential learning. He firmly believed in the practice and, as Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) explained, "In Dewey's system, experience is always the starting point of an educational process; it is never the result" (p. 94). Dewey recognized the need to combine experience with traditional teaching methods to more fully prepare students for the *real-world* workforce. He saw experience as superior to traditional teaching methods because, as Carver (1997) explained, Dewey believed

The educational value of an experience is derived from the way the experience contributes to the students' development (principle of continuity) as well as the immediate nature of students' relationships with their environment (principle of interaction). It takes into consideration not only the explicit curriculum but also the lessons people acquire by participating in activities..." (p. 145)

Despite Dewey's vision for the future of formal education and his many writings on the subject, the pedagogy has not taken hold to the extent he had envisioned, especially in the higher educational systems. One way it has been implemented, however, is through the academic service-learning (SL) movement that has grown across the U.S. throughout the 1990's and into the twenty-first century. Initially, the pedagogy was implemented in a very small number of fields (e.g., nursing), but gradually educators have begun to recognize the value of combining service assignments with the course content to improve student learning, understanding, and knowledge retention in a large variety of disciplines. Much research has been done to examine the efficacy of using academic SL in other types of courses and disciplines, but this article is among the first to report how the pedagogy might be used to improve student learning in HRD courses. It is our argument that educators should consider integrating academic SL projects into human resource development (HRD) courses and throughout the HRD curriculum.

### Theoretical Framework

Even though service-learning is said to be a relatively new pedagogy, some claim it has been used on a limited and informal basis for years. Academic SL is a form of experiential learning. It adds reflection to a learning experience to prepare students to enter the workforce after graduation. It provides participants with a hands-on, course-based, credit bearing opportunity to learn course content and other valuable and practical skills in a variety of disciplines. The addition of the word *academic* to the term *service-learning* appears to be an important way to dispel myths about the practice. When educators first began using the term SL it was in reference to class projects such as picking up garbage along a highway. SL has evolved, however, into an actual pedagogy that must reinforce course content. Institutions, faculty, students and communities that still foster the former notion about SL may be more inclined to implement a pedagogy known as academic SL.

Educators are sometimes confused between SL and other forms of experiential learning (e.g., internships, co-ops). Even though the definitions of academic SL vary throughout the literature, understanding what it is can help in distinguishing it from other forms. One often cited definition by Rice (as cited in Bush-Bacelis, 1998) is that

Academic service-learning is a method by which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated with the academic and local communities (Perkins, 1994)...[academic SL] *requires* the infusion of the classroom content into the community service experience. The students and professor work together to connect content with the students' active involvement in the community. Effective learning modules include three main criteria: meaningful service, connection to course content, and active reflection on the service-related learning (p. 20).

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This is a useful explanation of service learning in three ways. First, it elucidates that, although students can direct their own projects, the educator's role is to help students make appropriate connections (theory and knowledge to practice) through reflective activities. Second, it stresses the fact that the projects are designed around a specific community need. Third, it also illustrates the idea that the service should be meaningful, and the projects should be infused into classroom content. In other words, service-learning projects should be *academically* combined with traditional teaching methods to heighten learning. The term *traditional teaching methods* refers to the long-established practice of educating via textbook, secondary research assignments, and lecture, yet this form gives little attention to the students' need to experience the systems and processes that are discussed. Academic SL combines these methods with hands-on experience to cement the learning.

In understanding academic SL, it is also important to understand the term *community partners*. This term refers to the hosting organization for service projects. These organizations are often (but not always) non-profit, small, and understaffed and therefore have great need for the service provided by the students. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship between the students and the community partners. Bush-Bacelis (1998) explained that the community partner "becomes the context in which students apply [course] principles. Their thinking goes beyond the textbook and classroom as soon as they become involved with the organization. They think more globally and they apply principles" (p. 25).

Much of the theoretical framework for this article comes from the works of David Kolb (1984) who is recognized by a majority of SL researchers (e.g., Carver, 1997; McGoldrick, Battle, & Gallagher, 2000) as a leading theorist in the dialogue. Kolb (1984) defined learning, as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience" (p. 38). He also noted that, because learning is a continuous process that is grounded in experience, all learning can be seen as relearning. His theory started with a model for experiential learning, of which service-learning is a part. The model has four steps which, according to Swanson and Holton (2001), include (1) concrete experience—being fully involved in here-and-now experiences; (2) observations and reflection—reflecting on and observing their experiences from many perspectives; (3) formation of abstract concepts and generalization—creating concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories; (4) testing implications of new concepts in new situations—using these theories to make decisions and solve problems (pp. 167-168). The model has had widespread use and has also provided the general framework for a large number of studies. However, Swanson and Holton explained that the reason few have tested this theory is because of innate problems with Kolb's instrument.

Gagne also provided a framework that is practical to use in guiding the implementation of an academic SL component into the classroom (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, pp. 15-16). He identified five *domains of the learning process*, which we have used to illustrate the different components of effective academic SL design.

1. *Motor skills*: developed through practice (using the academic SL pedagogy, the actual project fosters these skills in the learners).
2. *Verbal skills*: the major requirement for learning being its presentation within an organized, meaningful context (these skills are still learned during the in-class lecture portion, they are also developed through practice with the academic SL project).
3. *Intellectual skills*: the learning of which seems to require the prior learning of prerequisite skills (these skills must come from prior learning, as the domain suggests, but the SL experience also increases these skills, which the students take and use in future experiences, e.g. Dewey's principle of continuity).
4. *Cognitive strategy*: the learning of which requires repeated occasions in which challenges to thinking are presented (this is the portion missing from Kolb's model; it is, however, present in service-learning through reflection).
5. *Attitudes*: which are learned most effectively through human models and vicarious reinforcement (in general, attitudes are established by the time students reach upper education levels, although research (e.g., Rama, Ravenscroft, Walcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000) has suggested that attitudes toward learning can change when a student understands how the subjects are relevant.)

Although Gagne did not envision experiential learning per se when he developed his theory, it fits nicely with the elements practiced in properly designed academic SL. And, when used in conjunction with the Kolb model, Gagne's framework illuminates the fundamentals of academic SL.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the need and applicability of using academic SL within HRD courses. It examined how this pedagogy could help students at all levels of higher education learn and retain HRD-related knowledge and skills. The study explicitly examined the following questions in relation to HRD and academic SL:

1. What learning and benefits do students experience or gain from participating in SL projects and programs?
2. What initial framework can describe the connection between academic SL and HRD education?
3. What are some ideas and guidelines to assist faculty in adding academic SL projects to their course curriculum?

## Research Methods

This study was primarily based on an analysis of the literature previously published on academic SL. However, limited data gathered for a larger study will be reported in this article as well.

First, academic SL scholarly articles in the business and educational arenas were located by searching a variety of indexes including ABI/INFORM Global, Academic Search Elite, Business Source Premier, Digital Dissertations, ERIC, ERIC (EBSCOhost), and PsychInfo. Approximately 70 of the most relevant articles were selected for initial review and use. In addition, ten related books were reviewed. Each piece of literature was read thoroughly, underlined, and annotated by both authors. Then all of the highlighted text and notes were typed word-for-word into a word processing document. Next, each author re-read the keyed portions of the articles and categorized or *nodded* all of the text into carefully selected service-learning themes (e.g., definition, pedagogical differences, reflection, citizenship, examples, theoretical frameworks, student learning, and need). The information was transferred and entered into the computer program *NVivo*, which allows for easy coding and recalling of themes.

Second, researchers interviewed students who had completed an academic SL project in a human resource undergraduate course during the spring of 2003. As previously stated, a full report of this study is the basis for another article currently being drafted. However, we felt a few selected statements from these interviews would assist readers in understanding student perspectives of academic SL projects in a related field. One or both of us interviewed each student who participated in the course. Importantly, the interviews took place about two weeks after the semester had ended and after the grades were posted. This was done for two reasons: 1) to allow students to be as open and honest as possible, and 2) to allow them time to step back from the stress of the project's completion. Each interview lasted about one hour and included approximately 16 questions. Relevant questions to this paper included the following: What were your initial perceptions of the project? How did those perceptions change throughout the semester? What did you learning while performing this service-learning project? How did the learning in this class differ from that of other courses? Would you take another service-learning course? Why or why not? Each of the interviews were transcribed and then reviewed by both authors. The key points were pulled out and nodded into common themes that were selected after the interviews. At that point, the names and identifying information of each participating student were concealed and the nodded interviews were entered into *NVivo*.

## Results and Discussion

This section will focus on reporting findings based on the first two research questions. First, the benefits to students who participate in academic SL in HRD curricula will be discussed. Second, a theoretical framework will be presented that takes an initial look at the possible interaction between academic SL and HRD education.

### *Literature – Learning and Benefits*

In our literature review, we discovered a vast number of findings related to topics such as pedagogical differences, self-confidence, motivation, teamwork, challenges, benefits, and more. In the following section, we will discuss the pedagogical differences between academic SL and traditional teaching methods, the motivations for teaching or learning in advanced education, and the collateral and course content student learning that is expected to take place in each well designed academic SL project.

First, an empirical study conducted by Rama et. al. (2000) compared two sections of the same course taught during the same semester, one using service learning, and the other applying traditional teaching methods. According to their findings, “S-L students self-reported an enhanced ability to apply course principles to new situations and an increased ability to solve real problems in the course area [...and an] increase in their interest in the subject matter” (p. 670). Even though this study found “no statistically significant difference in final course grades between SL and control students,” findings did show that SL students “scored significantly better on the essay portion of the final exam, and attended class more regularly” (p. 667). The results of the essay portion of the test seem to indicate that the academic SL students gained a deeper understanding of core concepts than students in the control group. The control students could regurgitate facts and figures for the exam, but the academic SL students could formulate coherent answers to questions that required thought and understanding. According to Kenworthy-U'ren (2000), even tests, case studies and research papers did not match the learning of an academic SL experience:

Service-learning provides students with a nontraditional, service-oriented social context for management education. It challenges them to confront, sort through, and excel in the dynamic, chaotic, nonlinear environment of a community-based organization. Real-world learning takes place as they simultaneously assume the role of professional consultants producing “goods” that will, in fact, be used. (p. 58)

This statement has important implications to HRD. Because through academic SL participation the students gain experience in a variety of industries and organizations, they increase their knowledge of traditional HRD competencies (e.g. technical, business and interpersonal) as discussed by McLagan (1989). For example, they obtain a diversified understanding of the types of companies in which they will be working, gain general understanding of business culture, and come to realize their prospective roles as an HRD professional in implementing interventions.

The literature on academic SL discussed student learning in two primary categories: *course content*—technical knowledge and skills, and *collateral learning*—other skills and competencies important for successful employment. First, academic SL projects should not be designed and offered unless they substantiate learning related to actual course objectives. Second, academic SL researchers (e.g. Arnold, 2003; Brown, 2000; Rama et al., 2000) agreed that collateral competencies gained in any well organized, student directed academic SL project could include: conflict resolution, ability to function in a diverse labor force, effective communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, teamwork, problem solving and reasoning, ethics, ability to define problems and establish project mission and objectives, resource allocation, client relations, budgeting, and industry/sector perspective. Though, to our knowledge, few have reported the attempt to implement academic SL into HRD coursework, the research on collateral learning suggests that students would gain useful periphery skills (collateral learning), as well as an ability to employ the models processes (course content) taught in the course. More directly, competencies expected from HRD are those related to course content, and those gained from experience in carrying out the functions of HRD. Interestingly, Zlotkowski (1996) wrote, referring to the types of competencies mentioned above, “such skills, all components of effective critical thinking, cannot be acquired in an abstract fashion. Content and process cannot be separated” (pp. 7-8).

#### *Current Study – Learning and Benefits*

The interviewees in our study were HR students who had recently completed a compensation and benefits project. Although the following student statements may reflect competencies needed for these functions, they provide insight into the learning benefits an academic SL can have in HR as well as HRD courses. In addition, we found that the students perceived other non-learning-based benefits for having participated in the academic SL experience. In our interviews, one student explained: “I can sit in a class and learn but if I’m not doing something it is not going to stick and benefit me long term... like at work people can tell me what to do and I’m just dumbfounded. And then they show me once and I think, oh, ok. Now I can actually do it.” Interestingly, at least three of the students stated that, although the class was an elective in a subject about which they previously had no interest, they were now interested in working in the human resources field. One student interviewed explained, “I learn a lot better hands-on than going to class and through reading the chapters” while another said that he would take another service-learning class if he *actually* cared about learning the course material. It appears that many students who have experienced both academic SL and traditionally taught courses recognized that they learned and remembered more with the academic SL pedagogy.

Other students explained:

- “I learned a great deal about the difficult nature of an organization or business to balance the value of their employees and what they could afford to pay.”
- “I learned how to figure out how to compensate people – when I need to know that for a job I’ll be able to use these skills”
- “I understand compensation because of this project and have more competence in the concepts.”
- “I just got an internship and I told him how I did write job descriptions and task inventories in this experience and he wants me to do it for them”
- “I learned the value of job descriptions and how that is important for training”
- “I learned a lot about the role of HR and how it fits into an organization. I had no idea before the class”
- “I learned that HR is a lot more than just compensation, benefits, and monthly statements”
- “I learned how to do a job analysis and would feel comfortable going about doing it again”
- “It helps you to be able to understand what it takes to work in HR.”
- “You can actually see how it really works – actually do the things – it really enhanced the learning experience”
- “Just talking to people at the site was a learning experience – I’ve never done that and tried to act professional and be confident and organized” (helpful especially for consultants).

- “I learned to deal with people, different personalities and how to relate them or something”
- “The best part is actually now – I would honestly feel comfortable going into an organization and doing something like that”
- “I felt like we were able to put together a quality report, based on the learning we had in class and actually being able to practice it – that’s how I learn better”
- “I feel a lot more confident in my knowledge of compensation and benefits (and the other service learning classes) when compared to my other coursework”
- “The best part was the application of the course content – I think that is pretty much the point”
- “I definitely felt like the project helped me understand the application of course material better than any other”
- “When you are actually doing it, involved with it – it is different because you understand it”
- “When I can remember the information I can use it even after school is over”
- “I can’t believe that I learned as much as I did – Yeah I liked it”
- “Sometimes I sit in a classroom and think I could learn the same thing from a book – I didn’t get that from this”
- “It was learning – it actually surprised me – I ended up learning more than I actually thought I would”

It is interesting to note that behaviorists balk at the idea that learners can have an accurate perception of their own learning. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) explained: “The behaviorists have differed among themselves as to what may be inferred in addition to what is measured, but they all exclude self-observation” (p.26). However, much of the basis of this work comes from the student’s own opinions about improvement and learning, as above. On the other hand, one of the elements of humanistic psychology is “evaluation by the learner” which contradicts the behaviorist’s view. According to Knowles et al., this element holds that “the learner knows whether the learning meets personal need, whether it leads toward what the individual wants to know, whether it illuminates the dark area of ignorance the individual is experiencing. The locus of evaluation, we might say, resides definitely in the learner” (p. 14). Nevertheless, these self-reports of student learning and benefits are supported by much of the literature. In addition, one of us (Madsen) taught the academic SL course of the students interviewed; hence, instructor perceptions also confirm findings and statements by the students.

#### *Competencies: Academic SL-HRD Course and Successful HRD Work*

The course content and learning for an academic SL HRD course is projected based on course content in a traditionally taught HRD course. According to primary and secondary research for this study, a student’s understanding of concepts and processes taught in a given course are enhanced by the academic SL experience. Well-designed academic SL projects have been found to facilitate student learning in both the technical skills areas (course/textbook) and in the collateral learning area (see left side of Figure 1). This term comes from Dewey who taught that teachers should be involved in developing the “whole” person. In HRD, those skills or traits may not be specifically addressed in a textbook but are still essential for successful HRD job performance. Academic SL has been shown to provide learning for students in both of these areas (see Figure 1).

Specifically, academic SL allows students an opportunity to develop (to some degree) and practice—among other things—teamwork, time management, computer competence, written and oral communication, industry understanding, problem diagnostic capability, and research skills—all of which may be helpful to new graduates beginning a career in HRD. (Actual skills and levels of development may vary depending on the project design and level of student autonomy involved.)

### **Recommendations and Contributions**

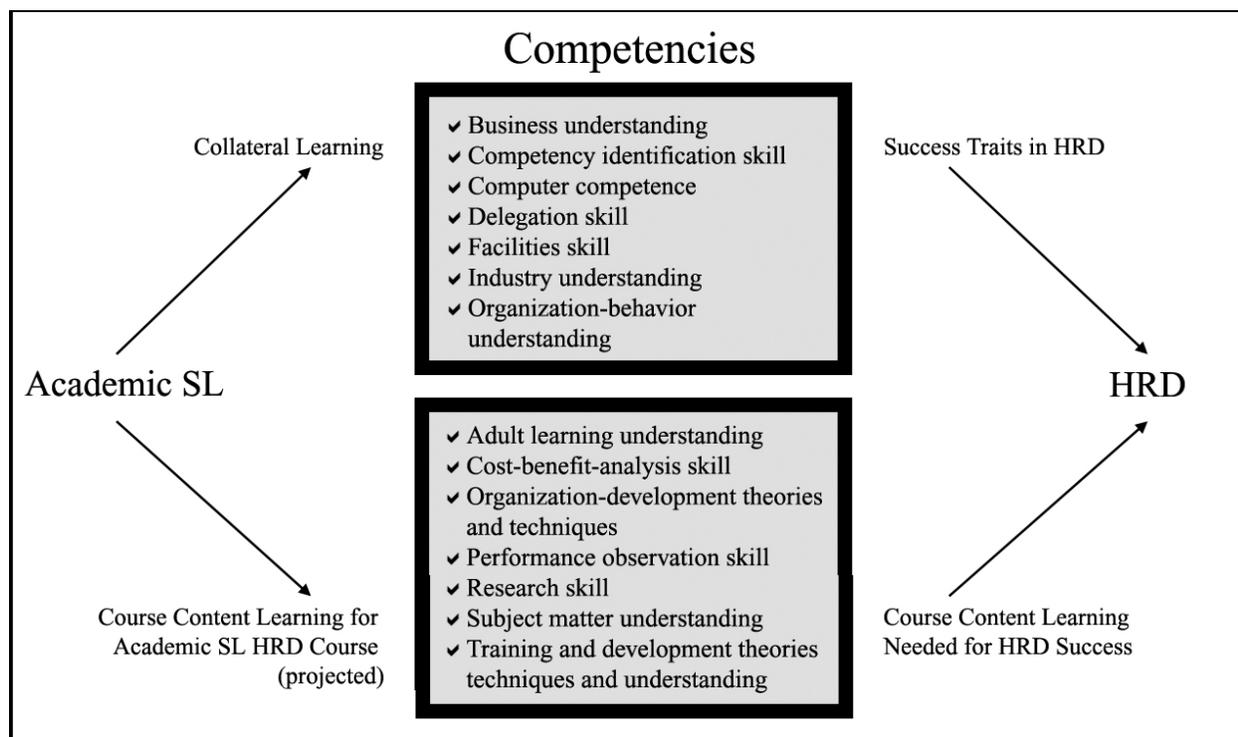
To assist HRD faculty in adding effective and sustained academic SL projects to course curriculum there are a number of principles or guidelines that have been recommended (Godfrey, 1999). SL needs to be designed to

1. engage people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good;
2. provide structured opportunities for people to reflect on their service experience;
3. articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved;
4. allow for those with needs to define those needs;
5. clarify the responsibilities of each person and organization involved;
6. match service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances;
7. [expect] genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment;
8. [include] training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals;

9. ensure that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interest of all involved; and
10. be committed to program participation by and with diverse populations. (*The Wingspread Principles*, p. 366)

Generally speaking, Godfrey (1999) stated that “the theme running throughout is that service-learning pedagogies do not merely append community service onto the curriculum but that they integrate community service within the curriculum.” (p. 365)

Figure 1. Academic SL-HRD Course and Traits/Characteristics for Successful HRD Work



\*Note: The competencies listed in the chart come from McLagan (1989).

A lot of literature has been written on the subject of developing good academic SL courses. Some of the most useful literature on the subject includes many authors listed in the references. Additionally, those wishing to learn more about S-L can turn to Campus Compact, a nationwide organization devoted to helping institutions implement this pedagogy into their curriculum. They have meetings and literature to support new and existing SL infrastructures within institutions.

For those who choose to apply the principles of academic SL, it is important to be aware that if the course is designed correctly, the students will initially resist. It is different from anything they have experienced, and requires more self-directed activity than most of the students’ desire. But, Bush-Bacelis (1998) said: “The best advantage for students is that in spite of initial resistance, they are able to connect the readings, class discussions, and other assignments with the real world, full of real people, with real problems that the students try to help solve” (p. 27).

McCarthy and Tucker (2002) believe that the need for academic SL has developed because of increasing focus at institutions of higher learning on extrinsic, reward-based outcomes of education (e.g. for students to leave college with a degree in-hand). This, McCarthy and Tucker say, ignores the intrinsic need to further academic understanding and ability to carry out the functions of a job. In other words, McCarthy says: “Increasingly, the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation’s most pressing civic, social, economic and moral problems” (p. 629). Academic SL has evolved since the early 1990’s to address each of these problems and has been adapted to a variety of subjects, which makes it more effective. For this study, we have focused primarily on literature related to business courses and academic SL. Easterling (1997) for example, takes a broad view of how the pedagogy has been implemented into a variety of business curricula at various institutions across the country. He explained:

Service-learning may be successfully pursued in a variety of business courses. For example, at Bentley College, a) accounting students have redesigned billing procedures for a large multiservice city hospital, b) business communications students have created outreach materials for an agency...c) finance students have designed and presented workshops on establishing credit and managing personal finances to clients in a transitional homeless program, and d) operations management students have developed an effective clothing distribution system for clients at the largest women's shelter in the Boston area"(p. 60).

Specifically, there are many types of academic SL projects that could be designed for HRD courses. For example, Clark (2000) lists seven project ideas that could be used in various HR related courses including one particularly relevant to training and development: "Developing a training program (including demonstration video and illustrated handbook) for new student employees in the university media center (which has very high, unpreventable turnover and must bring new employees up to speed quickly)" (p. 137). Kenworthy (1996), gives an example that is more oriented toward organizational behavior. She explains "Students in an organizational behavior course were responsible for funding, recruiting, developing, promoting and leading a project of interest at an area human services agency. The criteria of the project were, 1) that the students create and take ownership for the project, and 2) that the agency receive substantial assistance from the project" (p. 130). SL projects for an organization development course could include assisting firms and agencies in analysis, design, development, implementation, and/or evaluation of any type of change need and intervention.

Generally, we recommend that business practitioners (profit and non-profit) be aware of academic SL and provide opportunities for students to do course-related SL projects. Also, as more business professionals understand SL, they will begin to value (e.g., in the hiring process) the experiences and preparedness of the students who have completed such rigorous projects. We also recommend that more faculty members in colleges and universities throughout the world design and implement academic SL for a number of reasons. First, it has been shown to be an effective method of teaching a wide range of skills and concepts. Second, more research is needed (both qualitative and quantitative) on this pedagogy specifically in HRD-related courses. We have found only a few literature pieces that address academic SL in any course remotely related to HRD. Finally, a faculty member can utilize academic SL in tenure and promotion and post-tenure documentation. It is well known for being a pedagogy that involved innovative and engaging teaching and learning techniques. A faculty member can conduct and publish research findings on a variety of related research questions and hypotheses. Lastly, because the faculty member spends time interacting with community partners and facilitating community service from students, it also becomes a "service" activity for the faculty members. Academic SL is one of the few teaching methods that incorporate all three primary responsibilities and duties (teaching, scholarship, service) of faculty members into one.

## Conclusion

Clark, Croddy, Hayes, and Philips (2001) employed an analogy of a coach who uses traditional classroom teaching methods to teach a student to swim. "[The student]," they explained, "will drown the first time he jumps into the water if his coach never takes him out of the lecture hall, gets him wet, and gives him feedback on his performance" (p. 60). The same is figuratively true for an HRD student who enters the workforce with no real experience or understanding of how the systems and processes work in the real world.

Academic SL is a valid and useful pedagogy in a variety of disciplines, and deserves more consideration in human resource related fields, including HRD. It is a way of improving the whole person through course content learning as well as collateral learning. Beltram (1999) explained that "teaching such basic concepts as appropriate time management and pride in a finished product is more easily accomplished when the students know their work is actually being utilized rather than graded and filed away"(p. 19). Clark (1997) clarified the importance of employing these methods in the classroom when he explained that students come to see the relevance of education and the practicality of committing to learning the lessons of the classroom when they experience the link through experience in the "real-world laboratory of the community" (p. 166). Through academic SL, HRD students can gain a deeper understanding of the core concepts taught and a greater appreciation for the realities of work in the field than they can in a strictly classroom setting. The technical competencies that are basic to HRD, according to McLagan (1989), include (among others): *adult learning and understanding*, which relates to knowing how adults acquire and use knowledge skills and attitudes; *career-development theories and techniques understanding*, which relates to knowing the techniques and methods used in career development and understanding their appropriate uses; and *facilities skill*, which is planning and coordinating logistics in an efficient and cost effective manner. Through the experience, the students also gain business competencies such as industry understanding and organization-behavior understanding, and interpersonal competencies like negotiation skills, and group-process skill, and questioning skills that prepare them to succeed in the field (p. 56).

Because book learning and lecture do not translate well to understanding of day-to-day functions and broad responsibilities of an HRD professional, it has become important to look at other methods of education. Although generalization at this early stage would be inappropriate, preliminary findings seem to indicate that students who have service-learning experiences are more confident in their own abilities, as are the educators who work with them. It also appears that other advanced level courses, including HRD, could benefit from the hands-on style of training that occurs in academic SL. For example, because of the broad nature of HRD, and the difficulty of preparing students for specific experiences or challenges they may encounter in their careers, the authors argue that by allowing students to actually perform the required duties for real organizations, the students would concretely learn and be able to use professional development skills vital to success in HRD. It seems ideal for HRD, not only because it instills in students a real perspective of course content, but also because “as a form of experiential education, service-learning develops student’ abilities as change agents, gives them a sense of belonging, and fosters the development of competence” (Carver, 1997, p. 149). More research is needed on the subject, however, before making any definitive conclusions.

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