

## ABSTRACT

*Classroom based service-learning is an effective tool toward positive student outcomes. Still, there is a need for service-learning components to be more deeply integrated with college curricula as a whole. The current study explores the effects of creating a service-learning component in the Social Psychology classroom based upon applying the social psychological principles of the course to real societal issues. Participants self-selected an issue, wrote a series of reflection papers, worked with a collaborating organization, and completed a follow-up survey. Analysis revealed that as compared to students in a traditional Social Psychology class, students completing the service-learning reported favorable increases in attitudes related to service, identity, and academic variables. Specifically, participants seemed better able to see social issues and were more confident in their ability to help alleviate the problem.*

# *The Effects of Service-Learning in the Social Psychology Classroom*

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Service-learning is a pedagogical technique that requires the student to engage in active service that is connected to the concepts of social responsibility and civic participation and related in some form to the course the student is taking (Weber, Weber, & Young, 2010). Students in a service-learning course should be participating in some form of community enrichment, and reflecting on these experiences is thought to be of critical importance (Deeley, 2010). It is believed that through the service-learning experience, both students and the community are recipients of benefits (Deeley, 2010) as service-learning can enrich both the academic and social elements of education (Steiner & Watson, 2006). Even as the benefits of service-learning seem to be many, there has been a call for more knowledge about the benefits of service-learning (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004).

Outside of the classroom, service-learning has also been shown to augment relevant abilities such as increased decision-making (Kearney, 2004) and leadership skills (Howard, 2003). Inside the classroom, service-learning has been linked to increased intellectual and academic output for students (Tonkin, 2004). As these findings highlight, recent research has begun to showcase that service-learning can produce strong benefits in different, important areas of a student's life. As not all service-learning components are created with the same goal in mind (Britt, 2012), the variety of findings seen should not be surprising. Britt (2012) conceptualizes service-learning as the three processes of becoming,

engaging, and doing. The benefits of the project should stem from the form of the service-learning.

### Service-learning framework

Service-learning that is targeted at the idea of becoming should have effects on how the student views themselves and their abilities. As such, service learning is thought not only to increase a students' self-esteem, but also their self-confidence (Lisman, 1998). Moreover, service-learning of this type should strive to connect the student and community on a deeper level (Britt, 2012). This connection should drive changes that we see from service-learning. Here, we see service-learning linked to effects such as lower social dominance orientations (Brown, 2011) and increased desire to learn more about the political arena (Dudley & Gitelson, 2003). Showing the longitudinal effects of service-learning, participants report still being more politically engaged six years after college (Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005).

Service-learning that is more targeted at the idea of engaging should focus on aspects of social justice and awareness (Britt, 2012). Service-learning has, in fact, been shown to increase the social awareness of students (Batchelder & Root, 1994); and by increasing the number of perspectives a student encounters, service-learning is thought to expand understanding (Gorham, 2005). Engaging at this level can also focus students on a problem as seen in service-learning's ability to increase students' understanding of poverty (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011). Moreover, service-learning of this nature can drive students to become more involved with policy making (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997).

Service-learning focused on the practice of doing is centered on activity and reflection (Britt, 2012). Service-learning has been shown to give students the tools necessary for critical reflection and thinking (Deeley, 2010). The ability to reflect can help cause real-world experience to become lasting knowledge (Kolb, 1984), and linking knowledge and experience can increase retention (Johnson, 2003). In addition, Butin (2005) theorizes that service-learning can help create a more direct connection between the cognitive and affective aspects of thought.

Noted in the theories of Dewey (Giles, Jr. & Eyler, 1994), the use of service-learning is not a new pedagogical technique; however, recent years have seen an increase in the number of service-learning related courses in response to increasing civic disengagement among young people (Putnam, 2000). The increase in service-learning projects may be at a disadvantage due to the lack of understanding with regards to the necessary framework needed (Giles, Jr. & Eyler, 1994). Some researchers have even stated that service-learning may not fully express its possible benefits (Steiner & Watson, 2006). Whether service-learning is actually creating a greater understanding of civic needs and responsibility has been called into question as well (Sax, 2004).

### Purpose

As service-learning researchers work to answer the call for more understanding of the causal effects of service-learning (Deeley, 2010), they are also interested in creating service-learning components that more fully articulate the underlying learning outcomes of the specific courses (Cone & Harris, 1996). One of the keys to this may be in developing service-learning components that directly connect to the overarching theories of the course. By grounding service-learning completely in a related course, an instructor may be able to more fully integrate

the three practices outlined by Britt (2012). By combining these practices, students may be able to see a wider array of benefits from a single service-learning activity.

Purposefully pairing service-learning activities with courses designed to enrich the activities may be the key to further unlocking the potential of service-learning. Social Psychology is a course designed around helping students understand how they are affected by and influence the social world. Service-learning may be paired well with a Social Psychology course as service-learning has been shown to affect prejudice (Myers-Lipton, 1996; Yates & Youniss, 1996) and increase empathy (Boyle-Baise & Efiom, 2000). Both are concepts at the heart of Social Psychology. By purposefully pairing service-learning and Social Psychology, greater effects may be seen.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of service-learning in the Social Psychology classroom when the service-learning component is specifically designed to pair with the psychological theories addressed throughout the course. It is the author's belief that taking part in a service-learning course such as this will increase the participants' views on themselves both academically and socially. By integrating the service-learning fully with the course, students should see a wider range and deeper effect of the service-learning component.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-five students at a Hispanic-serving institution consented to participate in the current study. Students were enrolled in either a traditionally taught Social Psychology course or a Social Psychology course centered on a service-learning component. The sample of students from the traditional Social Psychology course was drawn from three sections of the course taught by two different full-time faculty members. The sample of students from the service-learning Social Psychology course was drawn from one section of the course taught by a full-time faculty member.

Due to incomplete data, ten participants were excluded from the final analysis. Participant age ranged from eighteen to fifty-two ( $M = 25$ ). The self-reported gender make-up of the final sample consisted of 21% male and 79% female. The self-reported ethnic breakdown of the final sample consisted of 37.3% Hispanic, 32% Black, 17.3% Caucasian, 8% Asian, and 5.3% other. The ethnic breakdown of the current sample is almost identical to the ethnic breakdown of the university at large.

### Materials

To measure attitudes concerning service-learning and related attitudes, participants completed the Civic Participation scale (Weber, Weber, Sleeper, & Schneider, 2004), the Attitudes Toward Helping Others scale (Webb, Green, & Brashear, 2000), the Self-efficacy Toward Service scale (Weber et al., 2000), the College Education's Role in Addressing Social Issues scale (CERSI, Weber, Weber, & Craven, 2008), a series of questions assessing civic responsibility (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2006), and the Personal Effectiveness of Community Service scale (Frumkin, Jastrzab, Vaaler, Greeney, Grimm, Jr., Cramer, & Dietz, 2009).

To assess academically-related attitudes, a series of questions using a 7-point Likert scale was used. These questions were both original and adapted from an existing assessment survey developed by the faculty of the department where the research was conducted (Crone & Portillo, in press). These questions assessed areas such as participants' confidence in their ability to learn from others, their confidence in their ability to teach others, and their confidence

in their ability to apply psychological principles to personal, social, and work issues (see Appendix A).

## Procedure

Participants taken from the traditional Social Psychology classroom attended sections of the course that were primarily lecture based. On the last day of the course, participants were given the opportunity to complete the current survey. The primary instructor of the course was given the option of offering bonus credit for participating. No difference in participation rates or on outcome variables was observed between the different traditional courses.

Participants taken from the service-learning Social Psychology course attended a primarily lecture based course with a central service-learning component. During the initial lecture unit of the semester, students were asked to pick a societal issue to be their focus for the semester. Students were advised to pick an issue that was important or meaningful to them. Students picked such topics as homelessness, urban beautification, the global water crisis, and mentoring underprivileged minors.

On the first day of class, students were informed that they would be required to complete the service-learning component to receive the highest grade in the course. The service-learning component required working a minimum of twelve hours at a collaborating organization. The primary instructor of the course had previously constructed a list of preapproved organization with whom the students could work. Students were allowed to work with other organizations with instructor approval.

Throughout the semester, students were required to turn in a series of papers related to the current project. These types of reflection papers become important as reflection can cause increased learning and retention (Johnson, 2003; Kolb, 1984). First, students were required to turn in an action plan outlining the societal issue, the collaborating organization with whom they were partnering, and an initial discussion of how the social psychological perspectives and theories discussed in that unit connected to the societal issue that they chose to examine. Students were asked to evaluate how the social psychological theories not only could help eliminate or alleviate the problem, but also how the basic psychological nature of the individual helped to create the issue. During subsequent units of the course, students were required to write short papers further exploring how different psychological theories of the course applied to their chosen issue. Finally, students were required to write a final report. This report was designed to outline the appropriate linked psychological theories in more detail. Students were guided to integrate their experience through the service-learning experience with the theories discussed in class.

On the final day of the course, students were given the chance to complete the current survey. Students were informed that this was not part of their grade and that no points would be attached to completing this survey. No bonus credit was given in this course for completion of the survey. All grade related assignments were submitted prior to completion of the current survey.

## Results

A one-way MANOVA with course type as the factor (traditional versus service-learning) was conducted on the self-reported attitudinal measures from the current study. Analysis revealed main effects on several variables of interest found below.

### Civic Participation

Analysis revealed a main effect on the Civic Participation scale,  $F(1, 63) = 12.28, p = .001, \eta^2 = .163$ . Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 4.33, SE = .15$ ) reported having more concern about the community and more desire to contribute than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.69, SE = .11$ ).

### Self-efficacy Toward Service

Analysis revealed a main effect on the Self-efficacy Toward Service scale,  $F(1, 63) = 5.14, p = .027, \eta^2 = .075$ . Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 4.38, SE = .16$ ) reported having more belief in their ability to improve their community than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.93, SE = .12$ ).

### Attitudes Toward Helping Others

Analysis revealed a main effect on the Attitudes Toward Helping Others scale,  $F(1, 63) = 6.91, p = .011, \eta^2 = .099$ . Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 4.32, SE = .19$ ) reported having more belief that people should give aid to those that are less fortunate than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.70, SE = .14$ ).

### College Education's Role in Addressing Social Issues

Analysis revealed a main effect on the CERSI  $F(1, 63) = 9.71, p = .003, \eta^2 = .134$ . Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 4.27, SE = .17$ ) reported having more belief that colleges should encourage more volunteering and offer more service-learning courses than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.61, SE = .12$ ).

**Table 1: Effects on service-learning related scales**

	Service-learning Course	Traditional Course
Civic Participation	4.33 (.15)	3.69 (.11)
Self-Efficacy Toward Service	4.38 (.12)	3.93 (.12)
Attitudes Toward Helping Others	4.32 (.19)	3.70 (.14)
CERSI	4.27 (.17)	3.61 (.12)

Note: All analyses achieved at least a .05 level of significance.

### Civic Responsibility

A series of questions assessing civic responsibility (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2002) revealed participants felt more civic responsibility after the service-learning course. Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.14, SE = .15$ ) report having more of "a good understanding of the needs and problems facing the community in which I live" than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 2.72, SE = .11$ ),  $F(1,63) = 5.06, p = .028, \eta^2 = .074$ .

Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.55, SE = .12$ ) also reported believing "if everyone works together, many of society's problems can be solved" more than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.22, SE = .09$ ),  $F(1,63) = 4.25, p = .043, \eta^2 = .063$ .

Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SE = .15$ ) both report more intention to enroll in more service-learning courses than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SE = .11$ ),  $F(1,63) = 4.59$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $\eta^2 = .068$ , and participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) report that service-learning should be done in more college courses than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SE = .10$ ),  $F(1,63) = 6.47$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\eta^2 = .093$ .

### Personal Effectiveness of Community Service

A series of questions assessing the personal effectiveness of community service revealed that students in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SE = .24$ ) felt they had made a contribution to the community more than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SE = .17$ ),  $F(1,63) = 10.34$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .141$ . Participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SE = .23$ ) also report feeling more a part of a community than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SE = .16$ ),  $F(1,63) = 7.98$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = .112$ .

**Table 2: Effects on civic responsibility and personal effectiveness**

	Service-learning Course	Traditional Course
Civic Responsibility		
<i>Understanding of needs</i>	3.14 (.15)	2.72 (.11)
<i>Belief in working together</i>	3.55 (.12)	3.22 (.09)
<i>Intention to enroll in more SL</i>	3.09 (.15)	2.70 (.11)
<i>College needs more SL</i>	3.09 (.13)	2.81 (.10)
Personal Effectiveness		
<i>Made a contribution</i>	3.91 (.24)	2.98 (.17)
<i>More a part of community</i>	3.91 (.23)	3.12 (.16)

Note: All analyses achieved at least a .05 level of significance.

### Academically-oriented Attitudes

Analysis revealed that participants in the service-learning course had more positive attitudes about themselves and their abilities in the classroom. Specifically, participants in the service-learning course ( $M = 6.21$ ,  $SE = .17$ ) reported feeling more confident in their “ability to apply psychological principles to personal, social, and work issues” than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 5.74$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1,63) = 5.18$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $\eta^2 = .076$ .

Showing more improvement of attitudes concerning academic abilities, participants in the service-learning course both report feeling more confident in their ability to “teach class material to other students” and their ability to “learn class material from other students” ( $M = 5.87$ ,  $SE = .22$ ;  $M = 6.00$ ,  $SE = .22$ , respectively) than participants in the traditional course ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SE = .16$ ;  $M = 5.35$ ,  $SE = .16$ , respectively),  $ps < .05$ .

**Table 3: Effects on academically-oriented attitudes**

	Service-learning Course	Traditional Course
Ability to apply to personal, social, and work	6.21 (.17)	5.74 (.12)
Ability to teach other students	5.87 (.22)	5.21 (.16)
Ability to learn from other students	6.00 (.22)	5.35 (.16)

Note: All analyses achieved at least a .05 level of significance.

### Discussion

The goal of the current study was to explore if purposefully creating a service-learning component that tied directly to the theories of the course would have a profound effect on participants' attitudes and beliefs about themselves socially and academically. To accomplish this, participants completed a series of guided reflection papers requiring integration of the social psychological theories of the course with the societal issue they chose to focus on over the course of the semester. Analysis revealed that participants in the service-learning centred Social Psychology class saw improvements in a wide array of areas related to the self and service.

### Areas of attitude change related to service-learning

Participants in the service-learning condition self-reported increased attitudes concerning service-learning related measures such as the Civic Participation scales (Weber et al., 2004), the Attitudes Toward Helping Others scale (Webb et al., 2000), and the Self-efficacy Toward Service scale (Weber et al., 2000). Further validating previous research (Weber & Weber, 2010), participants in the service-learning course reported feeling more concern for their community, an increased belief that people should give aid to others, and more belief in their ability to improve the community. Importantly, this further exemplifies service-learning's ability to show students that they can make a difference in their community (Ehrlich, 1999).

Participants in the service-learning condition also reported a desire for institutional change. As seen in their belief that colleges should offer more courses with service learning and that graduates should have a better understanding of how to solve social issues, participants in the service-learning condition report that the idea of social responsibility should be addressed and emphasized during one's college tenure. Participants' attitudes echo suggested American Psychological Association learning outcomes for all psychology majors regarding sociocultural awareness and personal development (American Psychological Association, 2007).

More than simply causing individuals to value service more, the current service-learning component seems to have increased participants' understanding of the needs around them. Participants in the current study report having a greater knowledge of the problems facing the community of which they are a part. Participants also espoused an increased belief that these problems can actually be solved if individuals would work together. Through these attitude changes, students seem to connect to community on a deeper level (Britt, 2012). Perceptions

such as these may also drive students to become more politically active (Denson et al., 2005) and more policy minded (Eyler et al., 1997).

Service-learning has previously been shown to help create a civic identity in students (Youniss, 2009). Evidence of this can be seen in the current study by examining their feelings of personal effectiveness. Not only did participants in the service-learning condition report feeling more like they had made contributions to the community, participants reported feeling more a part of the community. This finding taken together with those described above helps create a picture of students who understand the issues of a community, are able to work with others to solve the issue, and belief in their ability to actually cause change.

### **Areas of attitude change related to academics**

As predicted, attitudes related to academic abilities increased in the service-learning course. Previous research has highlighted that service-learning can boost academic and intellectual performance (Tonkin, 2004). Reflection is thought to be of key importance in this process by fostering critical thinking skills (Deeley, 2010; Kolb, 1984). One of the key drives of the current study was to help create an environment where students are better able to apply theories learned in the classroom to situations in their own lives. Supporting the idea that service-learning can promote these connections, participants in the service-learning condition report more confidence in their ability to apply the theories of the course to real world events. Anecdotally, from reading these reflection papers, it does seem that students are much more adept at making these connections. However, as there is not an adequate comparison group, an analysis of content is not currently available. Future research should strive to specifically test whether students are better at connecting theories to outside of the classroom events after taking part in service-learning.

Participants in the service-learning condition also saw increased attitudes related to how they perceived teaching and learning from others. Participants in the service-learning condition both report more confidence in their ability to teach others and to learn from others. Service-learning is thought to expand the number of perspectives students are able to see and understand (Gorham, 2005) while also decreasing prejudice (Myers-Lipton, 1996; Yates & Youniss, 1996) and increasing empathy (Boyle-Baise & Efiom, 2000). These elements can add together to create an experience where students are more able to understand the needs of others and how to reach them. At the same time, students seem to be more open to others teaching them. This may be tied to the fact that students had been engaged in areas where others at their collaborating organization had more expert knowledge that was shared.

It is also important to note that only improvements or increases in attitudes were seen in the current study. Participants in the service-learning condition did not fare worse than participants in the traditional course on any measure included in the study. While it may be too large a jump to say that service-learning has no drawbacks on student performance in the classroom or deleterious effects on attitudes, the current research highlights the large number of positive benefits that can be seen from participating in service-learning.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Due to the nature of the current project, some limitations do exist. The major drawback of the current project stems from the service-learning component occurring in only one professor's course. While the sample of traditional students was drawn from multiple professors' courses, this was not possible for the service-learning component. It is possible that the benefits seen in



the current study could have stemmed from the professor's course specifically. To alleviate this issue, future research should strive to have multiple professors utilizing the service-learning outlined in the current study.

Another limitation of the current study is the lack of academic performance data. As samples were drawn from different courses with different assignments and grading schemes, it seemed inappropriate to compare students' final grades. Future research should have researchers match assignments through a course so that increases in academic performance can more readily be apparent.

The final limitation of the current study is the lack of longitudinal data. The current study only reports the effects after a semester of service-learning. To further understand the magnitude of change that service-learning can create, a pre/post-test design should be utilized. An interaction between the specific course and the service-learning component may be seen in future research.

### **Conclusion**

The current study sought to understand the effects of service-learning in the Social Psychology classroom. The service-learning component was developed to specifically challenge students to apply social psychological theories to societal issues of their choosing. Analysis revealed that students taking part in service-learning showed increases in attitudes related to service, academics, and their own abilities.

As Britt (2012) highlights, there are three main paths for service-learning: doing, becoming, and engaging. The structure of the service-learning component helps dictate the type of effect one can expect from a particular service-learning component. The current study sought to highlight that a purposefully constructed service-learning component deeply rooted in the theories of the course should be able to broaden the types of effects seen. Effects of the doing, becoming, and engaging styles can all be seen in the current study. It does seem that a service-learning project that fully articulates the learning outcomes of a course (Cone & Harris, 1996) is better able to see wide-reaching personal change for students.

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