Service - Learning as a Form of Academic Legitimation of the University's Community Engagement Mission

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the role of service-learning as a form of academic legitimation of the university's community engagement mission. Based on an analysis of major theoretical approaches and international literature on service-learning, the paper examines service-learning in relation to the teaching function, the academic role of faculty members, and higher education quality assurance systems. The findings indicate that service-learning has the capacity to transform community engagement from a peripheral position into a legitimate component of academic life by linking learning objectives, course design, academic reflection, and outcomes-based assessment. On this basis, the study proposes implications for faculty members in the design and organization of teaching, as well as for universities in institutionalizing service-learning within curricula and quality assurance systems. The study contributes to enriching the theoretical foundation for the academic legitimation of the community engagement mission in contemporary higher education.

Keywords: Community engagement; service-learning; academic legitimation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research context and problem

In the context of globalization and increasingly complex social challenges, universities are no longer viewed solely as institutions for training and the production of academic knowledge. Instead, modern universities are expected to simultaneously fulfill three core missions: teaching, research, and community engagement, with community engagement increasingly regarded as a key dimension in creating social value and demonstrating the societal role of higher education (Ahmad, 2012; Berchin et al., 2021; Menon & Suresh, 2020).

However, in the practical organization of academic life, community engagement often remains in a "peripheral zone" compared to teaching and research. Many engagement activities are implemented in the form of campaigns, volunteering, or short-term support programs; as a result, they are difficult to standardize as academic practices, challenging to assess against learning outcomes, and rarely recognized appropriately within quality assurance mechanisms and faculty evaluation systems (Holland, 1997, 2005; Maurrasse, 2001). This leads to a systemic paradox: while university strategic orientations and policy documents emphasize the community engagement mission, academic systems continue to prioritize traditional teaching and publication-oriented research.

The issue, therefore, is not merely to "increase the number of community engagement activities," but to academically legitimate this mission that is, to transform community engagement into practices with an academic structure, clear objectives, methods, assessment, and quality evidence embedded in the core operations of the university (Holland, 1997, 2005; Percy et al., 2007). Among the possible approaches, service-learning emerges as a strategic option because it takes place within the teaching function, the institutional space most amenable to formalization and institutionalization in higher education (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Furco, 1996).

While the analysis is theoretically oriented, the paper is grounded in the context of Vietnamese universities, where community engagement is increasingly emphasized in policy discourse but remains weakly integrated into academic and quality assurance systems.

1.2. Research gap

Over the past several decades, service-learning has been widely studied as a form of experiential learning, emphasizing the role of community-based experiences in enhancing learning outcomes, fostering civic competence, and developing students' social competencies (Astin & Sax, 1998; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Quantitative reviews have also demonstrated that service-learning has positive effects across multiple outcome domains (Celio et al., 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012). In extended perspectives, service-learning has been linked to education for sustainable development and "real-world" learning opportunities in higher education contexts (Aramburuzabala & Cerrillo, 2023; Brundiers et al., 2010). In engineering education specifically, recent bibliometric reviews document rapid growth in publications and research themes, indicating that service-learning has become an increasingly important research stream (Narong & Hallinger, 2024).

Nevertheless, most existing studies continue to approach service-learning primarily as a teaching method and tend to focus on either (i) its impacts on students or (ii) its direct benefits for communities. Few studies situate service-learning within a broader analytical framework that addresses the question of through what mechanisms service-learning can be

regarded as a form of "academic practice" capable of legitimizing the university's community engagement mission, that is, practices that can be standardized, assessed, and recognized within academic systems (Butin, 2010; Mitchell, 2008).

A particularly notable gap concerns the academic role of faculty members. From course design and partnership building to the organization of reflection and the construction of assessment evidence, these elements are decisive in determining whether service-learning can function as a legitimate academic form or remains merely an experiential activity.

1.3. Research objectives and research questions

Based on the context and research gap outlined above, this paper pursues three objectives:

(1) To clarify the academic nature of service-learning in higher education;

(2) To analyze the mechanisms through which the community engagement mission is academically legitimized via service-learning, with a focus on faculty roles and their relationship with academic systems and quality assurance frameworks;

(3) To propose an analytical framework and implementation orientations aimed at enhancing the institutionalization of service-learning as an academic practice within universities.

Accordingly, the paper seeks to address two research questions:

(1) What constitutes the academic nature of service-learning in the context of contemporary higher education?

(2) How can service-learning function as a form of academic legitimation of the university's community engagement mission?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
2.1. The community engagement mission in modern higher education

The development of higher education in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflects a significant shift: from a university model emphasizing elite education and academic research toward a model characterized by greater social responsibility and active engagement in addressing community problems and promoting sustainable development (Boyer, 1990; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). In his argument on the *Scholarship of Engagement*, Boyer (1996) emphasized that scholarship should not be confined to closed academic spaces, but should be expanded to connect knowledge with real-world societal issues through forms of practice that possess academic value.

However, recognizing community engagement as a mission does not necessarily imply that it has been academically legitimized. Numerous studies indicate that when community engagement is not integrated into core academic practices and institutional mechanisms (governance, evaluation, and recognition), it tends to be reduced to an

"auxiliary" form of social responsibility, lacking standardization and sustainability (Holland, 1997, 2005; Maurrasse, 2001). Consequently, the central challenge of modern higher education is not merely to "expand" community engagement activities, but to identify organizational mechanisms that enable these activities to become a legitimate part of academic life, with clear objectives, methods, assessment, and evidence.

2.2. Service-learning: concept and defining characteristics

Service-learning is commonly understood as a form of instruction in which community engagement activities are intentionally integrated into academic curricula, closely aligned with learning objectives, and supported by structured reflection that transforms experience into academic knowledge (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Furco, 1996). Its core distinction lies in the reciprocal relationship between "learning" and "service": students apply disciplinary knowledge to address community needs, while community experiences serve as a resource for deepening academic understanding.

Drawing on foundational studies and subsequent reviews, four defining characteristics of service-learning can be identified. First, the activity must be embedded within a course or program and have explicit learning objectives, rather than existing as an extracurricular activity (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Second, service-learning requires appropriate pedagogical design and assessment (tasks, criteria, and evidence) to ensure that community engagement activities generate measurable academic outcomes (Astin & Sax, 1998; Celio et al., 2011). Third, reflection constitutes a key academic mechanism, enabling learners to connect experience with theory and social context, consistent with classical arguments on experiential and reflective learning (Dewey, 1903; Eyler, 2000). Fourth, service-learning emphasizes mutual benefit and regards the community as a partner rather than merely a recipient (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

These characteristics indicate that service-learning is not simply about "sending students into the community," but represents a structured academic design. Nevertheless, to conceptualize service-learning as a mechanism for academically legitimizing the community engagement mission, it is necessary to situate it within the academic system (curricula, faculty evaluation, quality assurance) and to clarify the role of faculty members as academic actors.

2.3. Service-learning within the academic system

To position service-learning as a form of academic legitimation of the university mission, it is necessary to examine it in comparison with adjacent practices within the university. Compared with traditional teaching that primarily takes place in classrooms, service-learning extends the learning space into social contexts, where knowledge is applied, tested, and reconfigured through problem-solving processes (Dewey, 1903; Kolb, 1984). Empirical studies and literature reviews indicate that community-based experiential learning can generate positive impacts on academic outcomes, social competencies, and civic capacities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Celio et al., 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

In contrast to voluntary student volunteering, service-learning is fundamentally distinguished by its course-based nature, as well as by explicit requirements regarding learning objectives, assessment, and reflection. It is precisely this academic structure that enables service-learning to be standardized and integrated into quality assessment mechanisms, rather than being recognized merely as a campaign-based or extracurricular activity (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Furco, 1996).

At the systemic level, service-learning can be institutionalized across three core academic domains of the university. First, it can be embedded in the curriculum, where service-learning is intentionally aligned with course learning outcomes and program objectives, thereby functioning as a legitimate pathway for achieving intended learning outcomes rather than remaining a peripheral activity (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Furco, 1996). Second, service-learning can be integrated into faculty teaching evaluation, in which course design, implementation, assessment, and the production of academic evidence are recognized as legitimate components of teaching practice (Holland, 1997, 2005). Third, service-learning can be situated within quality assurance and institutional accountability mechanisms, where universities are expected to provide demonstrable evidence that students develop professional competencies, ethical awareness, and social responsibility through structured teaching and assessment processes (Holland, 1997, 2005; Maurrasse, 2001). Taken together, these domains suggest that institutionalizing service-learning is not merely about expanding engagement activities, but about enabling community engagement to move from individual goodwill to academically organized and institutionally recognized practice.

2.4. Limitations of existing approaches

Although service-learning has been widely studied and implemented, existing approaches reveal notable limitations when examined from the perspective of academic legitimation of the community engagement mission.

First, many studies emphasize service-learning as a pedagogical tool and focus primarily on outcome impacts, yet they do not sufficiently clarify the full "academic legitimation chain," consisting of course design → assessment → evidence → recognition

within academic and quality assurance systems. In the absence of this chain, service-learning may be celebrated as a "best practice" but remains difficult to institutionalize as a stable component of university operations (Salam et al., 2019; Natarajarathinam & Qiu, 2021).

Second, faculty roles are often described mainly as activity coordinators rather than as academic actors responsible for knowledge design, partnership building, reflective practice, and assessment. Critical scholarship distinguishing between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning demonstrates that, without explicit attention to reflection, power, and equity, such activities risk becoming one-directional forms of "helping" that reproduce asymmetrical relationships (Mitchell, 2008). At the theoretical level, Butin (2010) also warns against the tendency to "romanticize" service-learning as a moral solution while neglecting academic mechanisms and institutional accountability.

Third, some studies point to the risk of "doing more harm than good" when community interventions lack disciplinary expertise, contextual understanding, and clear accountability processes—particularly in technical or humanitarian contexts (Birzer & Hamilton, 2019). This underscores that the need for academic legitimation is not merely about recognition, but also about ensuring the appropriateness, quality, and ethical integrity of engagement activities.

Taken together, these limitations indicate the absence of a coherent analytical framework that conceptualizes service-learning as an academic practice aimed at legitimizing the community engagement mission at the university level. This gap provides the foundation for the development of the theoretical argument in Section 3**.**

3. Service-Learning as a Form of Academic Legitimation of the University Mission
3.1. Academic legitimation of the university mission: a theoretical approach

The academic legitimation of the university mission can be understood as the process of transforming the institution's values, goals, and social commitments into a recognized academic form, that is one that is organized, implemented, and evaluated according to the norms of academic life. An activity is genuinely academically legitimized only when it has clear epistemic objectives, theoretically grounded methods, transparent assessment mechanisms, and formal recognition within the university's official academic system (Holland, 1997, 2005; Percy et al., 2007).

From this perspective, the community engagement mission cannot be understood merely as a moral form of social responsibility or a communication instrument; rather, it must be enacted through structured academic forms that are acknowledged within the higher education system. This argument is consistent with Boyer's (1996) notion of the *Scholarship of Engagement*, which extends scholarship from the mere "production of knowledge" to the connection of knowledge with real-world societal issues, provided that such processes meet academic standards comparable to those of teaching and research.

Among the possible pathways for academically legitimizing the community engagement mission, service-learning occupies a distinctive position because it takes place within the teaching function, an area that already possesses a well defined academic structure (curricula, learning outcomes, assessment, and quality assurance). Thus, rather than simply expanding the number of "community engagement activities," service-learning enables the restructuring of teaching practices to integrate knowledge, learners, and communities within a unified academic design.

3.2. Service-learning as an academic form

To move beyond approaches that view service-learning merely as a pedagogical method, it is necessary to analyze it as a comprehensive academic form, grounded in the core criteria of academic practice in higher education.

First, in terms of knowledge, service-learning creates conditions for disciplinary knowledge to be applied, tested, and reconfigured in real-world contexts. Unlike traditional teaching, which prioritizes transmission and reproduction of knowledge, service-learning situates learners in concrete social situations where knowledge is not only "applied" but also questioned, adjusted, and deepened through interaction with communities (Dewey, 1903; Brundiers et al., 2010). Knowledge thus becomes reflective and context-sensitive, aligning with the demands of contemporary scholarship.

Second, in terms of method, service-learning requires intentional pedagogical design, including the identification of learning objectives, the selection of appropriate forms of service, the organization of reflective activities, and the development of assessment tools. This sequence of design–implementation–assessment constitutes the core mechanism of academic legitimation, distinguishing service-learning from spontaneous volunteering or unstructured experiential activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Furco, 1996). When properly designed, service-learning does not dilute academic rigor; rather, it expands learning spaces in a controlled and evidence-based manner.

Third, in terms of academic outputs, service-learning generates outcomes that can be assessed at two levels: student learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, civic competence, professional competence) and impacts on communities. More importantly, these outcomes can be documented, measured, and aligned with learning outcomes, thereby meeting the requirements of quality assurance and accreditation systems (Celio et al., 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Fourth, in terms of the academic actor, service-learning repositions the role of faculty members. Faculty are not merely transmitters of knowledge or coordinators of activities; they function as designers of community-engaged academic practice—identifying academic problems, building partnerships, organizing reflection, assessing outcomes, and assuming responsibility for the academic quality of the activity. This perspective directly addresses a

common limitation in which the academic role of faculty in service-learning is overlooked or reduced (Mitchell, 2008; Butin, 2010).

3.3. Levels of community engagement in teaching and the position of service-learning

To clarify the bridging role of service-learning in the process of academically legitimizing the university mission, three levels of community engagement in teaching can be distinguished.

At the lower level, community engagement is one-directional and typically appears in the form of volunteering or social support activities that are not directly linked to learning objectives. While such activities have social value, they lack academic structure, are difficult to assess, and are challenging to integrate into quality assurance systems.

At the intermediate level, service-learning functions as an academic bridge. Here, service activities are embedded within courses, aligned with learning outcomes, and systematically assessed and reflected upon. This academic structure enables service-learning to maintain scholarly objectives while sustainably realizing the community engagement mission.

At the higher level, academically engaged community engagement extends service-learning into research and the co-production of knowledge with communities. However, reaching this level typically depends on service-learning in teaching as a foundational practice, as it helps to build the capacities, culture, and institutional mechanisms necessary for deeper forms of academic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Distinguishing these levels demonstrates that service-learning is not an endpoint but a central link in the process of academically legitimizing the university's community engagement mission. Through service-learning, community engagement is transformed from a peripheral activity into a legitimate academic practice that can be integrated into curricula, faculty evaluation, and quality assurance systems.

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1. Discussion: Service-learning as a mechanism for academic legitimation in university teaching

The analyses presented in Section 3 indicate that service-learning should be understood not merely as an innovative pedagogical method, but as a mechanism for academically legitimizing the community engagement mission within the teaching function of the university. This perspective helps to address the core tension identified in the introduction: the misalignment between the strong rhetorical emphasis on community engagement in strategic discourse and the marginal position of such activities within formal academic systems.

From a theoretical standpoint, situating service-learning within a framework of academic recognition allows scholars to move beyond approaches that treat community engagement as an "auxiliary" or "non-academic" activity. When service activities are integrated into courses, aligned with learning outcomes, and designed, assessed, and reflected upon according to academic standards, they no longer remain outside academic life but become a legitimate component of university teaching practice. This contributes to an expanded conception of scholarship consistent with the *Scholarship of Engagement*, while still preserving core criteria of academic quality and disciplinary rigor.

At the level of academic actors, service-learning highlights the central role of faculty members as integrative academic agents. Faculty do not merely perform teaching tasks; they assume roles as designers of knowledge, academic intermediaries between the university and the community, and reflective practitioners examining the relationship between academic knowledge and social practice. This perspective directly addresses a common limitation in prior research, where faculty roles in service-learning have often been reduced to those of organizers or activity coordinators.

At the system level, service-learning raises the need to reconceptualize quality in higher education. When quality is measured solely through teaching load or publication output, community-engaged academic practices are unlikely to be adequately recognized. By contrast, when quality is understood in terms of the attainment of learning outcomes, professional competencies, and verifiable social impact, service-learning emerges as a rational and necessary component of higher education quality assurance systems.

4.2. Implications for faculty: from instructors to community-engaged academic actors

Based on the foregoing arguments, several important implications can be drawn for faculty members in the implementation of service-learning.

First, faculty should approach service-learning as a purposeful academic practice, rather than as an act of goodwill or an individualized pedagogical innovation. This requires faculty to clearly articulate learning objectives, disciplinary content, and intended learning

outcomes toward which community engagement activities are directed, as well as to design appropriate mechanisms for assessment and reflection. Only under these conditions can service-learning genuinely contribute to the academic legitimation of the community engagement mission.

Second, the role of academic reflection should be placed at the center of faculty practice. Reflection not only enables students to connect community experiences with theoretical knowledge, but also serves as a tool for faculty to assess the academic quality of their own teaching practices. Through systematic reflection, faculty can transform practical experience into pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge, thereby strengthening the academic standing of service-learning.

Third, engagement in service-learning creates opportunities for expanding faculty academic portfolios. When appropriately recognized, activities such as course design, academic reflection, and assessment of community impact can serve as evidence of faculty teaching competence and social engagement, rather than being regarded as peripheral or difficult-to-quantify activities. This is particularly significant in a context where universities are increasingly seeking more comprehensive models of faculty evaluation.

4.3. Implications for quality assurance systems: institutionalizing service-learning as an academic form

At the institutional level, conceptualizing service-learning as a form of academic legitimation of the university mission entails important implications for quality assurance systems.

First, quality assurance frameworks need to broaden their evaluation of teaching to recognize community-engaged forms of instruction as legitimate academic practices. This does not imply a relaxation of standards; rather, it requires an adjustment of evaluation criteria to accurately reflect the distinctive features of service-learning, including course design, mechanisms for structured reflection, the extent to which learning outcomes are achieved, and demonstrable social impact.

Second, in curriculum development, service-learning should be regarded as a means of operationalizing learning outcomes, particularly those related to professional ethics, social responsibility, and the capacity to address real-world problems. Such integration enables a systematic alignment between the community engagement mission and educational objectives, rather than leaving implementation to the discretion of individual faculty initiatives.

Third, quality assurance systems should establish mechanisms for evidence collection and continuous improvement in relation to service-learning. Such evidence may include course portfolios, student learning artifacts, reflective outputs, and feedback from community partners. When systematically collected and analyzed, these forms of evidence

not only support accreditation processes but also contribute to the long-term enhancement of teaching quality and community engagement.

Overall, institutionalizing service-learning within quality assurance systems not only academically legitimizes the community engagement mission, but also lays a foundation for the sustainable development of higher education in a context of increasingly complex societal demands.

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