

23. Step-by-Step Guide to Service Learning Research Process

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A research service learning project follows the basic framework for research laid out above, with specifications particular to the RSL paradigm. The research process proceeds as follows:

1. We identify the objective of our research.

We collaborate with the host organization and the SOL staff to identify a clear objective for our research. The research will respond to a specific need of our host organization. Such needs could include:

- a. A community nonprofit focused on youth projects needs to assess community opinion on a proposed youth computer-literacy program.

- b. A women's community organizing group wishes to assess the degree of organizing activity already present within a community.

- c. An environmental activist group wishes to assess whether or not a local factory has been exerting negative effects on environmental conditions in a particular neighborhood through illegal dumping practices.

2. We design the instrument of research.

(Week 1-2 of summer placement)

We work with the host organization and the SOL staff to choose or develop a research

instrument that will provide for the most effective data collection, given the specific parameters of the research objective. Rather than being limited to choice among a few rigidly defined research methodologies, the methodology will be selected and uniquely adapted to the objective at hand. Depending on the nature of the research objective, the method of research may be primarily qualitative, quantitative, or a relatively even mix of both. However, all RSL research projects engage us in *direct interaction* with the community served by our host organization.

Methodologies could include (but are not limited to):

- a. The use of qualitative interviews to gather information from a community (such as for the hypothetical youth computer-literacy project described above).

- b. Documentary photography and writing might be used, for example, to gather evidence of environmental damage or perhaps provide evidence of city neglect of inner-city public housing facilities for a community organizing group's campaign to bring about more equitable allocation of public spending.

- c. An environmental impact study might be carried out and combined with interviews among residents of communities affected by illegal dumping practices, in preparation for an activist group's attempt to challenge the violators in court.

3. We conduct our research.

(Weeks 3-7/7.5 of summer placement)

The period in which the research is executed constitutes the bulk of our summer experience.

Throughout the research process, we engage in critical reflection on the research process itself, and seek to refine our research strategies in order to most effectively meet the objectives of the research. For example, in the hypothetical project in which a student interviews community members in regards to a new project for community youth, important new questions may be generated through the interviews that the researcher had not initially included in the initial set of interview questions. At an even more fundamental level, the student might discover that, in place of rigidly structured interviews, more loosely structured (yet still guided) interviews are more effective means of generating useful information and insights. This degree of *flexibility*, grounded in *reflection*, is critical throughout the research process.

4. We analyze our findings and synthesize our conclusions.

(Last 1.5-2 weeks of placement)

We must bring closure to the research process with ample time left for analysis of findings, and synthesis of conclusions. In final form, our product will be presented in a form appropriate to the type of research we have conducted. For *all* projects, though, the product should respond clearly to the objectives of the research, with presentation of conclusions and recommendations for future action based on these conclusions.

Examples:

- a. An interview project in regards to a community youth initiative might be presented as a report detailing interview findings, followed by analysis of the findings, and conclusions presented in the form of recommendations for future action.

b. An investigation utilizing photography to document environmental damage might include a portfolio of photographs within a final report explaining what conclusions can be drawn from the “evidence” of the photographs, and how this evidence might be used to enhance the investigation.

The product we leave with our host organization includes the findings of the research, the analysis of these findings, and the conclusions and recommendations derived from the findings and analysis. It is more than the final piece of an academic exercise: it is research grounded in *action*. Research service learning engages us in the work of social change in the present, and simultaneously permits us to contribute to the future social change work that will be carried out by our host organization after our departure. While RSL adheres to the same basic principles as traditional academic research, its impact—on both us and the community—can be deeper, more visible and more immediate than much of the research we are accustomed to doing within the academy.