

# Active Learning, Action Research: A Case Study in Community Engagement, Service-Learning, and Technology Integration

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## Abstract

This article explores the integration of technology into community engagement and service-learning activities at Tennessee State University (TSU). We have used active learning experiences to develop action-oriented research questions that help both students and local community members connect theory with experience and thought with action through technology. Technology is an important component of our work because it enables archiving of work and dissemination of lessons learned. Results have included a Web design curriculum for local middle-school-aged children; educational computer laboratories in several community-based organizations; and literacy and technology training conducted with key community partners. This work has also engendered a statewide consortium to provide digital media tools and training to underserved communities in Tennessee. Outcomes continue to be encouraging: community members display a growing interest in education, and TSU students continue to improve their ability to ask well-formulated research questions that can be answered through ongoing civic action.

## Introduction

Tennessee State University (TSU), like other historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), has a long tradition of service to its local community. This ideal is embedded in the university's motto—"Think, Work, Serve"—and displayed in the school's early history, when students literally built the institution with their own hands, and later, when the lunch counter sit-ins led to the desegregation of Nashville businesses.

However, in spite of TSU's rich history of service to local, regional, national, and global communities, service initiatives have been largely uncoordinated and often undocumented. In the past, the university lacked the infrastructure for sustained multidisciplinary initiatives to engage students and faculty in sustained service-learning and civic engagement. To address these needs the university in 2004 developed an Office of Service Learning to

plan, coordinate, and support integration of service-learning into the curriculum. This office began developing the needed formal structure to support cross-disciplinary projects and forge sustained partnerships in the community.

In 2005, the Office of Service Learning was institutionalized as the Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement (CSLCE). The center is now providing the infrastructure needed to integrate meaningful service activities across the curriculum, sustain effective community partnerships, and foster collaboration across all stakeholders. The center connects campus and community resources to create diverse learning experiences and to serve community needs. In doing this, it advances TSU's goals of quality teaching, research, and service as described in the university's 2005–2010 Strategic Plan.

Under the leadership of its seventh president, Melvin N. Johnson, TSU is exploring ever more creative and innovative ways to conjoin the work of faculty, students, and local community members. President Johnson's vision of the university as a bridge between the school and its communities reinforces the center's deep commitments to the neighborhoods that surround the university. Over the past two years, TSU has been systematically forging new partnerships with local community organizations and strengthening those that already exist. One consistent component of this effort has been uniting technology training and service-learning with civic engagement activities.

## Background

The turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s changed the face of many African American communities, and North Nashville, where TSU is located, was no exception. Currently, the neighborhoods immediately bordering the university have high concentrations of poverty, crime, chronic health problems, poor educational achievement, and deteriorating housing that lower the quality of life for all community members. As a major urban comprehensive land-grant institution, TSU has a key responsibility to collaborate with our community partners to achieve success on a wide range of issues. These include helping our community understand its strengths, priorities, and needs better; developing educational resources that respond to the community's agenda for progress; and enhancing educational opportunities for both students and community members.

TSU was given a means to provide support to the community, as well as to advance its strategic goal of instituting service-learning in its classes, when the CSLCE was awarded a \$600,000 HBCU grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2005. The goals of the grant included renovating the physical facilities of three community-based organizations, improving education opportunities through technology in six youth-serving community organizations, and improving economic opportunities

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in a low-income community close to campus. Grant activities have enabled TSU to work toward these goals in partnership with Friendship Community Outreach Center, Galilee Missionary Baptist Church and Education Center, Bethlehem Community and Family Resource Center, Grace M. Eaton Childcare Center, Preston Taylor Ministries After-School and Summer Enrichment Program, and the Watkins Park Community Center. Donating computers and

establishing computer labs in each site is enabling us to assess the learning needs of the children and youth and plan ways to meet those needs.

In all its work, the center has endeavored to use acknowledged best practices. One of the prominent lessons learned from other university-community partnerships is that institutions need to include their communities when setting civic engagement agendas (Burack 2005). Because we felt even more strongly that communities rather than universities must set the terms of any partnership, it was North Nashville stakeholders who identified two key areas of concern for the CSLCE task force: violence reduction and literacy. The center quickly realized that this guidance presented the chance to use technology to drive the other grant program goals.

For its part, the center wanted to avoid the usual pitfall of failing to connect student service with classroom objectives. We hoped to move from the ad hoc tutoring often performed as service to work connecting research and service. Too frequently, we believe, service-learning tutoring demonstrates a failure to take both education and community development seriously. We concluded that any programs we developed to address community needs would have to be systematic without being restrictive: able

to satisfy common course objectives but flexible enough to meet both individual course goals and community agency needs.

The vital element to the program, and our consistent pedagogy, has been instruction that concentrates on developing action-oriented research questions through active learning experiences. Our intent was to help students connect theory with experience and thought with action by way of technology. The first part of this aim is a stated goal of the CSLCE. Technology is an important added component because it provides a common, albeit virtual, base of operations and a convenient means of information exchange. The integration of technology into service-learning encourages the development, sharing, and archiving of student assignments and materials. More important, perhaps, it permits dissemination of lessons learned through reflection.

To date, students and faculty have generated a Web design curriculum and used it with ten local middle-school-aged children. University personnel have also established seventy-two workstations in educational computer laboratories in three community centers. Meanwhile, three literature and writing classes have conducted literacy and technology training with key community partners, and six English classes have produced a library of documents ready to be archived on the university's Web server. Outcomes continue to be encouraging, as members of the community display a growing interest in education, and TSU students continue to improve their ability to ask well-formulated research questions that can be answered with ongoing civic action.

### Global Nashville

As in every case we outline here, the service-learning project we came to call "Global Nashville" had deep connections with previous civic engagement work performed by departments and individuals at TSU. The College of Engineering, for instance, led by Dean Decatur Rogers, has long led a program to donate used computers and equipment to various community organizations. Engineering also conducts a Saturday Math Academy, in which local students receive tutoring in mathematics. Professor David Padgett, in the Department of History, Geography, and Political Science, typically uses his classes in geographic information sciences (GIS) to encourage students to map the environments of their local communities.<sup>1</sup> Other backgrounds to service-learning at TSU can be found in the hypertext presentation two authors of this article prepared for the 2005 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (*Maddux and Bradley 2005*).

In the fall of 2005, two English classes began constructing research questions aimed at understanding the historical and cultural contexts of the nearby neighborhoods. Twelve technical writing students tutored twenty-five advanced composition students in how to conduct research, analyze results, and report findings. Local civil rights history was explored, and an initial digital annotated bibliography was compiled on “globalism and the humanities,” with an emphasis on local history.

This work, it should be noted, entailed the kind of interclass collaboration that we outlined in the presentation for the CCCC.<sup>2</sup> By teaching research and writing skills to lower-division college students, upper-division technical writing students improved their own research, as they worked separately to produce written case studies of community organizations. The composition students, meanwhile, assembled the research they had completed and recorded five new media learning objects (podcasts) as examples of undergraduate scholarship in the humanities, arts, and society, including a podcast of a Katrina displaced student’s “Ode to Katrina,” set to a score composed by a TSU music major fellow student. The CSLCE during this time also coordinated a university-wide Katrina service and information fair to assist the local Katrina evacuees in connecting with the local Tennessee services they needed.

All of these activities encouraged TSU students to place their education in both local and global contexts. At the same time, community partners were given resources and contacts that they had often lacked. Not only were they aided by an influx of university students volunteering in their agencies, they were presented with digital resources that have already proved useful in teaching academic skills to middle school and high school students.<sup>3</sup> Finally, community programs and agencies were encouraged to recast their own activities within a broader historical and cultural framework.

### **New Media and Civic Engagement**

In the spring of 2006, TSU further developed and refined its “Global Nashville” Web site content: twenty-five advanced composition students finished the digital annotated bibliography and completed twenty multimedia learning objects to be hosted on the university’s Web site; these included twenty presentations assessing community partner needs. Twenty-three women’s studies students also produced research and artifacts. Technical writing students piloted an oral history new media project and also wrote concept papers seeking two Americorps Vista volunteers to work with the

center in capacity building. Students in a Bible as Literature class developed podcasts that studied the relationship of biblical themes to contemporary culture, and a vodcast of a student-authored musical composition, “The Ballad of Birmingham,” was produced. In all, student-generated print and new media content helped the global readership of TSU’s online newspaper log 400,000 Internet visits in April of 2006.

### **Growing the New Technopolis**

In the summer of 2006, faculty and staff began cultivating close working partnerships with sister institutions Fisk University and Meharry Medical College. During Meharry’s Summer Enrichment Program, funded by a grant secured by the medical college, twenty-five students from TSU, Grambling, Fisk, Southern, Jackson State, Hampton, and other HBCUs developed Web site templates for two North Nashville community partners: Galilee Missionary Baptist Church and Education Center and Friendship Community Outreach Center (FCOC), an after-school academic enrichment center. Furthermore, six seminars on Web site design were conducted with ten middle-school-aged children from FCOC. These seminars involved the committed participation of many participants from TSU, including one university vice president, two faculty and three staff members, two graduate students, and one undergraduate student. Through these classes, children and youth in the low-income communities adjacent to campus were able to forge close relationships with college students and develop new skill sets that will help them succeed in school. The seminars also led directly to a Web site design curriculum documented and designed by TSU student Susan West, a communications major in her junior year (*Friendship Community Outreach Center Partnership 2006*).

The work of the HUD/HBCU grant also spurred changes within the university administrative structure. An Office of Technology Integration (OTI), which coordinates all technological aspects of service-learning and community engagement activities, was created. Over fifty students, faculty, and staff at TSU collaborated to establish education computer laboratories in the Friendship, Galilee, and Bethlehem community centers. Furthermore, the OTI initiated the Growing the New Technopolis Project, which is supervised by the University Office of Technology and Administrative Services.

A technopolis is usually defined as a geographic area such as Silicon Valley or the Research Triangle in North Carolina. The OTI, in conjunction with the CSLCE, envisions underserved populations

such as North Nashville as potential, but virtual, “technopoli.” We seek to provide tools and training that will build capacity in the six community partner computer labs that form hubs of the North Nashville community.

This vision of advancing digital learning in the community originated with the goal of fully exploiting technology resources to raise quality of life. Through this training, especially at the Friendship Community Outreach Center, TSU has also initiated an exploration of capacity building in the community that will focus on how technology (through e-commerce and e-philanthropy) can help drive community partners’ missions. TSU’s New Technopolis also builds capacity by providing models of digital content that

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inspire community members to dream beyond their apparent limitations. One model Web site (*Ballad of Birmingham 2006*) demonstrates how student-generated content, aided by faculty instruction, can lead to contributions for not-for-profit agencies.

Recently, the OTI and the CSLCE were awarded a \$10,000 grant through Vanderbilt University that will continue to benefit our outreach efforts at our Watkins Park community-based organizations. The grant will be used to provide additional software and academic learning materials to some of the

after-school programs; provide student performance incentives; and develop a more formal evaluation of educational performance for the children participating in after-school programs operated by our Watkins Park community-based partners.

In the Web seminars at FCOC, which have carried on into the spring semester, students at Friendship continue to learn valuable computer skills that greatly improve their creativity, resourcefulness, and access to information. The main objective in the workshops is to enable the students to create Web pages using hypertext markup language (HTML). By creating the Web pages with this basic Web authoring language, and using common text editors, the students leave every session with a skill that they can practice on any computer with a browser and a network connection.

During the summer and fall, the student participants created initial Web pages (examples of their work are linked at Web Design Workshops 2006). Final pages for Galilee and Friendship, when they are finished by the TSU students and students at Friendship, will be displayed on the TSU Web server and offer these community members additional resources to increase their capacity through e-philanthropy. Learning such basic skills as changing font and placing pictures on Web pages has heavily boosted the self-confidence and technology interests of the children at FCOC.

Our university's focus on active learning through creating digital assets has helped to build capacity in the North Nashville community by promoting a digital literacy that will ultimately impact economic development. At the same time, the New Technopolis Project has benefited greatly from action research in the field. Observing community students engaged in active learning in technology affords the researcher invaluable insights into how students really learn and how to maximize that research. Simple insights into keyboarding technique, mouse manipulation, and Internet browsing methods have resulted in refinements to the curriculum that have improved its effectiveness.

### **Supercharge Summer Camp and the New Technopolis**

At the beginning of July, one month after the inaugural Growing the New Technopolis initiative, TSU undertook another major project, Supercharge Summer Camp, in the Katrina-devastated city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Following Hurricane Katrina many students in the Gulf Coast area lost precious weeks of learning while schools were closed during and after the evacuations of their communities. Supercharge Summer Camp, funded by a HUD Universities Rebuilding America Partnership (URAP) grant, was a four-week academically focused day camp where 250 young hurricane survivors could experience high-quality learning activities, receive emotional counseling and mentoring, and have fun in a safe and engaging environment for children. We decided to call the camp "Supercharge Summer Camp" because we hoped the children would be "supercharged" for the new school year and so better prepared to cope with the continuing challenges of their lives.

The bulk of the management, hands-on instruction, and day-to-day operations of the camp were executed by a team of twenty-five Tennessee State University undergraduate students, together with a supervision team of four graduate students. The camp curriculum included reading, mathematics, language arts, physical education, and arts and crafts developed with guidance from certified teachers

from the New Orleans public schools. Pre- and posttest scores indicated that by the end of the camp 60 percent of the children had made significant academic gains.

To document the camp activities and communicate with its participants, the Technopolis group in Nashville established a blog where pictures, comments, questions, and experiences from both sides were displayed (*Tennessee State University Katrina SuperCharge 2006*). FCOC participants were curious about the experiences of students in New Orleans and consistently wished the New Orleans participants well. The TSU students in both New Orleans and Nashville were eager to see what new information was available on the blog, and the FCOC students could not wait to write and view the latest entries. The success of the blog encouraged some members of the TSU student group to create their own blogs, as the blog stimulated the FCOC participants to improve their Web page design techniques.

### Lessons Learned

Over the past two years, several surprising lessons have challenged many of our assumptions. Some of these pertain specifically to TSU, some to the community organizations that partner with institutions of higher education, and some to the relations that develop between colleges and communities.

To take the last first, one of the most important lessons we have learned is to recognize that building “trusting mutual partnerships” is an ongoing process that takes time and listening and frequent shared meals. We assumed that the community members and leaders would rejoice in our outreach to them. We soon learned that some community members mistrusted our intent, believing that we might exploit the community just to get research grants. Frequent meetings, focus groups, town hall meetings, and meals together have begun to create the foundation of shared understanding, affection, and collaborative planning that is necessary for effective partnership.

One example of a shared understanding that must be continually addressed is the artificial “semester” structure of most service-learning, which is sometimes hard for community members to understand. Children in after-school programs need consistent long-term tutoring/mentoring, yet most service-learning projects last only eight to twelve weeks. We continually struggle with ways to meet the children’s needs for long-term trusting relationships within the typical semester schedule.

Moreover, both community stakeholders and university personnel sometimes prove unwilling to seek a potential greater good at the cost of a known lesser good. This is apparently part of the human condition (*Nash 1950*). It also shows that change is sometimes frightening for surprising reasons. As we worked with various course and community populations, we were reminded that every child, every learner, every community has the potential

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for development, but all are not always ready at the same time. Some of our university students and faculty needed to be convinced that neither service nor learning would suffer in the activities we proposed. For their part, some community agencies were reluctant to give up the traditional tutoring services to which they had become accustomed and experiment with more potentially “disruptive” technologies.

There is certainly some reason for this reluctance on the part of community stakeholders. Not surprisingly, those local community students who do well with difficult material also do well as the subjects of service from university students, faculty, and staff. Above-average students remain above average. Average and below average students tend to remain in the same place. What this means is that students, like the communities they come from, often need to be enticed into learning. Emphasizing the practical benefits of working with technology was one way we found to overcome resistance in after-school workshops.

The same holds true for universities. Instructional biases have a habit of becoming learning biases. Those who are already enfranchised in a service-only model of community engagement can perceive a threat from a change of focus to service combined with classroom learning. CSLCE-sponsored workshops on developing service-learning became a way for teachers to share ideas and to creatively address frustrations.

There is, in other words, a continuum between student tutoring (the most basic form of service) and capacity building (the most sophisticated). If any member of the university cannot learn the former in connection with course objectives, he or she will never understand how to achieve the latter. We cannot function as capacity builders and leaders if we cannot learn ourselves.

This is why letting communities set the conditions of community engagement programs is both pragmatic and meaningful. When communities direct change, they are not only invested in it: they are tutors of it. Communities can bring positive change to universities when even university administrations cannot.

Finally, the recent experiences of TSU and North Nashville stand as an answer to the criticism that service-learning, with its emphasis on experience, does not result in real learning (*Bordelon and Phillips 2006*). The gap between civic engagement and academics is not, after all, irreducible. Every pedagogy has its pedants, fundamentalists, and dilettantes, but this evidences only that any pedagogy, to be practiced well, must be practiced artfully.

The much maligned practice of reflection, for example, can be either well or poorly used. The latter results in a disconnected series of impressions; the former offers systematic closure to the experience, in which the active learning is transformed into action research (*Campus Compact 2000*). As a consequence, the work at TSU continues to be formative of other projects.

### Expansion and Development

In spring of 2007, technology will continue to inform other aspects of the HUD grant's implementation. Twenty-five technical writing students will create profiles of and maintenance schedules for computer labs in each of our six community partners. Insights gleaned from the New Technopolis Project have already resulted in a statewide consortium of higher education institutions, the Tennessee Sandbox (<http://www.tnsandbox.com>), which promotes a convergence of best practices in educational technology through civic engagement. The Tennessee Sandbox, through its association with the Tennessee and National Campus Compact, will seek to push out tools and training to every rural and urban community in the state. North Carolina has also expressed interest in replicating the model. The Sandbox is sponsoring a statewide podcast tournament that features a service-learning/civic engagement category. In fact, Friendship Community Outreach Center will be entering a podcast in the statewide tournament. Again, this exposure to leading-edge technology integration is essential to any community's well-being; the students participate in scripting and recording their voices in Audacity, an open-source multitrack digital recorder. Students help determine their own best practices, which are then migrated to e-portfolios. This semester's assets will feature poems, stories, and a special "This I Believe" short essay

that will echo the NPR program. The local NPR affiliate, WPLN, has agreed to sponsor the podcast tournament, and exposure to the quality programming of NPR during this assignment will broaden students' cultural literacy.

In addition, we continue to combine service and learning into tiers of related activity. Students in upper-division literature and writing classes continue to assist those in lower-division courses. Meanwhile, students in one sophomore literature class are participating in a concerted effort to improve literacy and writing skills of the children at FCOC through the use of technology. As always, learning remains critical in service-learning at TSU: the sophomore literature students are teaching the skills they are themselves practicing. University students are reading age-appropriate books with the children at Friendship. On Monday afternoons, the university and Friendship students practice applying literary terms and concepts to the books they are reading. On Wednesday afternoons, the students from TSU work with the children at Friendship on writing and computer literacy exercises that relate to the work done on Mondays. As this curriculum develops, we will employ it with other community partners.

To date, the following university units have established ongoing collaborations with community partners: the Departments of Languages, Literature and Philosophy; Teaching and Learning; Communications; History, Geography and Political Science; Psychology; Health and Sport Sciences; Early Childhood; Cooperative Extension; Dental Hygiene; Nursing; Physical Therapy; Business; Faculty Support Center; and the library have all begun to incorporate and encourage service-learning projects in their academic activities. Other institutional relationships are also emerging, including partnerships with the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Fairleigh Dickinson University, University of Tennessee (UT) at Knoxville, UT Martin, UT Chattanooga, Tennessee Technical University, East Tennessee State University, the University of Memphis, and Virginia Technical University.

### **Campus Compact**

By far the most promising recent development is the commitment of TSU's president, Melvin N. Johnson, to lead the state in the development of a Tennessee Campus Compact. Recently, state government leadership in Tennessee has begun to recognize the importance of civic engagement in the future of the state and has championed civic knowledge and engagement at both the P-12 and postsecondary levels. TSU has therefore been given a unique

opportunity to become a leader for service-learning and civic engagement and to establish a statewide community outreach/service-learning mechanism to formalize and coordinate activities and document outcomes.

As a growing national coalition of higher education institutions committed to civic engagement, Campus Compact is a valuable resource for best practices in this endeavor. As TSU leads the state in creating a Tennessee Campus Compact, there will be strength in coordinating the numerous public service opportunities on a statewide level. Therefore, aligned with the systematic effort to institutionalize service-learning will be the garnering of support to establish a state Compact. A Tennessee Campus Compact will: (1) assist college presidents in promoting service-learning and student participation in community service, (2) improve collaboration and build partnerships at the state level among the faculty and presidents of higher education institutions, (3) offer resources to member campuses to improve teaching and learning, and (4) provide linkages with other state and national groups. It will promote best practices, improve collaboration among members, and develop organizational leadership and infrastructure for sustainability. For over thirty-three private and public higher education institutions in the state, a Tennessee Campus Compact will offer the potential to cooperate in building mutually beneficial partnerships to improve the quality of life for Tennessee residents. Under the leadership of President Johnson, Tennessee will be one of the newest statewide Campus Compact organizations, promoting civic engagement throughout the higher education community.

## **Conclusion**

Collaborative work in and with communities is consistent with the goal that TSU be a model urban university, provide leadership in integrating service with teaching and research, and engage faculty, staff, and students in learning activities that benefit their communities as well as themselves. Through this collaboration, TSU is distinguishing itself as a campus that creates interdisciplinary approaches to generating and communicating knowledge that meaningfully contributes to the well-being of society.

Service-learning is a mutually beneficial balance of community engagement and academic learning. When the two are deliberately balanced, the outcomes of service and learning can result in meaningful learning that contributes to the common good. Integrating technology into service-learning offers a way to adjust operations while they are ongoing. Electronic means of production, archiving,

and distribution make it possible to identify problems at an early stage, when adjustments can prove most effective. Our experiences have proved to us that when service, learning, and technology are creatively combined, even the most tentative of collaborations in the most challenging of circumstances can yield remarkable results, as long as all of the participants are willing and inspired to work together for positive change.

### Endnotes

1. See <http://www.gislabtsu.freehomepage.com/gislab.htm> for examples of the work produced by Dr. Padgett's students.

2. For examples of this collaboration between lower- and upper-division students, see <http://www.tnstate.edu/hmaddux/4C05/1020essay.htm> and <http://www.tnstate.edu/hmaddux/4C05/neely.htm>.

3. For a sample of the resources generated by TSU students and made available to local community partners, see <http://www.tnstate.edu/hmaddux/resources/tips.html>.

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