Service Learning Projects in Online Courses: Delivery Strategies

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ABSTRACT

As more college courses are taught online, maintaining course deliverables and learning to mirror face-to-face offerings is important to faculty, students, and accrediting agencies. Offering experiential and service learning is an increasingly important way to connect students to their local communities. This article presents a case study implementation of a service learning project in a hybrid (taught partially online) senior-level business seminar, which is moving to a fully online format. The format pairs business students with existing community partners that have defined projects and tasks for volunteers. Delivery strategies to engage students in civic and social organizations are presented along with benefits to students and to the community. Strategies for including college students in volunteer projects as an initial service learning experience are included. Areas for future research are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is a rapidly growing pedagogical reality in higher education. Yet the learning delivery is often criticized for its lack of real-world connections. Many face-to-face classes overcome these weaknesses through service learning projects. However, the service learning pedagogy should not be limited to face-to-face instruction only. This paper integrate the benefits of service learning, an effective classroom teaching style that relies on interactive learning and integration of classroom activities and efforts into communities, with the ever increasing online environment. The study examines a case within a hybrid (partially online) environment, focusing on business students using functional business knowledge within the community. Additionally, this paper provides suggestions for implementation within an online course.

SERVICE LEARNING

The seminal definition of service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112) is a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." Service learning is further defined by Weiler et. al. (2013) as "a pedagogical strategy for promoting the development of civic-mindedness among university students" (p. 236). Universities are adopting service learning as a pedagogical strategy for a number of reasons, particularly to develop socially-responsible knowledge and values for their students and to produce civic minded alumni (Reeb, 2010; Bringle & Steinberg 2010). While additional research is needed on

the community-impact of service learning projects, a goal is to engage students in projects to fill a community-identified need (Reeb & Folger, 2013)

Service Learning in the Classroom

The service learning pedagogy integrates experiential learning through assigned community projects requiring structured reflection to benefit both students and the community (Glenn, 2002). By providing opportunities for students to work with community partners, students become prepared to participate in society. Further, service learning allows educators to connect classrooms to the world beyond the campus (Giles & Eyler, 1994) and creates an ethical base for learning (Coye, 1997).

Becker, et. al. (1991) argue within learning theory, higher levels of understanding require active involvement in application and use of concepts Service learning is a method to make the on-campus or online classroom an active experience, and to appeal to students' interests by making course material more relevant. Applied learning offers opportunities for repetition and reinforcement of concepts already studied, thereby increasing the likelihood of retention (McKeachie, 1999). Students enjoy real examples relevant to the business environment where they will be working (Buckles, 1999) and develop a greater appreciation for the relevance of concepts, and as a result the motivation to learn may be enhanced (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). As students become involved in service learning projects, a sense of community on campus develops which improves retention, recruitment, and future involvement in other projects (Lucy-Bouler & Lucy-Bouler, 2012). College students are introduced to service learning through participation in short-term experiences (McCarthy, 1996) providing a balance of challenge and support along with possible future participation in community service experiences with long-term outcomes and activate deep learning (Grauerholz, 2001).

Benefits of Service Learning

Service learning provides opportunities and benefits for students, faculty, community, and the academic institution (Warner, Glissmeyer, and Gu, 2012). Service-learning focuses on "how-to" and restores a link between citizenship and service that has historically been a concern of educational systems (Staples & Ornatowski, 1997) by providing "real world" experience component, thus enriching the classroom experience and making the course content relevant to the student (Brown, Cox & Watts, 2010). The integration of student's learning into the community benefits the society as a whole by utilizing student or human capital produced by the academic institutions.

Working with community resources can include a wide variety of organizations addressing area problems, including homeless shelters, after school programs (Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Junior Achievement), urban planning groups (City Councils, County Commissions), or abuse centers (Family and Children's Services, Crisis Center, Community Kitchen) and other public or private agencies. The Service Learning Center at the academic institution or a similar outreach department should take the initiative to make contacts with community agencies to identify their needs and build ties to the curriculum by introducing the service learning concept and projects in appropriate fields of study. A variety of benefits of service learning have been found for student participants both immediately and after they graduate. By providing opportunities for students to work with community partners, institutions help them become "ideal orators" (Quintilian, 1988).

Further benefits have been found in a study of service learning and leadership. Sabbaghi, Cavanagh, & Hipskind (2013) found student leadership dimensions of persuasion, building, community, commitment to the growth of people, stewardship, empathy, awareness, foresight, and listening increased after participation in a financial literacy service-learning project. In addition students' interest in social justice increased. The authors believed the students were better prepared to be ethical leaders and compassionate citizens after completing the project.

Similarly Caro et. al. (2013) cited pressure for business students to be prepared to enter organizations and understand quality leadership motivated their inclusion of a service learning project into a leadership seminar. In a nursing program at the junior-level students were found to make connections between theory and practice as they learned concepts from patient-centered care to evidence-based practice (Flinders, 2013). Experiential learning through service learning builds on personal growth and understanding. By bringing students outside of the classroom and into the community, students are allowed to give back and build a connection with their communities (Eisenhard & Ninassi, 2010).

Hansen (1999) states students develop important skills, helping them function more effectively in the labor market or in graduate school, even through those skills are not always measured by exam scores and often not even in overall course grades. Studies suggest an effective teaching style provides a classroom environment enabling students to apply learning to real life situations (Elzinga, 2001). Then when confronted with real life problems, students can apply their analytical thinking to comprehend and resolve them. Service learning provides the channel for applied learning.

Engaging students in the community for active learning is the motivation of most service learning projects. Johnson (2013) believes service learning provides students with relevance demanded from the business community. Her students in a graduate research methods class worked in teams to conduct a situation analysis for a local non-profit organization in an experiential learning project. Service learning offers students the opportunity to develop a number of competencies or skills such as team building, leadership, conflict resolution, communication, organization, and time-management (Olney, Livingston, Fisch, & Talamantes, 2006). Calvert and Kurji (2012) explored the impact of a service learning project in a managerial accounting course. Their motivation was the criticism of business schools producing graduates that lack teamwork and communication skills. They proposed a service learning methodology to improve these skills in accounting students.

PROLIFERATION IN ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

Kolowich (2014) reported online education went mainstream many years ago. Academic leaders continue to forecast more pervasiveness of online courses in the future. Recent data from the Babson Survey Research Group indicated some 7.1 million students take at least one online course to complete their education. Bolkan (2013) reports the number of college students taking a minimum of one online course rose from 23 percent in 2009 to 45 percent in 2013, citing the 2013 College Explorer report surveying over 1,500 students.

Online learning is revolutionizing the way higher education is delivered to students. Professors are required to successfully adapt coursework to a new learning environment, while being conscious of factors such as communication, active and collaborative learning, and reflective practices (Gresh & Mrozowski, 2000). Students and the institutions also play a key role in online success. Students must shift their learning paradigms to maximize knowledge acquisition and institutions must broaden their vision to explore innovative methods of utilizing the online learning channel of instruction. Online courses too are tasked with being equivalent to the in-class experiences and many regional (i.e. SACS) and program-specific accreditation agencies (i.e. AACSB, NCATE) require separate assessments on online, hybrid, and face-to-face learning to assure they are equivalent in meeting course objectives and learning experiences for students.

SERVICE LEARNING IN ONLINE COURSES

Khan and Hill (2013) promote integrating industry-sponsored projects into online courses, particularly capstone courses, citing a growing need for such inclusion. Further, the design of service learning or industry/client-sponsored projects can be incorporated into any program at any institution (Kahn & Hill, 2013). Incorporating service learning pedagogy maintains an interactive environment in online courses. Sservice learning projects can encompass various activities, depending on demographics, size of the economy, the locality, the college affiliations or community involvement, the student population, and class size. Studies conclude successful online instructors realize building a sense of "community" is necessary for successful learning outcomes (Kazmer, 2000; McLellan, 1999). Developing a community "becomes a parallel stream to the content being explored" in online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

IMPLEMENTING ONLINE SERVICE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

The four components of the service learning pedagogy—preparation, action, reflection and evaluation—are adapted to online environments. Regardless of the length of the online course, students are introduced to the project in the course syllabus and receive a project orientation and description outlining expectations and project due dates.

Implementing service learning is a popular activity in a number of capstone senior-level courses regardless of discipline. For example, Hagan (2012) utilized client projects in an undergraduate marketing and public relations capstone class. Students applied their discipline based knowledge while working collaboratively, also using their 'soft' skills. However, in an online modality, such experiential service learning projects for clients can be more challenging (Hagan, 2012).

As an in depth case, students in an AACSB accredited business program in a SACS accredited college in the Southeast United States participated in a service learning requirement as part of their Senior Seminar course. The course is a pass/fail graduation requirement of all business students in their last semester, currently being taught as a hybrid (partially delivered online) course. Currently, required seminars compose the face-to-face component of the hybrid course. However, as the school incorporates more online classes with a completely online Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degree, Senior Seminar will be converted to video using Camtasia® software. Additionally synchronous online webinars will be provided to accommodate distance learning students who cannot attend on

campus seminars. The focus of the course is preparation for the world of work and targets job search strategies, interviewing, networking, and human relation skills in addition to reinforcing business/discipline-based knowledge and critical/analytical thinking.

To enhance job search skills, students are required to attend seminars on professional dress, interviewing skills, resume and cover letter writing, participation in an etiquette module followed by an etiquette dinner and developing professional profiles on social media sites (e.g. LinkedIn). In addition, students are required to write a cover letter and develop a resume for a job within their major later used in a mock interview. The mock interviews are conducted by local business executives, typically at the executive's workplace. To enhance networking and human relation skills, students are required to participate in a service learning project to benefit a local social or civic organization. A list of approved service activities is provided. The opportunities available provide an array of volunteer opportunities to accommodate most schedules so that students need not take time away from their work (almost all the seniors were working at least part-time).

In preparing for the Senior Seminar course, the preliminary step was to identify community stakeholders. While several civic groups were partners of the School of Business, to increase the population, the professors used social media to poll current students and alumni for additional examples. Together they identified national and international organizations with a presence in all locations represented by students in the hybrid class. These included: Chamber of Commerce, Rotary International, Kiwanis Clubs, Lion's Club, AARP, Ruritan, Sertoma, the American Legion, Exchange Club, and the Optimists Club.

Four partners, shown in the table above are available to students in our ten-county service area of about a 100 mile radius. Students are allowed to propose other service opportunities that meeting stated requirements (i.e. benefit the community, utilize discipline-based knowledge and skills, have available work to meet the minimum of 10 hours of service, etc.). This is particularly helpful for online students, allowing them to contribute to their communities.

In the syllabus, students are given the list of the service learning partners, including a short write-up explaining the organization and outlining the types of volunteer activities and duties available. Students are asked in an online survey to indicate their major and top preferences. The professors use this to assign service learning projects. Students are provided with the contact information for the organization and director. Students schedule their volunteer training schedule for the project. The service learning partners are also given a list of students and are aware the students will be contacting them.

Following the completion of their service learning projects, students are required to post comments about their experiences, including reflections on the business knowledge and skills they used, what they learned from the experience, and suggestions for improvements or modifications. This provides opportunities for instructors to observe and further guide the lessons learned from the students' service experience in subsequent lectures, postings, and online discussions. The reflection process connects the classroom learning with the experience and allows students to think about their achievements from service learning and evaluate their contributions to the community.

Senior Seminar Service Learning Partners		
Organization	**Meeting Date/Times**	**Learning Outcomes**
Girl Scouts	Saturdays	Teams, International Policy, Event planning and organizing
VITA – Volunteer Income Tax Assistance	Spring Semesters on Fridays/ Saturdays	Accounting, Customer Service, Organization, Process Flow
Junior Achievement	JA in a Day; one hour a week for five weeks in K-12 schools; and weekend entrepreneurship programs	Finance, Economics, Management and Entrepreneurship
Alzheimer's Association	Saturday Events-- spring "Dancing with local Star" and fall 5K run as well as weekday work in the office	Planning, Organizing, and Marketing

Student's volunteer activities are assessed by the supervisor in the respective community agency in an online, www.surveymonkey.com survey, developed by the university faculty. The instrument covers the quality of work, communication (oral and written), leadership and teamwork abilities. These assessments provide feedback to the instructor, and are used in evaluating students and providing grades and student feedback at the end of the service learning project. Anecdotal end-of-course student comments rate the service learning experience "extremely positive" and note and increased confidence from their participation. Several have noted it made a difference in later job interviews.

Suggestions for Implementation

Prior to implantation, a service learning project must be well planned before the online semester begins. Preparing requirements for qualification, expected activities to reinforce selected knowledge and skills, and deliverables used to provide feedback for grading must be included. Starting with one or two standardized options (i.e. Junior Achievement, VITA) provides a basis for additional projects. It is also helpful for the instructor to develop a relationship with someone in the community organization, preferably a coordinator.

Early in the semester, an explanation of the service learning project options should be provided in detail to students. Fully discuss the learning objectives and required deliverables and documentation (e.g. signed completion forms, photographs, journaling, and reflection papers). It is important for students to have input to increase commitment to the service learning project and to the organization. However, it is important to coordinate students and projects so their instructor can track progress and assure a good student-organization fit. For example, a student with an extreme stuttering challenge assigned to Alzheimer's Association fundraising event helped coordinate work flow behind the scenes, independently managing backstage activities. Encourage diversity as well. One professor assigned male students to work with the Girl Scouts in a much needed diversity exercise. Non-accounting majors were assigned to the VITA tax preparation project to organize work flow of volunteers and prepare schedules for clients.

Finally discuss projects and learning with the class in a chat room and post student reflections of the project. Alumni websites and social media (i.e., Facebook) can be used to follow up with long-term learning from the online service activities. Remind students to include their service learning volunteer work on their resumes. Service learning projects and experiences provide a competitive advantage in the job search, particularly for students with limited or no work experience.

Areas for Further Research

With the growth of online courses around the world, projects must be adapted to this style of learning and teaching. The benefits of the service learning project are important to students, faculty, the college, and the greater community. It also provides a key deliverable for student resumes, facilitating the job search process. Organizations benefit from free student "consulting" and often screen potential employees from the student volunteers. The mission of colleges and universities continues to expand to include more external stakeholders and service learning projects provide synergies for all concerned. With continual adaptations of the pedagogy to the online learning environment, the success of these projects will continue. Mechanisms for linking the community organizations with the college campus and appropriate courses will develop as organizations learn about the benefit of student engagement.

Future research is needed in a number of key areas. First is to explore how adaptations are made in the online learning classroom to incorporate service learning with studies and documentation from a variety of disciplines that explore the pedagogy, grading challenges, ways to implement the process using technology, and studies of student learning, satisfaction, and retention.

In terms of application, community organization partners should be surveyed about the short and long-term benefits and the success of service learning projects. Studies should examine the degree of community involvement by online student populations and how to further this level of integration to foster transfer of knowledge from students into local communities and economies.

Finally case studies examining the longitudinal impact of service learning for online students are needed. Do online students become more engaged, charitable and philanthropic after helping an area organization via service learning? Are online students more likely to volunteer their time and money to help the chosen organization or other organizations after participating in service learning? Are there differences in engagement in online versus face-to-face educational settings? Does involvement in service learning projects provide better employees? What service learning projects are available after students gain experience with existing programs in community organizations?

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