

Service Learning During a Global Pandemic: How and Why?

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ABSTRACT

This case study provides an overview as to how two faculty members co-taught an asynchronous online course with a service-learning component during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Within this paper, the authors recount the adjustments that were made in order to accommodate an online teaching modality while maintaining their commitment to service learning.

Keywords: asynchronous online, e-service-learning, COVID-19, indirect service learning

For those who teach in higher education, the global pandemic has required a rethinking of the ways in which course materials are delivered, with many faculty members forced to embrace new modalities. For those who use service learning and community engagement within their courses, the idea of attempting to implement these methods during a global pandemic seemed tenuous at best. During the summer of 2020, Campus Compact and other institutions across the United States hosted various webinars, workshops, and training on considerations that should be made while continuing service learning and community engagement during this time. Although many individuals and institutions may have halted their service learning and community engagement during the global pandemic, the two authors of this paper reflect on their decision to continue and experiences of implementing service learning into their co-taught on-line asynchronous courses during the fall of 2020.

In the fall of 2019, prior to the pandemic, Kiesha Warren-Gordon and Angela Jackson-Brown began working on a plan to bring their two classes together for the purpose of partnering with the Whitely community in

Muncie, Indiana, to provide support for individuals reentering the community after periods of incarceration. The community is composed of approximately 2,500 residents, with the majority identifying as African American, and many living below the poverty line. The community has faced, and continues to face, many problems, and with each problem they prove their resilience by working together and creating outreach. Warren-Gordon has a long-standing relationship with the community and has partnered with members of the community for various service-learning projects using critical service learning (CSL), a method that focuses on developing authentic relationships to bring about social justice and social change (Mitchell, 2007, 2008). Utilizing this model, the Whitely community partners took on the role of co-teachers. They helped design the course syllabus, led course discussions, and were centered as experts. Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown's concept was that during the fall of 2020 they would bring their two classes, Jackson-Brown's African American Studies capstone course and Warren-Gordon's Criminal Justice capstone course, together and work with the Whitely community council as

community partners to create a service-learning course that would focus on some aspect of supporting individuals who had recently returned after periods of incarceration. The idea was that Jackson-Brown's class would create a documentary based on research conducted by Warren-Gordon's class. Warren-Gordon's class would also be interviewed for the documentary, along with returning community members and those who provide support services to those returning. Combining students who were in their last semester of classes before graduation into this co-curricular environment would create a transformative learning experience for students in both classes (Martin & Strawser, 2017). Many of the Criminal Justice students were White and had very little, if any, engagement with Black people who were centered as experts or in positions of power. For the African American Studies students, it would give them the opportunity to apply what they had learned during the course of their studies while working with people with whom they self-identify, which would be a reaffirming experience.

In the spring of 2020, Warren-Gordon's students worked with the Whately community to identify individuals who would be willing to spend time with the students in order to explain the obstacles they faced when reentering the community. Students began meeting with community partners and individuals reentering the community weekly for conversation and pizza dinners. These meetings were held with the goal of creating trust between the students and members of the community. The idea was that the work from Warren-Gordon's spring 2020 class would carry over to the co-taught class in the fall of 2020. However, the college abruptly, with a two-day notice, shifted to asynchronous online learning during the ninth week of the 16-week semester due to the global pandemic. During that same week, the governor announced a shutdown of the state that required all nonessential agencies to close. Due to the state's closure, the community had to shift its

focus onto ensuring the safety and health of community members, and made adjustments as to how it provided basic resources to its members. For example, the food bank had to limit the number of volunteers to essential support only, and therefore shifted to a drive-up food bank instead of the prior walk-in model that allowed individuals to make their own food choices. With this shift, it was no longer appropriate to assume that the Whately community could support the service-learning endeavors of the two classes.

This community focus continued into the summer and fall of 2020, with the community partners' focus on COVID-19 testing, rental and housing assistance, and ensuring that community members were continually educated regarding COVID-19. Warren-Gordon continued to work with the community and coordinated the sewing of 150 face masks by the members of the University's theater department to be donated during the monthly food bank.

During this same time period, like many across the world, Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown grappled with the question of how to continue their planned courses. Should they continue the service-learning component as designed and planned? Should they abandon the idea? Or should they adjust it? At the same time, they were also waiting to learn what teaching modality they would be assigned in fall.

After a considerable amount of discussion, they decided that they would continue to co-teach the course and would keep the theme of prison-to-community reentry. Instead of creating a documentary focusing on understanding the obstacles those individuals face, they would create a website that focused on resources available to individuals recently reentering the community. They decided they would continue with the project as a form of indirect service learning, and prior to developing the course outline, they conducted a deep dive into the literature on indirect service learning and electronic service learning.

TYPES OF SERVICE LEARNING

Indirect Service Learning

Although the literature on indirect service learning is limited, it suggests that it can provide a rich learning experience for students. Connor-Linton (1995) describes indirect service learning as a three-step process: 1) students learn about an aspect of the community through the teacher's experience; 2) students apply the knowledge acquired through course instruction to create a "service or product" (p. 107) that will provide support to the community; and 3) students then analyze the issues and application of the service. The extent to which indirect service learning can provide a transformative experience for students has yet to be fully evaluated, but studies suggest that indirect service learning can provide students with an opportunity to make connections. However, those necessary connections with community partnerships are often absent or lacking the breadth and depth needed for a transformative learning experience to take place. For example, Darby et al. (2015) examined the emotional relationships students develop over the semester when taking part in direct service learning compared to students who took part in indirect service learning. Their findings suggest that students who took part in direct service learning courses reported more emotional responses to working with peers and community partners, whereas students taking part in indirect service learning reported an emotional connection and relationship to their peers. Examining high school students' perceptions of experiences in direct versus indirect service learning, Coomey and Wilczenski (2005) found that students who participated in direct service learning reported having stronger positive perceptions of their social growth than those with indirect service learning experiences (Sturgill & Motley, 2013). The limited existing research on indirect service learning suggests that this form of service learning can provide an impactful learning experience for students;

however, the extent to which that impact leads to long-term transformative thoughts and behaviors still needs to be examined.

Electronic Service Learning

Like indirect service learning, literature on electronic service learning (e-service learning) is sparse. Waldner, Widener, and McGorry (2012) define e-service learning as service learning where the instruction takes place in the online learning platform. Although e-service learning is relatively new, it is receiving more consideration as a viable teaching tool as universities offer more online courses (Marcus et al., 2020; Olberding & Downing, 2021). Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2010) assert that there is a continuum to the degree to which the teaching/learning and the service happen in the online format. Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown identify cases in which all of the teaching/learning and service delivery took place in the online environment called extreme e-service learning. In examining the impact of extreme e-service learning, Waldner, McGorry and Widener (2010) found that product completion, client satisfaction, student satisfaction, client/student interaction, and skill building were all described positively, and concluded that extreme e-service learning can provide a positive experience for both the students and community partners. Strait and Sauer (2004) examined e-service learning in a language arts course and concluded,

When conducting online courses, e-service offers excellent outreach to community organizations and fills a void in meeting community needs. As the educational paradigm shifts to more distance learning, students will be looking for ways to gain work experience and build long-lasting partnerships with their communities that will benefit their future careers. These experiences provide rich, authentic, hands-on training for students (p. 64).

COURSE OUTLINE AND DELIVERY

After speaking with the community partners, it was reaffirmed that the time demands in response to the pandemic could not allow for them to fully engage with the classes as they had in Warren-Gordon's previous courses. However, after much discussion the community partners indicated that they wanted the classes to continue to work on prison reentry issues, as the pandemic was impacting that marginalized group, and that the work in assisting them needed to continue even if community partners could not have a direct role. During Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown's conversations, it was decided that the students would create a website to support individuals reentering the community after periods of incarceration. The website would list various resources as well as interviews with the directors of those resources explaining how their organization could help individuals reentering the community.

As the development of the two courses began to take shape, one of the hurdles that needed to be addressed was how Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown would communicate with the students and how the students would communicate with each other. Because the two courses were asynchronous, they could not require class meetings at specified times; however, they could require the students to meet and work in groups. Having the students work in groups was important because collaboration is an essential component of service learning (Hoy & Johnson, 2013). It was also decided that weekly video announcements would be sent to both classes. Although each class had its own class registration number, and students' work would be graded by the individual instructor, Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown were able to combine the two courses into one Canvas course management system page. This system allowed for

students to be put into groups and for the two faculty members to communicate with each group separately. It also allowed them to put students from both classes into groups together. From the spring 2020 course, Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown learned that individuals who are returning to the community after periods of incarceration face obstacles with finding permanent housing, employment, food, and health care.

On the first day of the semester, they sent a questionnaire to the 30 students in both classes, asking them questions about their skill set. They wanted to know who had website design capabilities, who was good with making editorial decisions, and who were their natural leaders. Once they received the feedback from the students, they sat together and began the formation of the groups. Because many of the students enrolled in their two classes were former students, they also were able to glean from previous experiences which students would be best in which group. That knowledge was an added bonus, but even if they had not had prior knowledge of the work ethic of the students, they still would have been able to use the students' feedback to create their groups. They decided that they would create groups of four to five students, and each group would address each one of the obstacles. Every member of the group was assigned a responsibility: leader, responsible for leading and organizing weekly meetings; secretary, keeping notes and completing weekly accountability work-sheets; community liaison, coordinating meetings with community and communicating with the instructors of the courses; and recorder, recording required weekly video meetings held via Zoom. They felt the consistency of having the students focus on the same responsibility from week to week would allow students to focus on the one task and develop mastery. The recordings enabled Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown to

view them at a later date and also allowed students with time conflicts to watch at their leisure. In groups with five members, two members were assigned as liaisons. Assigning each group member a task ensured that all students were actively involved every week.

Once they tasked the students with their duties, they spent a good deal of their time checking in with the student liaison for each group. That student shared with them the progress their group was making and if there were any internal issues within the groups. In case of internal issues, Warren-Gordon or Jackson-Brown would intervene by sending an email or scheduling a virtual meeting with any students who were struggling. Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown also watched the video recordings of the weekly student meetings to ensure that course expectations were being met and that the groups were moving forward in a timely manner. The project depended on each student doing their share of the work, so it was imperative that Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown maintained good communication with the leaders of the groups. Because the students spent so much time learning about the formerly incarcerated, and because they were able to speak directly with community partners, they seemed to take the requirements of the course seriously. One student said,

This was the first class I was ever enrolled in that I could directly see the benefits of what I was being asked to do. More classes should be designed this way because too much of what we do, in some classes, feels like busywork, rather than work that is applicable to our future careers.

The quote above is evidence of how this form of engagement supports students' learning by providing them with transformative, hands-on experiences. By design, these courses were intended to give students the opportunity to put their education

to work and see the direct impact of their knowledge. So often students will graduate and never know what they are capable of achieving. The students in this course learned the importance of critical listening skills, time management, and collaboration.

While occasionally Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown would drop in on a meeting, as the semester progressed, they were able to spend less and less time checking in with the students and instead were able to focus more attention on the overall project. The students truly saw the value in the project, and toward the end of the semester there was very little need for any type of micro-management. The students completely understood how important it was for them to show up for each other weekly, so each group leader set up their own group meeting days and times where the students would meet and double check that they were still on target with their portion of the website. Jackson-Brown worked with several of the students on website design, but because the groups were carefully selected, each group had a person who was capable of editing video and developing a website. There was very little that Jackson-Brown had to do other than sign off on the website design the students came up with during one of their weekly meetings.

Once the website was complete, Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown met with the students to discuss the virtual event where they would present the website. Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown wanted the students to take ownership of this event, so each group designated one person to be the speaker and talk about the details they included on their portion of the website. Once they completed the presentation, they had the chance to hear from the community partners. Approximately 10 community partners from Muncie, Indiana, in Delaware County were present for the unveiling of the website, and they were elated by what they saw. One of the comm-

unity partners pointed out that the website had the potential to have a far-reaching impact on the community as a whole.

The reactions of community partners suggested that this website will be used by many people other than just the formerly incarcerated. It could also be beneficial to anyone in Muncie and some parts of Delaware County who might be struggling with some of the basic resources that are taken for granted by many.

Throughout the semester, the students submitted reflective essays analyzing the process of creating a user-friendly website for the formerly incarcerated; through lectures, group discussions, readings, and guest lectures, they were able to make adjustments to the process as they reflected on their work through each phase of creation. Perhaps the best lesson for the students was the reaction they received from the community partners. It was helpful for Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown to tell them that what they did had the potential to make an impact, but it was very powerful for them to hear from the people who were, in essence, their clients. As another student said, "I will never forget the feeling I got from being part of this project. Long after I graduate, this website will still be helping the community and that is a good thing."

Based on their interpretation of student reflection assignments, student evaluations, and feedback from their community partners, the course modality and outcome were positively received. Overall, students reported developing new skills, appreciation for group work, and feelings of accomplishment for completing the website. In some of the students' reflection assignments, they did express a frustration with having to complete the service-learning components online. However, the three students who expressed that frustration were students who had been in Warren-Gordon's class in the spring of 2020 and were hoping to have had the same

level of engagement with community partners that they had in the previous semester. They also acknowledged that they understood that having the course online was the only viable option during the pandemic. Student evaluations also reported students' satisfaction with the course. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 representing the highest level of positive ranking for both instructors, none of the ratings were less than 4.5. Neither instructor received negative comments regarding the course in the open comment section of the student evaluations. For the students who did leave comments, they expressed how rewarding the courses were and how much they appreciated the fact that the work they did had real-world implications. Many of the students said that out of all of the classes they had taken in their major, these classes gave them experience they could list on their resumes. Overwhelmingly, the community partners expressed gratitude that they continued to work on the pressing issue of prisoner reentry during the pandemic, and, due to the prior working relationship with their community partners, continuing to work with them indirectly was a seamless endeavor. The established trust allowed for the students to conduct interviews with those who direct programs that support individuals who are returning to the community.

CONCLUSION

Indirect service learning within the e-service-learning modality was successful for their courses. However, there are some considerations that must be taken into account for future use. As previously mentioned, their community engagement and service-learning work falls under the guise of critical service learning and engagement (Mitchell, 2008, 2013, 2017). Would this modality have been a success had they not had prior relationships with their community partners? I.e., would directors of the community programs have been so

eager to participate in interviews had they not been aware of their previous community engagement work with the Whately community? Spending the last five years using service-learning and community engagement practices that center social justice, redistribution of power, and authentic relationships with the community created trust that allowed for the students' project to be received without trepidation. Another consideration is whether or not this use of indirect service learning in the e-service modality allows for the rich trans-formative experiences that are at the root of service learning and critical service learning (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Mitchell, 2013). Although previous research does indicate that indirect service learning and e-service learning can have an impact on student learning, there is not research on if the two together can have the transformative experience as defined by Mitchell (2013).

The greatest lesson Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown learned with using this service-learning approach is it allowed them to empower their students to take the initiative on the group project—the website for the community. Their workload began to diminish as the semester progressed, because by mid-semester, the students were taking the lead and Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown were simply there to support and encourage. Although they both prefer face-to-face classes as it allows for them to connect with their students directly, and allows for engagement with community partners, if in the future circumstances did not allow for a face-to-face class, they would utilize the techniques described in this paper again, especially if they could be used within a synchronous class rather than an asynchronous one.

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