
Developing Community Partnerships to Promote Social Justice-Related Learning Outcomes

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my gratitude for Dr. Theresa Castor, whose guidance and expertise was integral to the development of this project.

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Introduction

Each year, students enrolled in Communication 435: Integrated Marketing Communication (COMM 435) at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside (UWP) participate in a community-based partnership with *Focus on Community*, a small non-profit organization headquartered in Racine, Wisconsin, that strives to “unite our community in an effort to prevent substance abuse and inspire healthy life choices” (Focus, 2021, para 1). This upper division course provides students with the opportunity to apply concepts of integrated marketing, a primary objective of which is to create multi-media materials with a unified strategy to maximize return on investment for companies and organizations. In collaboration with *Focus*, students work to develop materials that contribute to a marketing objective, defined anew each year. *Focus* has a long history in our community, having celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2019, and the reach of their programming within the region is significant. The expressed mission, vision, and values that *Focus* upholds through their programming, and the general make-up of the community *Focus* serves, makes the community-based learning (CBL) experience in COMM 435 a productive case study through which to explore the relationship between experiential learning and social justice-related learning outcomes.

Community-based service learning is a high-impact practice (HIP) that fosters a reciprocal relationship between students and the organizations they serve (Anderson et. al., 2019, Blewitt et. al., 2018, Fougère et. al., 2020, Kilgo et al., 2015). Though many definitions exist to characterize HIPs, I proceed in this case study with the understanding that a pedagogical practice is high impact if it is effective and “correlated with positive educational results for students from widely varying backgrounds” (Kuh et. al., 2008, p. 1). The skills learned through HIPs

tend to be transportable and affect a range of student outcomes, such as higher order thinking and relationship building skills (Coker et. al., 2017; Blewitt et. al., 2018). For this reason, HIPs like community-based learning are both highly instructional and highly relational. The breadth and depth of the CBL experience enables dialogic communication among all parties (i.e., the community partner and the students, the students and myself, myself and the community partner). When established early, and modeled frequently, dialogic communication within the relational dynamics of a CBL partnership can bring pedagogical and social justice orientations into alignment.

This case study examines my experience teaching students in COMM 435 as a CBL course and advances two primary arguments pertaining to the development of social justice-oriented learning outcomes in community-based partnerships: 1) part-

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nering with organizations that pursue social justice generates educational resources that foster justice-related learning outcomes in the classroom, and 2) effectively teaching social justice in a CBL experience is best modeled through an ethos of social justice in which all parties sustain a dialogic relationship and co-create the parameters of the CBL project. To support these arguments, I discuss how dialogic communication is modeled and assessed in COMM 435 through an Active Listening learning objective and the structure of critical reflection with respect to the students’ CBL project. In the following sections, I elaborate on best practices for pursuing social justice-related learning outcomes in community-based partnerships by first developing my line of inquiry and description of practice. I then conclude with implications and next steps for educators looking to develop community partnerships that promote social justice-related learning outcomes in their own service-learning courses. This case study illustrates how dialogic communication encourages

students to be assertive, yet respectful and open, as they collaborate with the community partner.

Line of Inquiry

Community-based learning depends on the alignment between the pedagogical objectives of the curriculum and the objectives associated with service learning, which may include social justice-oriented learning outcomes. Through community service, students “become active learners, bringing skills and information from community work and integrating them with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). Developed by Rhoads’ (1997), the concept of *critical* service learning has evolved to describe “academic service-learning experiences with a social justice orientation” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51; see also Rice and Pollack, 2000 and Rosenberger, 2000). As tools for encouraging “students to see themselves as agents of social change,” critical service-learning experiences position service as a means of addressing injustice in communities (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). With this perspective, community-based learning can pursue service to social justice outcomes along with service to individual organizations.

Numerous studies have indicated that participation in service learning and CBL opportunities are linked with myriad diversity-related outcomes (Jones & Abes, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Engberg & Fox, 2011; Brownell & Swaner, 2010). In addition, there is a connection between reflective learning opportunities, the development of critical thinking skills, and moral reasoning growth (Nelson Laird et. al., 2011). The insights produced by these prior works have helped to decipher which *specific* pedagogical practices positively affected student growth within the context of precollege or other institutional factors. Nevertheless, questions remain about how these practices function within co-curricular experiences, primarily HIPs like service learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Braxton et. al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seirfert et. al., 2010; Kilgo et. al., 2015). Critical service learning, in part, addresses these questions and strengthens the connection between community-based partnerships and student growth.

Service learning is a practice in balance, wherein the needs of the students are leveraged against the needs of the community partner. Ideally, that partnership operates as a training ground for the development of students’ skills and yields positive results even in instances when the tangible deliverables produced by

the students are sub-par. Recommendations from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) support this argument. Aimed at developing work, life, and citizenship skills, the AAC&U advises that postsecondary institutions pursue four learning outcomes geared toward student success, including the goal that students gain “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning” (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise, 2007, p. 3). As part of their journey to gain knowledge of human cultures and to cultivate personal responsibility, students must actively listen and attend to new information and perspectives. A skillset that alters the mental “gatekeeper” for new information, active listening plays a prominent role in the degree to which students who are exposed to the complexities and unpredictability of their surrounding communities through the completion of a CBL project may demonstrate proficiency with the AAC&U’s advice for engaging successful service learning.

My approach to service learning in COMM 435 expressly prioritizes the alignment between curricular and social justice-oriented learning outcomes by assessing the degree to which students enact active listening with their CBL partner, which is measured and modeled through dialogic communication. In the next section, I elaborate on my description of practice, which outlines the Active Listening learning objective included in my syllabus and my expectations for dialogic communication between all parties. Both classroom practices take advantage of the educational resources made available through partnership with an organization that itself pursues social justice.

Description of Practice

In the two years that I’ve been supervising students in COMM 435, they have produced multi-media marketing materials for *Focus*, including a brief video spot to be aired in local movie theaters, strategic plans for social media use, and long form copy for distribution in newsletters and on the organization’s website, all with the purpose of increasing revenue and/or marketshare for *Focus*. The CBL project in COMM 435 is both intensive and extensive, spanning the entire semester and providing the foundation for every formal assessment in the course. Students are asked to engage in critical analytical thought, creative production of materials, oral presentation of and advocacy for their work (i.e., a “pitch”), and self-reflective exercises, all the while serving *Focus*’ expressed need to increase public interest in their programming. To develop a social

justice orientation in our community partnership, I have enacted two primary pedagogical practices: 1) an Active Listening learning objective in the syllabus, and 2) a purposeful structure of critical reflection.

Active Listening Learning Objective

Students in COMM 435 pursue an Active Listening learning objective: “To effectively gather client needs, internalize those needs, and create an advertising message for the client.” As a precursor to my students fulfilling this objective, I engage with it myself. Before my first semester teaching CBL began, I met multiple times with two representatives from *Focus* to develop a shared approach to the course that links my own pedagogical objectives with *Focus*’s mission to serve at-risk communities in Racine. In that first meeting, I asked several questions (mostly open-ended) soliciting information about the kind of work *Focus* does, what kind of project they would want the students to do for them, how they felt they could help the students, and how much face time with the students and/or small work groups they’d be interested in sustaining. Through this discussion, I learned that they were most interested in 1) increasing their fundraising within the community, 2) emphasizing that the organization was aimed at substance abuse prevention rather than treatment, and 3) highlighting specific programs. That meeting helped me to understand the phase of transition the organization found themselves in, as they had purchased a new facility and were scheduled to be moving locations just after commemorating their 40th anniversary. I have repeated this process ahead of each semester, tailoring my syllabus, course schedule, and lesson plans accordingly. The positive results of that proactive communication paid dividends, as pursuing the active learning objective myself enabled me to use my community partner as an educational resource and develop a class that would provide students the opportunity to participate in a social justice-oriented mission.

Once the semester began, I laid out the expectations for how the students would satisfy the Active Listening learning objective in their direct communication with representatives from *Focus*, as well as with volunteers and program enrollees. For example, in my first semester teaching COMM 435, one of the components of the students’ CBL project was to create a promotional video for *Focus* to use as part of its 40th anniversary fundraising efforts. This video included “talking head” interviews with program coordinators and footage of enrollees as they participated in the programs. The challenge of making the video was not just in capturing, editing, and finalizing the footage,

but also in developing a strategic plan for what the video would highlight, coordinating schedules with interviewees, handling requests to reschedule, and ensuring that release forms had been completed by any individuals who were videotaped, particularly minors. To navigate those challenges effectively, students met with representatives from *Focus* ahead of time to ascertain how the organization envisioned the video, who they felt would be appropriate representatives to interview, which program(s) they wanted to showcase, and when it would be most convenient to request time with the volunteers. These interactions between the students and community partner, wherein students were assessed for their active listening, facilitated the expectation that the students interact with our client in a dialogic way as opposed to a top-down hierarchical communication strategy wherein students dictated the terms of the project or vice versa.

To assess the students’ success in meeting the Active Listening objective in this case, I supervised meetings between the students and *Focus* representatives and held informal class discussions at the start of each class meeting about progress and challenges. In doing so, I was not only able to evaluate their proficiency with the Active Listening learning objective itself, but also redirect students or help them identify how their actions may have exacerbated or mitigated any challenges they faced in completing the video. For this reason, the Active Listening learning objective worked in tandem with the dialogic interactions between students and their client, client and instructor, instructor and students. As a result, we achieved meaningful, intersectional alignment between course learning objectives, learning outcomes, assessment opportunities, and a social justice orientation.

Structure of Critical Reflection

Another strategy for achieving alignment between my pedagogical objectives and social justice-oriented learning objectives was requiring tiered pre-, mid-, and post-project written reflections from students, each of which captured a different dimension of how students claimed personal responsibility and took ownership of their participation in the project. The pre-project reflection is graded as complete/incomplete and requires the students to respond to three prompts:

- After meeting with representatives from *Focus on Community*, list and justify three preliminary IMC (integrated marketing communication) priorities that you think would be worth pursuing as we move forward with developing our CBL project.

- What are two potential pitfalls that you predict may become an issue in this project?
- List three goals you have for yourself as an active contributor for this project and explain how each will enable you to be successful in your given role(s).

This initial pre-project reflection is also an opportunity early in the semester for me to mine key information about how each student relates to their group members, the mission at *Focus*, and the broader community. Upon receiving the reflections, I informally tabulate categories of comments, which either touch directly on or circumvent the issues of diversity and socio-economic justice inherent in serving a non-profit like *Focus*. In other words, if students fail to mention the ways in which their own biases or prior experiences may color their perceptions of the individuals served by *Focus*, I consider ways to actively broach that subject during an in-class debrief. If students do mention these or related concerns in their reflections, I use their comments as a starting point to have a more in-depth discussion.

The mid-project reflection functions as a check-point wherein students are asked to confront the strengths and weaknesses of their performance and that of their fellow group members. This reflection is also graded as complete/incomplete and initially tasks students with filling out a class-wide editorial calendar. On this calendar, each student articulates various tasks that must be completed, for what purpose (in the context of the larger CBL project) the task is suited, as well as deadlines for completion. Among other things, the editorial calendar is a tool of accountability that lets students identify and prioritize all key tasks associated with their section of the project, which engenders the expectation of personal responsibility. In addition to filling out the editorial calendar, students are asked to respond to two additional prompts:

- Name and discuss two ways that you have demonstrated commitment to the project and supported your group members in your collective effort to complete the project successfully and on time. Identify at least one way you can improve in this regard.
- Discuss the respective performance of your group members. Have they been supportive participants in the development of the project thus far? Has your group successfully managed the pitfalls you anticipated in the pre-project reflection?

Of the three project-based reflection opportunities, the mid-project reflection encourages the students to look inward in order to recognize their own agency in enhancing the project, as well as the relational dynamics within their work group.

The post-project reflection opportunity constitutes the self- and peer-evaluation and critical reflection sections of the students' Final Capstone Portfolio that they submit in lieu of a final exam. Students are invited to draw from their prior reflections when framing or illustrating either the evaluation or critical reflection portions of the portfolio. In critical reflection section, students are not only asked to provide a detailed, well-illustrated critique of their participation in the campaign, group dynamics, command of course concepts, and quality of performance, but also to consider the ways in which their work pursued *Focus*' mission and vision. Students are expected to write candidly and address points of strength and weakness in their performance. In fact, students who identify and illustrate ways they may not have adequately achieved these goals typically receive full marks in this section of the rubric. As this is the final opportunity I have to assess them, my feedback is oriented less on mechanics and more on the broader takeaways of the project and their experience working with *Focus*. Ultimately, the structure of critical reflection throughout the project leads students through speculative and reflective exercises as they co-create the project experience with their community partner.

Implications and Next Steps

This case study reveals insight for how best to link service learning with the promotion of social justice and improve student outcomes. In the preceding pages, I advanced two primary arguments for how to develop community partnerships that promote social justice-related learning outcomes: 1) partnering with organizations that pursue social justice generates educational resources that foster justice-related learning outcomes in the classroom, and 2) effectively teaching social justice in a CBL experience is best modeled through an ethos of social justice in which all parties sustain a dialogic relationship and co-create the parameters of the CBL project. Both arguments illustrate the imperative to involve all parties (student, instructor, and community partner) in the collaborative development of the service-learning experience through sustained dialogic communication. Moreover, formal assessment of students' active listening and purposeful reflection codifies the ways in which dialogic, co-creative critical service-learning experience improves student

growth in critical thinking and moral reasoning.

Importantly, this case study reveals the importance of modeling an ethos of social justice in the development and implementation of the course as a method of teaching social justice-related learning outcomes. Service learning necessarily leverages the needs of the students against the needs of their community partner. The role of the instructor as intermediary and guide may be widened to include that of leader, exemplifying the communication behaviors that define the nature of the community partnership. Completion of a service-learning project does not itself guarantee that students have internalized the goals of a social justice-oriented mission. Assessing the process of completion, however, may capture the specific communication strategies that characterize a critical service-learning experience, one in which students have internalized the goals of a social justice-oriented mission rather than merely producing materials that run parallel to a social justice-related mission.

Establishing an ethos of social justice through the development of community partnerships lies in both the pre-conceived structure of learning objectives and other classroom practices as well as how that structure is enacted. Through the process of completing the CBL project, students develop work, life, and citizenship skills, all of which prepare students for the complexities and unpredictability they will encounter in their respective community/communities. Therefore, adequate assessment of social justice-related learning outcomes will focus less on the content of the CBL project (i.e., writing mechanics or form) and more on the communication skills acquired and enacted through their relationship with the community partner.

A co-creative community-based service-learning experience motivates students to claim personal responsibility and agency. Through completion of the project, and the development of a dialogic community partnership, students recognize the successes and challenges that defined their experience and use that knowledge to positively impact others. It is challenging, but such challenges make critical service-learning experiences integral tools for student growth in high impact practices. Looking ahead, proactive and dialogic collaboration between instructor and community partner, community partner and students, students and instructor, may enable more fruitful outcomes for students as they learn to be more productive members of the communities to which they belong. ■

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