

Six Courses, Three Degree Programs, One Project – Are We Nuts?

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This session describes the process of developing a cross-disciplinary service learning project that includes Business, Visual Communications, and Mass Communications courses. Classes in these areas work together to create ready-to-use, multi-media advertising campaigns for non-profit organizations in Harford County, Maryland, north of Baltimore. The steps involved, the successes, and the problem areas will be discussed.

The American Association of Community Colleges defines service learning as “the combination of community service and classroom instruction, with a focus on critical, reflective thinking as well as personal and civic responsibility” (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2002, p.5). This project facilitated service learning through a partnership with a non-profit organization. The goal was mutual gain: an opportunity to integrate information learned in the classroom with the development of an advertising campaign which would meet the needs of the clients.

Many non-profit organizations do not have large advertising budgets, but have important messages to relay to the public. In the summer of 2000, Professor Sandie Ferriter received a phone call from the Bel Air Volunteer Fire Company to ask if students could develop an advertising campaign to recruit new volunteers. Ferriter’s *Advertising and Sales Promotion* class deals with the business side, not the creative side, of advertising. Ferriter asked two colleagues, Jim McFarland, in the Visual Communications area, and Wayne Hepler, in Mass Communications, if they would join her in the development of the campaign. The three met several times during the summer with representatives from the fire company and conveyed what types of media could be used, such as brochures, print ads, and TV and radio commercials. After much discussion, the first collaborative campaign was born. All subsequent campaigns have followed the same general pattern.

In the fall semester, the *Advertising and Sales Promotion* students are divided into groups and take on the role of account executives. They became the liaison between the client and the creative staff comprised of Mass Communications and Visual Communications students. The client visits the class early in the semester when the campaign goals are identified: Ferriter's account executives create a slogan and work with McFarland's and Hepler's creative staff that develop the target audience, creative strategy, and campaign materials. This team approach is supported by Barbara Holland and Sherril Gelmon, who write, "the characteristics associated with service learning success include...mutually agreed upon goals." In addition, "Success is defined and outcomes are measured in both institutional and community teams" (1998, p.198). Academic outcomes are part of the objectives for all Harford Community College courses and have to be completed in order for the service learning project to be successful. For example, an expected outcome for the fire company was the advertising campaign which would inform the community of its need for volunteers. Holland's and Gelmon's third characteristic of success is "...an educational component with clear consequences for the community and the institution" (p.198). For the students, this means an opportunity to work with clients in a realistic situation. Students see the print ads that they create in the local newspaper, and the TV and radio commercials that air on local TV and radio stations. "They learn to communicate, compromise, and develop a campaign to meet the needs of a client," says Ferriter. "In some cases the communication, through email or attending the other classes, went smoothly; in other cases, poor communication resulted in less satisfactory results."

The ensuing phases of the project include applied audio, video, and writing projects produced by three or more classes in the Mass Communications Program. The introductory audio production class is responsible for a public service announcement (PSA), which it learns to produce via the service learning campaign. According to Professor John W. Eby, who coordinates the Agape Center for Service and Learning at Messiah College, it is just such a project that can "subvert" service learning because service becomes the "means to an end" rather than the end itself (1998, p.2). Hepler was relieved to find that this wasn't his experience. "Service learning must indeed promote volunteerism," says Hepler, "but if it is also a

contrived assignment in class, students will wonder why they're doing something out of line with a course description just to be altruistic. One of the premier strengths of service learning is that it can promote learning in a variety of curriculums, and promote community service at the same time." Accordingly, service learning surveys given to all students involved in the project indicated no conflict of purpose and were predominantly positive.

Deadlines among participating classes can create a time crunch for the service learning professors. Though Hepler had been involved with the client since the first meetings three-to-four months earlier, his students couldn't produce PSAs without copy points from Ferriter's class. In addition, students needed appropriate time to learn the necessary production skills and to find audio talent, since the PSAs are intended to air on local radio. Such complications are used to teach the realities of the field. The visit to the county humane society, for example, was an eye-opening experience for many audio students. "They picked right up on the benefit of a well-informed producer, to not only the humane society, but to the animals, as well," says Hepler. "It was memorable and reinforced the merit of service learning." This runs contrary to the notion that service learning instructors "can anticipate greater heterogeneity in student learning outcomes and compromises to faculty control" compared to traditional courses with their "constant learning strategies" (Howard, 2001, p.18).

Mass Communications video students tend to find more favorable conditions for their productions. Since service learning takes place in an upper-level videography and editing course taught year-round, more advanced students address the Ferriter class material than Hepler's audio class. The video PSA is also the final project, so there's more time to produce the material. Finally, the visuals can be less difficult to obtain since students have natural video opportunities inspired by the client, such as the volunteer firefighters who scheduled a house-burning training exercise with the project in mind.

In the spring semester, the upper level *Writing for Electronic Media* course develops copy for the brochure phase of the project. Like the audio class, student writers have a real-life deadline to meet in order to facilitate McFarland's Visual Communications students, who produce brochures immediately upon the

copy's arrival. In fact, the writing class has been the tougher fit for the project, since a brochure project was never required before the service learning campaign, and the brochure assignment comes between the more natural transition from audio to video copy. But that, too, has proven a benefit because a brochure requires significant visualizing on the part of the writer, who would frequently work with an artist in an agency environment, which Hepler points out. As in the audio class, the writing students complete survey forms before and after the brochure assignment, but the writers delay completion of the second survey until they see the finished brochure from the design class weeks later. This enables the students to not only see the finished product, but to reflect on it as well, a standard component of service learning instruction. Finally, the print media design is done in the *Introduction to Graphic Communication* and *Graphic Design* classes. Once the campaign is developed by Ferriter's *Advertising and Sales Promotion* class, and approved by the client, work begins on designing print media, such as brochures, newspaper ads, and promotional flyers. For design students, the process offers many opportunities for "enhanced academic learning" (Howard, 2001, p.26). Because they are working for an actual client, the course content is more relevant.

The assignment addresses the client needs and includes: information from the client, the creative strategy and slogan developed by Ferriter's class, the copy provided by Hepler's writing class, intermediate and final design deadlines, specifications for presentation to the client, and contact numbers and email addresses for all involved. When the project is assigned, the process of working in a promotional "agency" as part of a creative team is discussed. Work groups are formed for the completion of the assignment, and each group is encouraged to discuss the project with their contacts in other classes participating in the project. McFarland regularly invites Ferriter and Hepler to his classes to discuss their phases of the project.

Effective group work is important to the outcome of the design assignment. The members of the group must work cooperatively to complete the assignment professionally and on time. Each group creates a production calendar including all of their deadlines and project responsibilities. The calendar demonstrates that the group has a realistic schedule and that the workload is fairly distributed. Students are typically good judges of equity of work and, with the help of assigned intermediate deadlines, anticipate

what it will take to get the job done. Finding the appropriate grouping of students is dependent on the skills and personalities of the members of the class. However, the most effective groups have had three members.

The environment in the class is that of a creative studio. The class as a whole reviews the work of each group regularly throughout the creative process and offers positive comments and suggestions for improvements. When possible, the client is included in one or more reviews, which allows students to hear the client's perspective first-hand and have their questions answered. The client visit can also reduce revisions at the end of the process.

When the work is finished, the designs are presented to the client. Students are graded on the quality of their work and the effectiveness of their group interaction. Each student writes a reflection on the benefits and challenges of working on a project for the community organization, including assessing how well their group worked together. In every project, the students learn much more than if they had simply done an exercise in class. As Bringle and Hatcher state, "...educational outcomes are enriched, deepened, and expanded when student learning is more engaged, active and relevant" (1999, p.179). The most successful projects have resulted in the print materials being used by the client for many years.

"These projects have been exciting and educational," says McFarland, "assisting local non-profit organizations and involving students in their community. The key to success is strong communication between the participating individuals: faculty members, the students in their groups, the groups in the different classes, and, most importantly, between the creative 'agency' and the client. With a focus on community and effective communication, the possibilities are endless."

As of spring semester, 2005, five campaigns have been completed: the Bel Air Volunteer Fire Company, RSVP Connections (a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities), the Havre de Grace Maritime Museum, the Ripken Museum (the Ripken family baseball museum), and the Humane Society of Harford County. Non-profit organizations now initiate contact with Ferriter, McFarland and Hepler for assistance in developing promotional campaigns.

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