

Service Learning Goes High Tech

Project Bases Service Learning for Web Design

Jesus Diaz-Northwest Vista College, San Antonio Texas

Session Information

This session will provide a case study of a web design class with a service learning project incorporated as the final group project. The session will outline the service learning project, revealing successes and challenges and how each can be leveraged to further build upon and enhance community service thru a real world project. Simple techniques for engaging the community will be shared and explained; as well as how to maintain those relationships thru surveys and partner communication.

Service Learning is often not associated with technology and can even be viewed as incompatible. In reality technology projects provide a rich scenario for allowing students to develop communicative skills often lacking in technology courses. The challenges a student faces provide a real world perspective. Students are responsible for meeting with the partner and gathering necessary information to insure project success. After the initial meeting students design a non-working composite that the partner must approve. Based on the approved composite students develop a working prototype before the final deliverable is produced and presented. The community partner and the students develop a reciprocal relationship that is of mutual benefit. Students also benefit from the group work and collaborative nature of the project while working with peers. Partners gain valuable knowledge about the industry that can serve them in the future if they do hire a professional web designer. The relationship that is built increases the value of learning and appreciation for community colleges and educators.

Real world experience for students

The multimedia department at Northwest Vista College has a professional advisory board that consults our department on trends and industry needs. One crucial need was client communication skills. Graduates of the multimedia program lacked enhanced communication skills needed to interact effectively with clients and co-workers. To insure this need was being met it would be necessary to have students become involved in a project that allowed for contact with a real client thus developing basic client skills and a better understanding of the web design industry.

Having worked professionally as a web designer and developer for over a decade, I felt compelled to provide students with a similar experience as the one I received thru working with real clients. The solution was to allow students to interact with non-profit organizations in the community who often have little or no funds to hire a professional web designer or consultant to assist them in the concept and creation of their website.

What you will learn

Thru this session attendees will learn the process necessary to initiate a similar project based service learning experience for students. Attendees will learn how to use simple techniques and readily available resources such as email to attract partners in the community. Attendees will walk thru the different pieces of the four week project and learn valuable insights that can increase the success of their own project based service learning modules.

Plans for the future

In Spring 2008 students in IMED 1316 Web Design I, finished the third round of service learning projects for this class; students of this class have now served 12 different community partners. Some of these partners have found it necessary to continue using these students skill and have actually hired several of the students to work as contractors on their developed sites. Multimedia students have begun to recognize the value of such projects especially when it comes to building valuable portfolio items that are actually being used by a partner. There is a shift from previous classes where students were hesitant in participating in the projects to students actually wanting to take the class to work with a real client as part of their web design. Students have had many positive things to say about their experiences in the project and have expressed how the project not only increased their awareness on a community need and issue but also allowed them to put their newly learned web design skills to the test.

Currently the Multimedia Department at Northwest Vista College is planning to not only offer this type of service learning project in its classes but to create a practicum environment where students would run and manage a Media Agency that would serve non-profit organizations. Students would produce a wide variety of projects for our community partners while gaining valuable experience. Projects would range from websites, animations, user interfaces, e-commerce, blogs, podcasts, portals and rss feeds. This Media Agency lab would create a reciprocal partner base for our students allowing them to use their skills from their multimedia classes that range from audio, video to digital media and design. Community partners would have a location where they could take advantage of cutting edge innovations and media production that would be normally out of reach for non-profit organizations.