

Engaging Students as Agents of Positive Change
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Description of Session

This session will detail the strategies employed in two different courses that required service activities: an Advanced Expository Writing class and an Environmental Literature course. While the later of the two courses gave students options for choosing 2-3 activities geared more toward civic engagement or environmental activism, the former involved a full semester of various service learning activities, some of which were required for the whole class, and others which were individually selected. Discussion in this session will address the difference between service-learning and civic engagement activities in ways that are relevant for other disciplines, not just English, and all with a focus on inspiring and encouraging students to see themselves as agents of change in the world, and not merely passive spectators.

Because my approach is to help students see themselves as empowered, when so many messages in the world make them feel otherwise, part of my pedagogy involves giving students choices about some of the service and civic activities with which they can make effective contributions to their chosen communities. Based on years of teaching, I've often found that most students perform better when they are interested and committed to an area of personal interest, and so I really try to allow them freedom, while at the same time, helping direct the development of the project so that it fulfills the service requirements. Giving students the ability to choose their individual projects – an act of community service and designing their own research based, public awareness campaign – is certainly more difficult than the group and class projects they all do together during the first part of the semester, but the sense of fulfillment and accomplishment many students derive from their chosen areas makes the extra work well worth it; I would like to share some of the inspiring work my students did and some of the strategies that help me keep track of their progress.

This session will combine presentation of ideas and activities with time for participants to reflect on how they could develop similar strategies for student empowerment. In addition to this interactive format, I would also like to provide visuals of the kind of public documents they created for one of the major semester activities with one community partner. Since my most effective Service-Learning and Civic Engagement activities are ones that guide students through a number of stages, I'll have with me a number of handouts to share with participants as models to use and tailor to their own course learning objectives. Although they involve writing, as both of these courses are writing based, they are still effective techniques for other areas of study, as much of Service-Learning pedagogy affirms the value of written reflection. Even in courses that are not, strictly speaking, writing courses, the kinds of pre and post reflection writing I asks students to do are relevant for any area of service-learning. Part of my presentation will provide examples of the kinds of pre and post reading and writing activities.

Foundations/Motivations

This Workshop would be especially appropriate for faculty who do not have a designated Service-Learning Program or office at their college. The reality is that my approach to service and civic engagement is shaped as much by the situation at my institution as it is my own student centered teaching philosophy. As Co-Chair of a Service-Learning Task Force at my community college who has tried to get our administration interested in developing an official program, I serve as both one of the few faculty actually initiating service-learning and civic responsibility in the courses and one of a handful trying to help other faculty to do so. Asking students to engage in community service or civic work outside the classroom is therefore a difficult thing to do in some cases, especially where the “extra work” is initially met with some resistance. Trying to be innovative in this way, where so few students have been exposed to the idea of service-learning, is the condition that informs

much of what I have done in my courses; in fact, this institutional context is probably a major reason why I have developed this approach as student directed and student empowering – partly, but not only as a means of selling them on the value of the extra work. (I still genuinely believe that each one can make a difference and benefits from seeing him or herself as empowered). So this workshop would be helpful to faculty in similar situations, and my discussion addresses how to help students see the benefit of what they are being asked to do.

Although I believe in the intrinsic value of service, the various responsibilities many students at a community college must juggle, often make them less than eager to “have to find time for service” and so one reason for approaching what began as service-learning, now as a form of civic engagement, was to empower students and to help them see themselves as powerful agents of positive change. And this has shaped my pedagogy. I think teaching students that each one is an important and potentially powerful agent for positive change in the world around them is the most important lesson they can learn in college. And I believe that the most crucial factor in providing students with a fulfilling service-learning experience, one that will engage them in the service as well as the subject, is to allow them to determine and design as much of their projects as possible. Giving students choice affirms my respect for their interests and ideas. I continue to be inspired by the causes and concerns to which they contribute, and humbled by their appreciation for what the class allowed them to do – especially the student who, by his own self directed project, saved a non-profit agency \$17,000 (come to the talk and you’ll hear how.)

What Participants Can Expect to Gain from this Session

The objective of this workshop is to provide participants with strategies for developing effective Service-Learning projects in which students become actively engaged in determining their service. From the examples of my student’s work, participants can expect to come away with a sense of the kinds of activities they can use to empower their own

students as agents of change and a sense of how these activities can be used to achieve the specific learning outcomes of their courses; they can also expect to receive a number of handouts I use to help clarify group and individual projects, a bibliography of sources they can use to inspire students as agents of change, a list of activities my students chose for their self-directed area of “making a positive change” and a series of questions they can use to reproduce the same kind of student empowering approach in other courses.

Future Plans for Course and Community Partners

I am currently redesigning these courses to be web enhanced and will be teaching the two courses in smart rooms, equipped with internet access so that I can more easily present to students such things as web pages for our non-profit community partners, examples of others’ service projects, examples of online activism (for instance appeals and petitions, and other forms of public writing) and a list of other activities and agencies for students to use in their more self directed choices for service and civic action. This part is new for me, and I am thrilled by the possibilities this enhancement will offer to the class. While previously I have the community partner either come into our class and meet students or talk to them via a conference call, I think the possibilities in a smart room will make the scheduling of such exchanges between partner and students much easier.