

Connecting Academic Disciplines and Community through Service Learning: A Model from Sociology and Biology

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Abstract

Among the challenges facing students interested in service learning are the constraints put on these students' extracurricular time by a myriad of commitments. In addition, service learning has become part of many different courses, causing students to find themselves simultaneously enrolled in multiple courses that have service learning components. We report on our ongoing experiences in developing and offering interdisciplinary service learning opportunities to students in Sociology and Biology courses in a way that creates an environment of greater accessibility to service learning projects for interested but time-constrained students and offers service learning opportunities that are meaningful in tying together the learning outcomes for multiple disciplines. This work demonstrates service learning's efficacy as a tool that serves community needs and enhances course content as well as creates important connections across disciplines that generate broadly-educated, civic-minded learners.

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Introduction

As with many public institutions, explicit in the mission of Northampton Community College (NCC) is the notion that we seek “to provide excellent, accessible and comprehensive learning experiences in partnership with the dynamic, diverse communities we serve.” To that end, administrators, student services personnel, and faculty alike foster partnerships with community organizations to encourage our students to bridge the gap between college classes and civic engagement. One tool that many faculty use to fulfill this mission is service learning, a student experience that, at its core, connects community engagement to classroom learning. Beyond simple volunteerism, service learning “allows the student to participate in service activities that meet community needs and at the same time provide reflection opportunities in order to gain further understanding of course content....”

The reflection of NCC’s mission in service learning’s definition has led to the success of this tool at our institution. For example, during the Fall 2009 semester, over 200 students (approximately 2.5% of full-time equivalent students) in a dozen disciplines were involved in service learning activities as part of their courses. This number increased to over 300 students in 15 disciplines during the Fall 2010 semester, with students engaging in more than 2,000 hours of service for more than 85 different community partners. Recognizing the efficacy of service learning, NCC has been proactive in its institutional support of this form of instruction by employing a full-time Service Learning Administrator in the Office of Student Affairs. The Service Learning Administrator maintains contact with faculty who use service learning and works as a liaison among faculty, students, and community partners. In addition, she oversees content of links to service learning on the NCC web-page, providing fast access to a list of active community partners, files of relevant paperwork, and answers to frequently asked questions. The Service Learning Administrator also conducts institution-wide assessment of service learning’s utilization and efficacy, and she visits classrooms regularly to explain service learning to students, working to connect students and faculty with appropriate projects.

This ever-increasing popularity of service learning has both benefits and challenges for the institution and the students. The college benefits in a number of ways; in particular, student and faculty civic engagement fosters positive relationships with the community that the college serves. In addition, the educational goals that the college sets for its students are achieved in a broader and more practical context (Keen & Hall 2009). Students benefit both in and out of the classroom through the better understanding of course material (Waskiewicz 2001), the improvement of interpersonal

skills, the exploration of potential careers, and the enhancement of self-concept (Miller & Gonzales 2009; Prentice & Garcia 2000).

The burgeoning embrace of service learning pedagogy by institutions, faculty, and students is not without its challenges. While service learning has an inherent flexibility and can be incorporated into nearly any course (Spiezio et al 2005), its exploration by faculty often precedes an institutional plan or a systematic manner in which institution-community partnerships are established (Sandmann et al 2009), although, thankfully, this is not the case at NCC. These hurdles can impede the development of long-term and equitable relationships between college and community (Reardon 2006). In addition, ad hoc commitment by students to participate in service-learning experiences is affected by the students' level of motivation (Serow 1991). That is, civic-minded students are likely to engage in service learning, while marginally or poorly motivated students are often more difficult to recruit (JKL & ER, personal observations). This hurdle may be overcome if service learning components of courses are optional and prevent marginal students from feeling overwhelmed (Jones 2002) or if the motivation for participating in the project can be found in the students' motivation to help others or to develop career opportunities for themselves (Madsen 2004).

Among the most significant challenges facing students who are interested in service learning are the constraints put on these students' extracurricular time by employment, family, and a myriad of other commitments. In addition, service learning has become an optional part of many different courses, creating a scenario where civic-minded students increasingly find themselves simultaneously enrolled in multiple courses that have service learning components. The problem of offering such opportunities to students without overwhelming them has not gone unnoticed by faculty from a number of disparate institutions (e.g., Williams et al 2002; O'Byrne & Alva 2002; Posey & Quinn 2009), whose solutions to the problem are likewise disparate.

In what might be considered a "top down" solution to engaging students in service learning that crosses disciplines, many institutions have embraced the pedagogy of the learning community (e.g., Oates & Leavitt 2003). This solution is top down in that it involves substantial ad hoc commitment by the institution and faculty in order to link curricula and courses and to coordinate faculty and student schedules. The benefits of learning communities are numerous and include, among others, the integration of interconnected themes into teaching and learning, greater retention of marginal students, and increased collaboration among faculty in different disciplines (Zhao & Kuh 2004; Beachboard et al 2011). As with any complex curricular design, however, learning communities are not without their challenges. For example, integrating service learning into the already convoluted curriculum of the learning community introduces another facet of the course(s) that must be planned, executed, and assessed. In addition, the out-of-class service learning experience may be cumbersome for students whose

schedules are already tightly constrained by commitment to the learning community course(s).

Other, “bottom-up” solutions to promoting student involvement in service learning involve less ad hoc institutional commitment and have included limiting required service learning hours (O’Connell 2002); allotting normal classroom time for service hours (Hatcher et al 2002), and; increasing the flexibility in the expectations placed on students who have participated (Posey & Quinn 2009). Here, we report on our experiences in offering service learning opportunities to the busy (and sometimes overwhelmed) students of NCC in Sociology and Biology in a way that draws on the strengths of the learning community while maintaining the flexibility that our time-constrained students need.

Rationale

In our offering service-learning components as part of Sociology and Anthropology courses (ER) and Ecology and Biology courses (JKL), we have found an increasing overlap in those students who choose to do service learning. That is, during any given semester, the students who have participated in service learning as part of a Sociology course have simultaneously participated in service learning as part of an Ecology course. During the Fall 2008 semester, we saw an overlap of ten students among three different courses (Cultural Anthropology, Biology I, and Field Ecology). During the Spring 2009 semester, this number increased to fifteen students in four different courses (Field Ecology, Biology II, Cultural Anthropology, Principles of Sociology). These service opportunities involved different community partners as well as different sets of expectations on our parts as professors.

The extent of the overlap in students performing service learning became clear as we collaborated in a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-funded project that involved one community partner, the Cherry Valley Community Supported Agriculture Initiative (CSA). Over the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years and the Fall 2010 semester, we had 20 students, who, during any given semester, were enrolled simultaneously in a Biology and a Sociology course and completed service learning hours at the farm for both courses. Without creating a formal learning community, we linked the topics covered in our courses and had over 200 students tour, work on, or study CSA models. Despite these efforts, fewer than 10% of our students were able to complete the necessary hours to satisfy service learning for multiple courses. During this timeframe, biology students who could not commit to the farm but did perform service learning worked with 9 other community partners, while sociology students worked with 4 different partners.

Through this experience, we realized that some students who wanted to perform service learning (29 students total) had to choose the service learning component of one course over another, rather than having each course's content enriched by such experiences. We felt that this was neither the best way to provide comprehensive learning experiences to our students nor the best way to serve the communities in which we live and learn.

Program

As a result of our observations, we have drawn on elements of learning community pedagogy to develop a common set of expectations that encourages students to participate in a single interdisciplinary service learning project that satisfies the service learning components for multiple courses rather than to try to engage in multiple disjointed projects for multiple courses during a single semester. The tasks of developing this interdisciplinary service learning project have been threefold. First, we have worked to identify areas of overlapping content in our respective courses that are offered in the same semester. For example, one student learning outcome in Environmental Biology states that students will "recognize anthropogenic influences on ecosystems and . . . identify solutions to these problems." In Cultural Anthropology, students are expected to "recognize what contributes to cultural . . . prejudices . . . and to recognize [them] and work toward diminishing them." That is, a goal of each course is to have students recognize and work toward solving social and environmental problems that are often intertwined, problems such as inequity in wealth and food distribution or resource consumption. The parallel nature of these learning outcomes makes an interdisciplinary fit between these courses seem intuitive; the goal is to ensure that students also make this connection.

Second, we have identified appropriate community partners whose missions overlap the learning outcomes from the target courses. For example, during the Spring 2011 semester, we identified two such "linked partners." The first is the Garden of Giving, a community garden where produce is grown for donation to local food banks and needy charities. Students learn all aspects of food planting, growth, cultivation, and distribution as well as lessons in food security and social equity. The goals of providing reliable food to low-income or food-insecure local residents satisfy the learning outcomes of Cultural Anthropology and Environmental Biology. The second linked partner is the Monroe County Environmental Education Center which maintains a maple syrup operation during the late winter months. The operation involves tree identification, sap collection and processing (lessons that satisfy the outcomes of Biology 2 and Field Ecology), and public workshops that focus on the Native American,

European colonial, and modern cultural history of “sugarbush” operations (satisfying outcomes in Cultural Anthropology and Principles of Sociology).

Once community partners were identified, we met with representatives of these host organizations to ensure that everyone involved understood: the course learning outcomes toward which students were working; the expectations that we had for the students in terms of the number of hours to which they would commit and specific projects in which they would be involved, and; the expectations that the community partners had for the students such as appropriate working attire and behavior.

Third, we reflected on our individual requirements for student service learning projects to determine in what ways our sets of expectations were similar to or different from one another and to develop a common set of clearly assessable expectations that students can fulfill to receive service learning credit for two courses simultaneously. After considerable deliberation, we determined that service learning components of our courses would continue to be optional and that a student would be able to substitute a service learning project for a single hourly examination or major writing project of his or her choosing in each course. This equates to roughly 10 - 15% of the student’s grade in each course.

To receive this credit, the student must perform a minimum of 20 hours of service with an appropriate linked community partner. The 20 hours of service must be completed over the course of the semester during which the student is enrolled simultaneously in our two courses. That is, while we have always encouraged our students to continue to work with community partners beyond a single semester, each student must complete his or her 20-hour project when enrolled in both courses. Throughout the experience, the student must record his or her experiences in a “daily journal.” The daily journal is informal and intended to capture the student’s immediate impressions of the work with the community partners. Through journal entries, a student records his or her duties performed with the community partner and ties those activities with personal values and in-class learning. In this way, the service-learning experience is integrated into the routine of the semester, rather than becoming disjointed from in-class work; such reflection strategies have been shown to increase students’ impressions of course quality and commitment to the service learning experience (Hatcher et al 2004). The daily journal also serves to document the date and number of hours that the student is working with the partner organization and to ensure that the student is meeting expectations.

The formal assessment of the service learning project has taken the form of a “reflection essay” that must be completed prior to the end of the semester. The reflection essay is perhaps the most widely-used summative assessment of service learning projects (Ash et al 2005; Hatcher et al 2004); in particular, ours emphasizes the

connections between the courses that are made via the service learning experience. The student is assessed on commitment to the project as well as on his or her ability to make connections between the courses. (The assessment rubric for this assignment is available from the authors.) As an example, we ask of a student working with the Garden of Giving: has the student learned about local sustainable agriculture and how such local agriculture can lead to more equitable food distribution or increased food security? Has the student related the experience to his or her own life and to the outcomes of the courses?

Through the interdisciplinary projects, we have been able to recruit more students who are interested in civic engagement and to gauge each student's proficiency at the tasks undertaken. While the project is ongoing, we had, during the Spring 2011 semester, eight students who were enrolled simultaneously in our courses and who could not perform separate service learning projects but who committed to participate in interdisciplinary projects. This represented approximately 16% of our total enrolled students in two courses. By requiring a single essay for both courses, the students must reflect on their service experience as it related to both Sociology and Biology; therefore, they inherently tied together in a meaningful way the learning outcomes of both disciplines.

An additional outcome of the current effort has been our increased ability to "re-engage" students who have already performed service learning in one of our courses. For example, students enrolled in Biology who previously took Sociology and performed service learning for that course are more likely to express an interest in performing service learning with a linked community partner during the Biology course. That is, it appears as though the repetition of overlapping course content and service learning opportunities central to this project encourages students to seek opportunities that expressly connect the two disciplines.

Discussion

A fundamental challenge for all faculty, whether or not we use service learning, is helping our students realize what it means to be generally educated, i.e. helping students interconnect the content and concepts they have learned in courses in different disciplines. Perhaps no pedagogical tool accomplishes this goal better than the learning community (e.g. Oates & Leavitt 2003). From co-curricular planning by multiple faculty to co-teaching and co-assessment, the learning community at its best will completely eliminate divisions among multiple courses in different disciplines (Rasmussen & Skinner 1997).

Recognizing the benefits of learning communities, the ultimate goals of this project have been the offer of service learning opportunities that are meaningful in tying together the student learning outcomes for multiple disciplines and; the creation of an environment of greater accessibility to service learning projects for interested but time-constrained students. Exemplified by our work with the Cherry Valley CSA Initiative, the Garden of Giving, and the Monroe County Environmental Education Center, service learning in general can and should create connections between courses in multiple disciplines and between classroom and “real world” experiences. The principle advantage of interdisciplinary service learning to the learning community is its flexibility. That is, we conduct co-curricular planning, co-student-learning experiences, and co-assessment without the requisite co-enrollment of the learning community (Rasmussen & Skinner 1997). This creates an enriched learning environment for all of the students in the courses without significantly reworking the curricula of standalone courses, refining a tightly constrained course schedule, or imposing additional time commitments on students. In addition, working with community partners to identify linked projects has allowed us to “think outside the syllabus” of isolated courses, to reinforce the important interdisciplinary themes present in our courses, and to enhance our relationship as faculty comrades.

We feel that this work demonstrates service learning’s efficacy not only as a tool that serves community needs and enhances course content, but also as a tool that in an innovative way creates for students important access to service learning opportunities and important connections across disciplines that generates broadly-educated, civic-minded learners. To that end, we are working to expand student opportunities for interdisciplinary service learning in other courses. For example, we are exploring partnerships between Sociology and Psychology as well as between Biology and Education that will serve as examples for instructors in any number of disciplines.

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