

Effects of Service Learning on Concept Learning About Small Group Communication

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Interest in service learning has increased in the past two decades, partly due to recent accumulation of knowledge about its beneficial outcomes to participants and society. This manuscript describes a small group basic communication course taught in a service learning format at a small liberal arts college. Qualitative comments as well as quantitative data from an anonymous survey (n = 112) indicate that the small group basic communication service learning course was beneficial to students in terms of aspects including personal development, clarification of career goals, a sense of connectedness with the community, and a sense of fulfillment in assisting others.

Interest in service learning has increased in the past two decades, with hundreds of colleges and universities across the nation implementing service-learning courses into their curriculum. This trend is in part due to recent accumulation of knowledge about its beneficial outcomes to participants and society (Carlan & Rubin, 2005; Eyler, 2002; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005). Although some differences among scholars exist, most agree that the beneficial outcomes of service learning include (a) enhancement of learning of in-class material, (b) personal development, (c) fostering of civic responsibility, and (d) benefits to the community (Eyler, 2002; Madsen & Turnbull, 2005; Waterman, 1997). Furthermore, the authors of a more recent meta-analysis study of service learning in higher education outcomes state that their results provide evidence that community service enhances learning by improving academic understanding of subject matter, skills learned, and ability to apply knowledge and reframe complex social issues (Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to describe a small group communication course taught in a service-learning format at a small liberal arts college. Students (n = 112) were surveyed regarding their service-learning experiences and their impressions of the effects of service learning on various aspects of learning and self-awareness.

Review of Literature

Service Learning

Service learning is a concept that incorporates active experiential learning with community service. The value of service to the community has long been part of the public discourse of the U.S. since as early as 1810 in the writings of Thomas Jefferson and philosopher William James (Waterman, 1977). As for the experiential learning component of service learning,

philosopher and educator John Dewey advocated active discovery of ideas by students themselves as an approach to effective education (Madsen & Turnbull, 2005; Waterman, 1977).

In the 1960s a number of state-government internship programs evolved involving urban or rural studies semester and summer programs. The Kennedy administration saw service learning as a way to tear down barriers between academics and other sectors of society (Jacoby & Associates, 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s, service learning developed conceptually, leading to such organized lists as "Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning" by the National Society for Experiential Education and "Critical Elements of Thoughtful Community Service" by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). More recently, service learning has acquired more support and acknowledgment, as reflected in the Clinton administration's emphasis on service learning, urging academicians to share their knowledge and resources with their community (Jacoby & Associates, 1996).

Enhanced learning of in-class material was noted by various authors who summarized student feedback to service-learning assignments in terms of learning about specific content areas such as public relations (in a public relations service learning project); learning about such general communication concepts and skills as team work, leadership, critical thinking, and the service learners' gain of an holistic understanding of how the content related to the social contexts in which they were placed (Deruosi & Sherwood, 1997; Lubbers, 1998; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005). Similarly, personal development was noted as an outcome by authors gathering information inductively from students who reported that they experienced personal growth in terms of becoming a role model, becoming more responsible, clarifying their value systems, clarifying career goals, and acquiring greater self confidence (Kauffman, Martin, & Weaver, 1992; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005). Fostering civic responsibility was

another induced outcome of service learning: Students reported commitment to social values, future plans to volunteer, efficacy to enable social change, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and preparation to take on the role of an engaged citizen (Bringle, Hatcher, & Games, 1997; Deruosi & Sherwood, 1997; Eyler, 2002; Madsen & Turnbull, 2005). More recently, service learning has been found to have a positive effect on the retention and academic success of a particular at-risk student population: first-generation college students (McKay & Estrella, 2008). Finally, an outcome that is reported by the participating organizations, rather than by the students, is that service learning brings about a value-added dimension to society, that the volunteers' efforts have indeed bettered society, albeit in varying degrees (Deruosi & Sherwood, 1997; Tannenbaum & Berrett, 2005).

The Centrality of Communication in Higher Education

Concurrently, the centrality of communication skills to a successful college education is becoming inevitably clearer to academia (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). On the one hand, mandates from members of society to reduce "mall speak" and incoherence in college graduates and to increase communication effectiveness (Dannels, 2001; Hobgood, 2002; Schneider, 1999; Zernike, 1999) are increasing pressure on academicians and college administrators to focus their attention on improving students' communication skills. On another front, clear communication is not only considered one of the most important skills in the corporate world, according to a survey of Fortune 500 companies (Morreale & Pearson, 2008), but it is also considered central in preparation for professional life (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Parvis, 2001), as well as in fostering skills necessary for citizenship and participation in the democratic process (Morreale & Pearson, 2008).

Additionally, a body of scholarship within academia itself also has shifted the paradigm from that of viewing communication as merely the vehicle of content matter to that of regarding it as an important part of the learning process that enables and furthers students' critical thinking abilities (Coppola & Daniels, 1996; Palmerton, 1992; Silberman, 1996). The increasing awareness among various societal entities extolling communication's role as central to a college education has resulted in institutions of higher learning focusing new attention and being charged with being accountable for teaching effective communication skills to college students (Morreale & Pearson, 2008).

Among the various types of communication skills, small group communication is perhaps the most widely sought skill due to its ubiquity in the career world and society in general (Walton, 2010; Witmer, Silverman &

Gashen, 2009). The college small group communication course typically teaches such core concepts as group cohesion, individual roles (both positive and negative), leadership, conflict, decision-making, and problem-solving, as well as avoidance of groupthink, as core concepts (for example, see Beebe & Masterson, 2015, or Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, L.A., 2002). Learning about the various roles people can play in small groups, conflict approaches and resolution styles, and leadership styles and skills, as well as listening skills, are important in small group communication. In order to acquire these skills, an in-depth understanding of the theory behind the skills is important. Additionally, communication programs are uniquely situated to include this pedagogical approach in their courses due to the fact that the course content, communication, is the focus and medium of most service-learning programs (Novak et al., 2007). For these reasons, many basic courses either focus primarily on small group communication or at least include it in the curriculum; for example a large East Coast university offers over 70 sections of the basic course each year focusing on small group communication.

Project Description

The author taught a small group communication course at a small liberal arts college over a number of years. After teaching the course in the traditional methods with conventional in-class activities, lectures, and assessments of learning during the first couple of years, the author, encouraged by a conference workshop presentation on service learning, decided to teach the course as a service-learning course. Two main issues prompted the author to transform the traditional small group communication course into a service-learning course. At first there was a sense of disconnect between the college students and the local community. The college was situated in a small historical town, which tended to be conservative and proud of its past. For the most part, the city adjusted begrudgingly to change, and there was certain sense of tolerance of the young college students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, although some students had financial and familial hardships, many of the students seemed to be oblivious to the privileges they enjoyed due to their relatively affluent socio-economic status and stable family backgrounds. Given these issues, the author sought to bring about change by fostering a sense of connectedness with the community and an enhanced awareness among the college students of the life privileges that they enjoy relative to others. The author also wished to provide opportunities for students to feel the satisfaction resulting from volunteering for others, with the hope that this attitude would continue throughout their lives. The service-learning course

used the same text as the traditional course to teach the same set of concepts and skills, but a requirement of providing at least 10 hours of service to a community organization was added. This new format has been taught for nine years.

In preparation for the course, the author worked with the campus COAR (Community Outreach Activities Resources) organization to learn about the various volunteer opportunities available. The agency also provided a standard service-learning contract, to be signed by the student, community organization, and professor, so that the type of volunteer work and conditions were clarified between all parties at the project's onset.

To prepare students for the project, they were presented with a lecture on experiential learning to provide the "big picture" for how the project and related assignments were designed to help them learn more about the course content, small group communication. Student groups of four each were designated by the author, based on student information sheets filled out on the first day of class. The sheets gathered information about students' names and majors, as well as hobbies, which the instructor then used to manually sort into piles to create diverse groups, e.g., a group consisting of an engineering major male student, a studio arts female student, and an English major male student. The goal was to make the groups as diverse as possible since the ability to work with people with diverse ideas and backgrounds is important to foster among students. The literature states that, although heterogeneous work groups initially and typically experience more trouble, they eventually end up producing better outcomes, such as more flexibility in options and more ways of looking at a problem (Beebe & Masterson, 2015).

Students were provided with a presentation by the COAR office with handouts describing various volunteer opportunities and contact information, some of which varied from semester to semester. As new agency contact was made, which resulted in novel volunteer opportunities, the COAR representatives brought an updated list of opportunities to the presentation. For example, in one semester students could volunteer at a Boys and Girls Club, an animal shelter, a women's shelter, and a nature conservancy organization, while the next semester presented opportunities for some these organizations with the addition of the YMCA or Day Break (a center for disabled youth). After providing them with handouts, student groups were then allowed to discuss and decide among themselves which volunteer opportunity would be most appropriate for them, given their schedules and interest areas. Student groups were assigned to volunteer at the same location and were encouraged to work together as much as possible to fulfill their hours (ten hours per semester). The rationale for this was to provide opportunities for students to engage in small group communication, the focus of the course. In doing

so, students could accumulate experiences to analyze for their journals, as well as for their small group analyses presentations later.

Assignments were designed to allow students to reflect and apply communication theories to their experiences. First, it was important to check each group's progress. To keep students on track, students were assigned to give a progress report on their volunteer work during the first half of the semester. During group presentations, students reported their progress made, as well as challenges met in attempting to make progress. Prompts included the following:

- Describe the organization, its mission, and the reason your group decided to volunteer at that organization.
- What was your service-learning goal for the organization as a group?
- What was your goal for yourself as an individual?
- What were some of the roadblocks?
- What were some positive effects reaped so far?
- Overall, do you feel that you are achieving both the organizational task goal and your group's goal?
- What small group concepts can be applied to your experience?

Additionally, each student's progress was checked by submission of an individual "Journal Logs and Summary" paper, also due during the first half of the semester, which was comprised of the individual's first six journal entries and a summary of the group's communication. The summary, which was required to be at least 3 pages of the 6-to-8-page paper, had to contain two points: 1) a summary of the individual's role played within the small group (students were provided with a list of small group roles widely cited in the area of small group communication such as "dominator," "supporter," "encourager," and "gatekeeper"), and 2) a report on how the group as a whole was doing. No specific details or names were needed, but this report was designed to increase accountability and to reduce "social loafing" of group members, as students knew that the papers would report on progress as a group and details of group work.

The bases for the "Journal Logs and Summary" paper were individual student logs. Students were to also keep a half-page to a page journal each time they met as a group, including planning meetings. Journal entries could contain information about their small group communication, an application of concepts learned in class to their real-life experiences, or their reflections on volunteer service. Questions were

provided as prompts for journal reflections, which were included in their course packets for reference, and they included the following: What did I see? What surprised me? What stories can I tell to give others an idea of the agency? How did I feel during the experience? What was my initial judgment of what I saw? What community problem makes my service necessary? How might I be part of the problem? What can I learn? What are the roots of the problems? What are the possible solutions? What small group concepts can I apply to my experience?

At the end of the semester and after reviewing their journals, students wrote a reflection paper detailing what they realized about themselves, thought about their volunteer experience, and learned about small group communication in the process. They also presented the reflection paper orally to their class to practice public speaking skills that would be important in their future careers, graduate school, or in other social situations. Also, this allowed the audience both to gain a better understanding of the concepts learned and to be exposed to different perspectives.

The current study sought to assess the perceptions of students regarding the influence of service learning in two areas: education and personal growth. The goal was to assess their perceptions of how service learning influenced their ability to understand and apply small group communication concepts, as well as promoted personal growth. Thus the research questions were:

RQ1: How do students perceive service learning as influencing their classroom learning of small group concepts?

RQ2: How do students perceive service learning as influencing their personal growth?

Project Outcomes

Student reactions to the small group service-learning course, as gaged by their reflection papers, were consistent with those reported in the literature. Reflection seemed to encourage a deeper level of learning about self and one's role in society, as well as the course content material. Students reported that the service provided an opportunity to clarify career goals, generate a commitment to social values, improve self-confidence through a sense of achievement and accomplishment in helping others, and increase communication skills in conflict mediation, listening, leadership, role-playing, and ethical decision-making. They also reflected on the importance of small group communication and showed an ability to apply abstract concepts such as Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis to their group interactions. But above all, students noted the satisfaction of being able to make a difference in the lives of others.

Student reflection papers revealed positive effects of service learning. One student noted various effects of the service-learning project, including focusing on a career path to learning about small group roles, as well as gaining the satisfaction of making a difference in others' lives:

Going through this experience has helped me to focus my goals for a career. I do know that I want to work with kids and perhaps through an organization such as the Boys and Girls Club, I can accomplish that and knowing that I am making a difference. Overall, the service-learning project has been very rewarding. From growing in group interactions and realizing the roles I play in a group to getting out into the community and seeing that it only takes an hour a day to help and make a difference, the experience has influenced my life.

Another student noted the various types of learning that the service-learning opportunity afforded, mostly in terms of his civic responsibility, and the relevance of small group communication in his career:

As I became involved in Day Break I realized how important service learning was to me, my group, and of course, the [unnamed] community... This class and the Day Break experience provided me with the opportunity to meet this goal, which I know I would have never accomplished on my own... I have also learned how important group interaction is in the real world. I am currently an economics major and have been through many group projects in the department. However, I never saw the relevance of this until now. I had never been asked to step back and reflect upon my group interactions to analyze what was happening. The reflection process has taught me that group work is beneficial to society in many ways and can help me achieve more efficiently than could be done alone.

Citing a study finding service learning to increase students' sense of social responsibility and the transformational effect of service learning, one student wrote:

Like the students in that experiment, I felt proud to be contributing to the improvement of my community, and that gave me more self-confidence...During the ten weeks of participating in my service-learning project, I did not notice all the changes I was going through. It was only when looking back analytically that I realized that not only did I help the people at the Thurman Brisben Center, but they helped me as well.

Students also were able to hone valuable communication skills during their service learning, as attested by the following student comment:

On a personal level I have learned many different things about myself during this service-learning experience and speech class. I've discovered that it can be advantageous at times to be silent and listen than to talk and dominate a conversation. I've also learned that it is better to have a multiple leadership style approach for equal representation and to not allow me to dominate the group. Finally, I've acquired the knowledge through this class to be a confident public speaker... [T]hrough my experiences with my group and the children at the Thurman Brisben Center, my listening skills have drastically improved.

On the same topic, another student noted,

At the same time I succeeded in improving my personal communication skills due to my interaction with my group and the community at Day Break.

Students also learned to apply the theories that they had learned from their textbooks and class lectures to their small group service-learning experiences:

Within the group, it was easy to see the symbolic convergence theory at work. Our style of communication related highly to the meaning of fantasy under this theory...The four of us shared numerous stories from the trip, which connects us all together. The more we laugh, and sometimes make fun of each other, the closer the group seems to get over time...This is representative of the fantasy chain revolving around our shared Habitat for Humanity trip.

Another student remarked on the same topic:

Another goal that I was surprised to meet was my ability to apply classroom learning to real life experience. The service-learning project gave me the chance to enforce what I had learned in the classroom in a way I never had before.

Finally, students most often noted that the service-learning project added meaning to their college lives. One student stated:

With regard to service learning, I never would have imagined such a rewarding experience... I realized that this was the perfect opportunity and the perfect time for me to give back to a community that has embraced me for the past 4 years. I will be graduating in May and truly feel that when I walk across that stage to receive my diploma, I will have

a greater sense of accomplishment and fulfillment because of my service-learning experience.

Overall, through student reflections, the value of this experiential learning project was evident: students stated that the service provided an opportunity to clarify career goals, commitment to social values, and improve self-confidence through a sense of achievement and accomplishment in helping others. They also illustrated enhanced learning of in-class material by showing their ability to apply abstract concepts such as Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis to their group interactions. The ability to apply abstract concepts and theories to real-life situations is a higher order of learning, according to Bloom's Taxonomy. But above all, students noted the satisfaction in being able to make a difference in the lives of others. In addition to gathering qualitative comments from students about their service-learning experience, students were also asked to fill out an anonymous survey on the topic of service learning to understand the effects of their service-learning experience further, as well as to obtain more generalizable results.

Method

The survey instrument was a seven-item likert scale which collected students' perceptions of various aspects of their service learning anonymously. The survey was distributed during the last two weeks of classes and was voluntary. The seven items included such topics as students' perceptions that the service-learning project helped them to learn the importance of community involvement, was conducive to application of small group concepts, and helped them to realize things about themselves, among others. The survey items were created based on the literature on inductively drawn effects of service learning. A copy of the survey instrument is included in the appendix.

Results

Student responses ($n = 112$) indicate that students had positive perceptions of the service-learning format of the small group communication course, indicated by six of the seven items surpassing 4 of out the maximum 5 points. They felt that the service-learning project helped them to learn the importance of community involvement ($\mu = 4.53$), learn and apply small group communication concepts ($\mu = 4.35$), realize things about themselves ($\mu = 4.36$), and focus their career goals ($\mu = 3.15$). Students stated that the service-learning activity was enjoyable ($\mu = 4.38$) and enhanced their learning experience ($\mu = 4.37$), and that they would recommend the service-learning course to others ($\mu = 4.37$).

Discussion and Limitations of Study

Survey results generally corroborated previous findings of outcomes of service learning, namely providing an opportunity to clarify career goals, commitment to social values, improvement of self-confidence through a sense of achievement and accomplishment in helping others, preparation to take on the role of an engaged citizen, and the satisfaction in being able to make a difference in the life of others. Students also reported enhanced learning and personal growth as effects of the service-learning experience.

Students gave high marks for the fact that the service learning gave them a chance to be involved in the community while learning and applying small group communication concepts through their interactions during volunteering. Reflection journal logs helped students to realize things about themselves as they were learning the concepts and volunteering; it was an exercise in increasing self-awareness for most. The students found the volunteering activities to be enjoyable and felt that it enhanced their learning experience, and they reported that they would recommend the course to others.

The only surprising result is that students were more or less neutral as to whether the volunteer activity helped them to focus their career goals or not, despite some qualitative comments that indicated that service learning had enhanced clarification of career goals. These qualitative responses may have been strongly expressed by certain individual students, but perhaps for others the selection of volunteer sites may not have been a good match for them career-wise. In retrospect, it seems that if the student were fortunate enough to be able to persuade their group members to volunteer at an organization that fit in with their future goals (i.e., Boys and Girls Club for future teachers), then the responses could be quite positive, but if not, the responses would likely be neutral. Working at Habitat for Humanity may link in with a career in Economics within the big picture (awareness of effects of social economic status, for example), but, understandably, students did not see a direct influence on their career goals.

While teaching the course in a service-learning format was one that has had positive effects on the students, preparing to convert it into a service-learning course took much time and effort. Forms need to be created, and organizations with volunteer opportunities need to be identified. If an instructor interested in turning his/her course into a service-learning course were to be fortunate enough to have a campus organization that can do much of the advance research for the volunteer projects, it would markedly reduce the preparation workload for the instructor.

Teaching a course in a service-learning format is not for everyone. Instructors who like to have control

over the projects and their outcomes may have difficulty at first adjusting to the free-flowing and sometimes unpredictable nature of service learning. Organizations may often be late to respond to potential volunteers at times, delaying the onset of the volunteering. Persistent follow-ups to try to make initial contact may be needed for some organizations because, as we came to learn, some organizations have communication problems due to their organization being routinely staffed mainly by volunteers. Additionally, students will have misunderstandings about meeting times and expectations. As always, students in small groups will have to negotiate through different levels of motivation and different proclivities and needs. However, stepping back and letting the students figure out the majority of the problems, with built-in mechanisms for checking on their progress (e.g., deadlines for submission of signed contracts, journals, progress reports), help to provide general guidelines within which students can navigate the progress of their projects themselves. Some students will approach the instructor for assistance with a problematic student or problems with the organization. The instructor should be ready to step in and take the lead when needed, but letting the groups solve their own problems and make their own decisions for the most part can be a valuable learning experience for students. As one student wrote in the survey: "There was the right amount of guidance, but not too much where groups could [not] make their own decisions".

One thing that the author changed recently was to give the students some more information on service learning itself and why it is important. At the time the author first turned the course into a service-learning format, the field of service learning was relatively new. Although deeply impressed by the concept, I was not able to relay some of the beneficial outcomes of the pedagogical approach. Since then, more research has been generated on service learning, which I now share with my students and which helps them to see from the very beginning why this approach was selected for this course.

Another change made was to relay to students some guidelines to consider when selecting organizations to volunteer for. Recently, after listening to numerous presentations by students who worked with small children who expressed dismay that students would be ending their volunteer experience at the close of the semester, the author began thinking that it would be best to have the students become more aware of the sense of loss that the children might feel when volunteers they may have become attached to have to leave. Although beginning and ending relationships reflect an aspect of real life, students should be made sensitive to those difficult situations and encouraged to see things from the volunteer service recipient's perspective. The author also tells the students that there are some organizations

for whom the volunteering activity will consist of stocking food shelves and cleaning up rather than interacting with people. I urge them to become acquainted with the nature of their jobs and, while they should try to push their comfort zones to provide whatever service is necessary to the community, note that they should be aware of what specific work environment they are going into, at the very least.

Finally, it helps the instructor to gain credibility to teach a service-learning course in the eyes of the student if he/she has some prior experience with volunteer projects. For the author it was useful that the author also volunteers for outside organizations, traveling to Honduras to help at an orphanage, teaching ESL at a local church, or serving at kitchens for the terminally ill. Students will give the instructor more credibility if the instructor has been through like situations, and especially if it is out of a genuine desire to help the community rather than to try a new pedagogical approach.

Conclusion

Service learning can be a rewarding for students and faculty alike. Students can learn application of classroom concepts in real-life situations. Especially when teaching a course such as small group communication, application of the format of small groups in a volunteer service-learning environment was a good match. Students reported many positive outcomes from taking the small group communication course as a service-learning format. Best of all is the thought that students are finding meaning in their quest for education by seeing the connection with their present and future civic duties and community involvement. Service learning is a pedagogical approach that can help overcome one of the most cited criticisms of education since the era of Dewey: that there is a disconnect between the educational process and the community wherein it takes place. Service learning helps the students feel the sense of fulfillment from connecting with the community during the education process. One student captured this notion well when he said, "This was probably the best idea to do for a class ever. I honestly can say that this was my favorite class in all my 4 years here because of the service learning. I'm actually going back to the hope house to volunteer more."

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Appendix

Please take a few minutes to answer a couple of questions anonymously regarding the service learning course you completed. Participation is voluntary and appreciated.
Circle the number that most closely reflects your thoughts.

REGARDING THE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT:

1. The service learning project helped me to learn the importance of community involvement.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

2. The service learning project helped me to learn and apply small group communication concepts.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

3. The service learning project helped me to realize things about myself.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

4. The activity helped me to focus my career goals.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

5. The activity was enjoyable.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

6. The community service enhanced my learning experience.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

7. I would recommend this service learning course to others.

Strongly Disagree			Neutral		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

If there are any comments or any suggestions, please provide them here: