SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS IN ONLINE COURSES:
DELIVERY STRATEGIES

Aref Agahei Hervani, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Economics
Chicago State University, Chicago, IL 60628

Marilyn M. Helms, Ph.D.
Sesquicentennial Endowed Chair and Professor of Management
School of Business, Dalton State College, Dalton, GA 30720

Raina M. Rutti, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Management
School of Business, Dalton State College, Dalton, GA

Joanne LaBonte, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Sociology
Chicago State University, Chicago, IL 60628

Sy Sarkarat, PhD
Professor of Economics
West Virginia University, Parkersburg, WV 26104

ABSTRACT
As more college courses are taught online, maintaining course deliverables and learning to mirror face-to-face offerings is important to faculty, students, and accrediting agencies. Offering experiential and service learning is an increasingly important way to connect students to their local communities. This article presents a case study implementation of a service learning project in a hybrid (taught partially online) senior-level business seminar, which is moving to a fully online format. The format pairs business students with existing community partners that have defined projects and tasks for volunteers. Delivery strategies to engage students in civic and social organizations are presented along with benefits to students and to the community. Strategies for including college students in volunteer projects as an initial service learning experience are included. Areas for future research are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is a rapidly growing pedagogical reality in higher education. Yet the learning delivery is often criticized for its lack of real-world connections. Many face-to-face classes overcome these weaknesses through service learning projects. However, the service learning pedagogy should not be limited to face-to-face instruction only. This paper integrate the benefits of service learning, an effective classroom teaching style that relies on interactive learning and integration of classroom activities and efforts into communities, with the ever increasing online environment. The study examines a case within a hybrid (partially online) environment, focusing on business students using functional business knowledge within the community. Additionally, this paper provides suggestions for implementation within an online course.

SERVICE LEARNING

The seminal definition of service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112) is a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” Service learning is further defined by Weiler et. al. (2013) as “a pedagogical strategy for promoting the development of civic-mindedness among university students” (p. 236). Universities are adopting service learning as a pedagogical strategy for a number of reasons, particularly to develop socially-responsible knowledge and values for their students and to produce civic minded alumni (Reeb, 2010; Bringle & Steinberg 2010). While additional research is needed on
Working with community resources can include a wide variety of organizations addressing area problems, including homeless shelters, after school programs (Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Junior Achievement), urban planning groups (City Councils, County Commissions), or abuse centers (Family and Children's Services, Crisis Center, Community Kitchen) and other public or private agencies. The Service Learning concept at the academic institution is based on the similar outreach department should take the initiative to make contacts with community agencies to identify their needs and build ties to the curriculum by introducing the service learning concept and projects in appropriate fields of study. A variety of benefits of service learning have been found for student participants both immediately and after they graduate. By providing opportunities for students to work with community partners, institutions help them become “ideal orators” (Quintillian, 1988).

Further benefits have been found in a study of service learning and leadership. Sabbagh, Cavanagh, & Hipkinds (2013) found student leadership dimensions of persuasion, building, community, commitment to the growth of people, service, leadership, empowerment, awareness, foresight, and listening increased after participation in a financial literacy service-learning project. In addition students’ interest in social justice increased. The authors believed the students were better prepared to be ethical leaders and compassionate citizens after completing the project.

Similarly Caro et. al. (2015) cited pressure for business students to be prepared to enter organizations and suggested there is a need for the students to understand the leadership role and develop this skill early in their undergraduate experience. They proposed a service learning project into a leadership seminar. In a nursing program at the junior-level students were found to make connections between what they learned in class and the real-life experiences of patient-centered care (Flinners, 2013). Experiential learning through service learning builds on personal growth and understanding. By bringing students outside of the classroom and into the community, students are allowed to give back and build a connection with their communities (Eisenhard & Nisaiali, 2010).

Hansen (1999) states students develop important skills, knowledge, and values effectively in the labor market or in graduate school, even though those skills are not always measured by exam scores and often not even in overall course grades. Studies suggest an effective teaching style provides a classroom environment enabling students to apply learning to real life situations (Elzinga, 2001). Then when confronted with real life problems, students can apply their understanding and effectively use the knowledge and skills they have acquired through their service learning (

Engaging students in the community for active learning is the motivation of most service learning projects. Johnson (2013) believes service learning provides students with relevance demanded from the business community. Her students in a graduate research methods class worked in teams to conduct a situation analysis for a local non-profit organization in an experiential learning project. Service learning offers students, the opportunity to develop number of competencies or skills such as team building, leadership, conflict resolution, communication, organization, and time-management (Otney, Livingston, Fisch, & Talamantes, 2006). Calvert and Kurji (2012) explored the impact of a service learning project in a managerial accounting course. Their motivation was the criticism of business schools producing graduates that lack teamwork and communication skills. They proposed a service learn- ing methodology to improve these skills in accounting students.

PROLIFERATION IN ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

Kolovich (2014) reported online education went main- stream many years ago. Academic leaders continue to forecast more pervasiveness of online courses in the future. Recent data from the Babson Survey Research Group indicated some 7.1 million students take at least one online course to complete their education. Boklan (2013) reports the number of college students taking a minimum of one online course rose from 23 percent in 2009 to 45 percent in 2013, citing the 2013 College Explorer report surveying over 1,500 students.

Online learning is revolutionizing the way higher education is delivered to students. Professors are required to successfully adapt coursework to a new learning environment, while being conscious of factors such as community, active and collaborative learning, and reflective practices (Gish & Mrozowski, 2000). Students and the institutions also play a key role in online success. Students must shift their learning paradigms to maximize knowledge acquisition and institutions must broaden their vision to explore innovative methods of utilizing the online learning channel of instruction. Online courses too are often tasked with being equivalent to the in-class experiences and many regional (i.e. SACS) and program specific accreditation agencies (i.e. AACSB, NCATE) require separate assessments on online, hybrid, and face-to-face learning to assure they are equivalent in meeting course objectives and learning experiences for students.

Implementing Online Service Learning: A Case Study

The four components of the service learning pedagogy—preparation, action, reflection and evaluation—are adapted to online environments. Regardless of the length of the online course, students are introduced to the project in the course syllabus and receive a project orientation and description outlining expectations and project due dates. Implementing service learning is a popular activity in a number of capstone senior-level courses regardless of discipline. For example, Hagan (2012) utilized client proj- ents in an undergraduate marketing and public relations class. Students applied their discipline based knowledge while working collaboratively, also using their “soft” skills. However, in an online modality, such expe- nent projects for clients can be more challenging (Hagan, 2012).

As an in depth case, student in an AACSB accredited business program in a SACS accredited college in the Southeast United States participated in a service learning requirement as part of their Senior Seminar course. The course is a pass/fail graduation requirement of all business students in their last semester, currently being taught as a hybrid (partially delivered online) course. Currently, re- quired seminars compose the face-to-face component of the hybrid course. However, as the school incorporates more online classes with a completely online Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degree, Senior Seminar will be converted to video using Camtasia’s software. Additionally synchronous online webinars will be provided to accom- modate distance learning students who cannot attend on
Four partners, shown in the table above are available to students in our ten-county service area of about a 100 mile radius. Students are allowed to propose other service opportunities that meet starting requirements (i.e. benefit the community, utilize discipline-based knowledge and skills, have available work to meet the minimum of 10 hours of service, etc.). This is particularly helpful for online students, allowing them to contribute to their communities.

In the syllabus, students are given the list of the service learning partners, including a short write-up explaining the organization and outlining the types of volunteer activities and duties available. Students schedule their volunteer training schedule for the project. The service learning partners are also given a list of students and are aware the students will be contacting them. Following the completion of their service learning projects, students are required to post comments about their experiences, including reflections on the business knowledge and skills they used, what they learned from the experience, and suggestions for improvements or modifications. This provides opportunities for instructors to observe and further guide the lessons learned from the students’ service experience in subsequent lectures, postings, and online discussions. The reflection process connects the classroom learning with the experience and allows students to think about their achievements from service learning and evaluate their contributions to the community.

Student’s volunteer activities are assessed by the supervisor in the respective community agency in an online, www.surveymonkey.com survey, developed by the university faculty. The instrument covers the quality of work, communication (oral and written), leadership and teamwork abilities. These assessments provide feedback to the instructor, and are used in evaluating students and providing grades and student feedback at the end of the service learning project. Anecdotal end-of-course student comments rate the service learning experience “extremely positive” and note increased confidence from their participation. Several have noted it made a difference in later job interviews.

Suggestions for Implementation

Prior to implementation, a service learning project must be well planned before the online semester begins. Preparing requirements for qualification, expected activities to reinforce selected knowledge and skills, and deliverables used to provide feedback for grading must be included. Starting with one or two standardized options (i.e. Junior Achievement, VITA) provides a basis for additional projects. It is also helpful for the instructor to develop a relationship with someone in the community organization, preferably a coordinator.

Early in the semester, an explanation of the service learning options should be provided in detail to students. Fully discuss the learning objectives and required deliverables and documentation (e.g. signed completion forms, photographs, journaling, and reflection papers). It is important for students to have input to increase commitment to the service learning project and to the organization. However, it is important to coordinate students and projects so their instructor can track progress and assure a good student-organization fit. For example, a student with an extreme stuttering challenge assigned to Alzheimer’s Association fundraising event helped coordinate work flow behind the scenes, independently managing backstage activities. Encourage diversity as well. One professor assigned male students to work with the Girl Scouts in a much needed diversity exercise. Non-accounting majors who preferred a team that avoided work in the paper often screen potential employees from the student volunteers. The mission of colleges and universities continues to expand to include more external stakeholders and service learning projects provide synergies for all concerned. With continual adaptations of the pedagogy to the online learning environment, the success of these projects will continue. In turn, community organizations with the college campus and appropriate courses will develop as organizations learn about the benefit of student engagement.

Future research is needed in a number of key areas. First is to explore how adaptations are made in the online learning classroom to incorporate service learning with studies and documentation from a variety of disciplines that explore the pedagogy, grading challenges, ways to implement the process using technology, and studies of student learning, satisfaction, and retention.

In terms of application, community organization partners should be surveyed about the short and long-term benefits and the success of service learning projects. Studies should examine the degree of community involvement by online student populations and how to further this level of integration to foster transfer of knowledge from students into local communities and economies.

Finally case studies examining the longitudinal impact of service learning for online students are needed. Do online students become more engaged, charitable and philanthropic after helping an area organization via service learning? Are online students more likely to volunteer their time and money to help the chosen organization or other organizations after participating in service learning? Are there differences in engagement in online versus face-to-face educational settings? Does involvement in service learning projects provide better employers? What service learning projects are available after students gain experience with existing programs in community organizations?

Areas for Further Research

With the growth of online courses around the world, projects must be adapted to this style of learning and teaching. The benefits of the service learning project are important to students, faculty, the college, and the greater community. It also provides a key deliverable for student resumes, facilitating the job search process. Organizations benefit from free student “consulting” and often screen potential employees from the student volunteers. The mission of colleges and universities continues to expand to include more external stakeholders and service learning projects provide synergies for all concerned. With continual adaptations of the pedagogy to the online learning environment, the success of these projects will continue. In turn, community organizations with the college campus and appropriate courses will develop as organizations learn about the benefit of student engagement.

Future research is needed in a number of key areas. First is to explore how adaptations are made in the online learning classroom to incorporate service learning with studies and documentation from a variety of disciplines that explore the pedagogy, grading challenges, ways to implement the process using technology, and studies of student learning, satisfaction, and retention.

In terms of application, community organization partners should be surveyed about the short and long-term benefits and the success of service learning projects. Studies should examine the degree of community involvement by online student populations and how to further this level of integration to foster transfer of knowledge from students into local communities and economies.

Finally case studies examining the longitudinal impact of service learning for online students are needed. Do online students become more engaged, charitable and philanthropic after helping an area organization via service learning? Are online students more likely to volunteer their time and money to help the chosen organization or other organizations after participating in service learning? Are there differences in engagement in online versus face-to-face educational settings? Does involvement in service learning projects provide better employers? What service learning projects are available after students gain experience with existing programs in community organizations?
REFERENCES


