



The Hybrid Mass Communication Workshop: Part Service-Learning, Part Student- Run Public Relations Firm

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of service learning through a public relations practicum known as the commercial media workshop. Students enrolled within the commercial media workshop at a small, liberal arts university, provided insight as both observers and participants in the workshop. Through reflective essays, students addressed four questions examining the technical and cultural perspectives of service learning (Butin, 2003). This qualitative analysis encourages reflection on both the skill sets needed to produce original media content as well as on the contribution made to the greater good of the community both on campus and off campus (Fall, 2006). Student skill sets are challenged as they produce content within the constraints of deadlines while working with both their peers and a client (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000).

Introduction

Faculty members within a small program often weigh the pros and cons of developing a service-learning course over the traditional practicum or workshop course. While providing both opportunities might be ideal, it may not be practical on many levels because of resources, instructional time, and critical student mass may make that impractical. Therefore, in many small programs, one course may be designed to fulfill many student needs.

In spring 2011 the Department of Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina Asheville, a small, liberal arts university, piloted a commercial media workshop. While workshops were required for all students within the mass communication major, workshops only existed for the journalism and film concentrations, and not for the commercial media or public relations tracks. The changes in public relations strategy and tactics brought about by social

media are undeniable, and necessitated a workshop focusing on real-time projects allowing for the repurposing of information across multiple platforms. This paper focuses on the evolution of the commercial media workshop from spring 2011 through fall 2012.

The pilot commercial media workshop revealed a critical learning curve for both students and the professor. Students had great difficulty with project deadlines, collaboration with peers, and self-selection of projects. The professor of the course found that motivating students became a balance between selecting the right projects and providing a high-level of structure. From attending development workshops on both service learning and student-run public relations firms, an idea emerged: combine aspects of service learning with the client approach of a student-run public relations firm to facilitate the ultimate in experiential learning.

The Evolution of the Workshop

To transition to a hybrid service learning, student-run public relations model for the commercial media workshop, the faculty member explored a number of variations. For the second commercial media workshop in fall 2011, an assessment of student skill sets and interests helped to reveal student aptitude for layout and design, photography, video, and writing; however, the assessment wasn't a predictor for completion of projects and therefore successful completion of the course. Attitude, defined as motivation and initiative, was a better predictor for measuring student success in the workshop. Like the journalism workshop, the commercial media workshop was a pass or fail course in which students needed to complete a combination of at least six writing, video, or photography projects during the semester.

Since the pilot commercial media workshop in spring 2011 demonstrated the need for a structure similar to the journalism workshop's student-run newspaper staff, students in the fall 2011 workshop were assigned a production role for an online interactive newsletter focusing on mass communication students and events. Student assignments were based on the assessment of their skills. Even with the assessment of skills and assignment of roles, enthusiasm for the newsletter project was low. However, with encouragement from the professor and the editor of the newsletter, the workshop students produced three interactive newsletters containing video, feature articles, and photos (see Appendix A). The commercial media workshop had been successful in providing hands-on public relations experience for students while expanding their portfolios. However, the professor believed a higher level of intrinsic value could be achieved in addition to the hands-on experience provided.

For the third rendition of the commercial media workshop in spring 2012, the professor partnered with an on-campus energy conservation campaign called "Flip the Switch." Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, the "Flip the Switch" campaign focused on an energy conservation competition among students living within the residence halls (see Appendix B). Students were enthusiastic about producing content for the campaign, from logos to posters to video to tweets. The on-campus campaign directors, selected as part of a U.S. Department of Energy conservation fellowship, were eager for the campaign to be a success, but lacked experience implementing campaign tactics. This became problematic when the client demanded

coverage in the student newspaper, and wanted students to be the point of contact for news releases. Although independent from the mass communication department, the student newspaper refused to cover the competition because mass communication students were producing content for the campaign and the editor wanted to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest. In addition, the client did not realize that the communication and marketing office handles all media inquiries for the university. Thus, while it became apparent that having a client-relationship within the structure of the workshop motivated students, however the client selected needed to appreciate the role of media and the public relations function. Ultimately, the solution to the problem of securing a client with both a need for and understanding of the media and the public relations function arrived when the new on-campus health and wellness center hired its first communications coordinator.

A Service-Learning, Student-Run PR Firm Hybrid

The North Carolina Center for Health & Wellness (NCCHW) opened its doors on campus in 2010 and hired its first communications coordinator, Andrea Fiedler, in spring 2012. When she voiced a need for assistance in creating traditional and social media content as well as an increased awareness of the center's role in the community, the NCCHW appeared to be a strong fit for the public relations workshop. It became apparent to the professor for the workshop that a relationship with the center would combine the hands-on experience of producing deliverables for a client, the essence of a student-run public relations firm, while also providing a level of intrinsic value as students enhanced the visibility of an organization serving the common good, the essence of service learning.

Furthermore, this hybrid model of service learning and student-run public relations firm offered promise that the other workshop models didn't for these reasons.

- The NCCHW's communications coordinator understood the function of public relations and the role of the media.
- The communications coordinator desired to work with students.
- The NCCHW possessed a well-developed mission to "be a leading catalyst for the prevention of chronic health conditions through promotion of healthy living among North Carolinians of all

ages with an emphasis on groups with health disparities.”

For the fall 2012 commercial media workshop, the NCCHW communications coordinator, Andrea Fiedler, identified key events for publicity coverage. Commercial media workshop students were required to complete three multimedia projects, each with a mix of traditional and social media (see Appendix C). While all three projects could focus on different offerings and community events sponsored by the NCCHW, students also were allowed to select one project outside of the NCCHW. Only one student out of the eight students enrolled chose to produce a non-client related project. Experiential learning within the commercial media workshop seem to work best with a hybrid of service learning and a student-run public relations firm elements.

Literature Review

Service Learning

Service learning links academics with civic values through active pedagogy rather than the traditional downward transference of information from professor to student (Butin, 2003). Theory, practice, community and ethical considerations are tantamount throughout the service learning experience. The basic criteria for service learning are that the project is legitimate, that it is ethical, and that it is useful (Butin, 2003). Eyler & Giles (1999) criteria for successful service learning focuses on student outcomes:

- Personal and interpersonal development.
- Understanding and applying knowledge learned in class.
- Perspective transformation.
- A developed sense of citizenship.

No matter how service learning is defined, the organization being served articulates the needs. However, to be academically beneficial, the service must be integral to the learning objectives of the course. By definition then, it may be argued that any model of service learning enhances the academic experience (Liu, 1995; Morton, 1995, Butin 2003).

Service-Learning Theory

Warren & Sellnow (2010) posit that while service learning lacks a dominant theory, the theoretical roots of service learning are grounded in Dewey's (1938) argument for experiential education, Kolb's (1984) four stages of experiential learning, and Rockquemore and Shaffer's (2000) stage theory of engagement. Dewey,

believed to be the first advocate of experiential learning, surmised that traditional top-down pedagogical approaches lacked the required engagement needed to facilitate problem solving in real-time situations (Warren & Sellnow, 2010).

Kolb's (1984) four stages of experiential learning are:

1. Concrete experience abilities.
2. Reflective observation.
3. Abstract conceptualization.
4. Active experimentation.

Of these four stages, active experimentation is the most difficult to achieve within a classroom setting because it requires the application of knowledge and therefore understanding of key concepts learned in class. Experiential learning, or service learning, provides a natural conduit for attaining active experimentation.

Rockquemore and Shaffer (2000) propose three stages of student engagement:

1. Shock.
2. Normalization.
3. Engagement.

The first stage, shock, is defined as experiencing a revelation regarding the working or living conditions for which they are providing a service. Normalization, the second stage, occurs as the students adapt to the service-learning environment. The last stage, engagement, is realized when students apply problem-solving and critical thinking skills, thereby connecting their service to concepts learned in the classroom.

In general, service learning provides a structured opportunity where the needs of an organization or a group are defined, goals are clarified, interpersonal or “soft skills” are developed, and discipline specific learning benefits are achieved (Werder & Strand, 2011).

Benefits of Service Learning

The popularity of service learning has grown considerably as the appeal towards the “scholarship of engagement” has increased within higher education (Butin, 2006). This appeal to link theory and practice is a common thread not only throughout service learning, but also in experiential education, undergraduate research, community-based research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Students involved in service learning courses demonstrate changes in political awareness, diversity attitudes, community self-efficacy, and community engagement (Simons &

Clearly, 2006).

Service learning may be transformative for a student's interpersonal and personal development through the perceived paradox of the situation (Lewis & Dehler, 2000). The service-learning experience affords the opportunity for students to analyze contradictions by observing opposing perspectives, conflicting demands, and mixed messages (Lewis & Dehler, 2000).

Limitations of Service Learning

Service learning has traditionally been approached as a methodology rather than a mode of inquiry that positions students with "high cultural capital" – mostly white – working to better "individuals with low cultural capital" – mostly non-white and/or low income (Butin, 2010, p. 6). Such a normative approach appears to leverage the recipients of the service in favor of those performing the service. Sustained impact on a community and benefits to individuals within the community are questions that remain unaddressed. Typically the balance of power resides with those providing the services that receive the most publicity. Therefore, Butin (2010) asserts that academia should transition from service learning as a social movement phenomenon to service learning as an intellectual movement. Otherwise, service-learning programs risk losing the transformative qualities for both students and higher education institutions.

Multimedia Storytelling

Students worked with the NCCHW to create authentic narratives using video, still images, and magazine-style reporting. Utilizing video to provide additional insight on a subject isn't a new practice in the field of journalism. However, today journalists have multiple new media platforms available and an expectation by the audience that multiple platforms will be utilized. New media allows for a high degree of transparency that translates into credibility for the journalist, the public relations practitioner, or the media outlet (Lambert, 2007). Students incorporated the seven key elements of digital storytelling (Lambert, 2007):

- Point of view.
 - Dramatic questions.
 - Emotional content.
 - The gift of voice.
 - Economy.
 - Pacing.
 - The power of the soundtrack or natural sound.
- Students established the point of view for the

project by determining who to interview. Evoking the subject's personal narrative began simply by inquiring about when and how the subject first sought out services provided by the NCCHW. Connecting the audience with health issues proved to be challenging visually. Employing standard practices within photojournalism and reporting, interviews were edited to hold viewer attention, provide a cohesive narrative, and maintain the integrity of the event covered. Consequently, staged visuals and sounds were not used in the creation of any video. The personal narratives of the subjects shed light on their experiences with the health and wellness in context with the NCCHW.

Rather than assign a student to a particular video, students selected events to cover provided by the client, specifically the NCCHW communications liaison. This approach allowed students a sense of ownership in the project and enabled their creativity.

Finally, the commercial media workshop course is a combination of the technical and cultural perspectives on service learning (Butin, 2003). The work is technical in that the course strived to meet the basic tenets of service learning – quality of placement, frequency and length of contact hours, scope and frequency of in-class and out-of-class reflection, and student exposure to an organization serving diverse physical needs. The work is cultural in that the course afforded individual meaning making within the context of the NCCHW.

Methodology

To assess the technical and cultural service-learning perspectives of the course, students were asked to complete a reflection paper addressing questions pertaining to each perspective.

Technical service-learning perspective questions were:

RQ 1: Critical reflection was a large part of the workshop experience. How did having feedback from the client as well as your peers help?

RQ 2: How rewarding did you find the partnership with the NC Health & Wellness Center? Did you learn things outside of the discipline of mass communication? Please describe the concrete experiences you gained from this workshop.

Cultural service-learning perspective questions were:

RQ 3: How was your experience with the NC Center for Health & Wellness transformation-

al as far as your motivation, morale and performance? How did having real-life situations to cover for your stories enhance your workshop experience?

RQ 4: To what extent did the workshop make you more comfortable in producing media for an organization?

Of the eight students enrolled in the workshop, seven students completed the assignment. Students provided their reflection papers to the administrative assistant in the mass communication department; the administrative assistant compiled all responses by question into one document.

Student reflections used within this study provided in-depth knowledge on the student as both an observer and a participant of the workshop. Qualitative analysis is preferred over quantitative analysis not only because of the size of the workshop, but also because quantitative data cannot fully capture the students' experience of the technical and cultural aspects of service learning.

Findings

The quality of placement for a service-learning project is critical; the selection of a client for a student-run public relations firm is critical. Although it may appear to be simplistic, the organization or the client must be able to articulate its needs and be available for student inquiry. Given the quality of placement with the NCCHW, frequency and length of contact hours per week, the scope and frequency of in-class and out-of-class reflection, and student exposure to the organization's diverse needs, the technical perspectives of service learning were well addressed within the workshop. With 100 contact minutes per week in the classroom, students were afforded the benefit of in-class reflection from peers, the client and the workshop professor.

Responses to RQ 1 revealed the differences between peer and client feedback. While students benefited from both forms of feedback, they desired more prescriptive feedback from the client, which could be anticipated. From their peers, students expected attention to detail and enhanced insight on the trajectory of their multimedia content. Among the sentiments students expressed, the following best summarizes their insight on peer versus client feedback:

Peer feedback

Feedback from peers always helps you notice little details that weren't obvious to you at first,

and how to fix those small things because if your peers notice it is probably because they have considered the same thing in their own work.

Client feedback

Feedback from the client is very important. By giving some kind of expectation it is easier to focus in on what it is you're going to do, and when the client gives quality feedback, you know if you are on the right track...While criticism is never easy to hear, it did push me to create better work and ultimately, it made me and the client happier.

Responses to RQ 2 spoke to the benefits of experiential learning. Meeting deadlines, "knowing what the client wants," "putting the client first," and "going the extra mile," resonated throughout the students' reflections. One expression that best captured the experiential value of the workshop was:

One of the most valuable aspects of workshop is the real-life experience and getting over the fear of that first project or failure. Workshop gave us all a chance to troubleshoot, so that we can be fully prepared from now on.

The responses to RQ 3 and RQ 4 addressed the cultural perspectives of service learning, and demonstrated an increase in the student's ability to produce satisfactory content for a client. In regards to RQ 3, students noted an increased level of self-efficacy realized through this hybrid model of service learning and student-run public relations firm. Learning accountability for facts and information resonated among the student reflections as a skill set needed early on in one's career. Ultimately, the meaning students derived from the context of the course reflected their capacity to transfer their skill sets to a larger, more dynamic arena. This sentiment was best expressed in the following manner:

Working with a client helped us to better understand what goes happens on both side of the relationship. We learned a lot about the NCCHW, their challenges, what they wanted people to know, and what was important to them, which helped us better develop our projects.

In response to RQ 4, students reflected on their ability to pitch an idea to the client as an internal process wrought with "lots of revisions." The motivation to produce good work for the client relied on the uniqueness and timeliness of the material. Students expressed learning that public relations wasn't about

“making up stuff,” and the events covered couldn’t be “redone” or “reenacted.” As one student wrote:

It added realism and context to the course. We are doing work that in the real world, people are doing and getting paid to do. When we step off the campus, if we choose to continue down the PR/marketing path, we’ll all have experience with covering events from a PR standpoint.

Discussion

Workshops are always an experiment in furthering applied knowledge by convincing the student that the knowledge is important to acquire. Real-time experience is less rooted in the technology and more in the development of problem-solving skills and interpersonal or “soft skills” needed to succeed within any discipline. This paper adds to the body of literature on mass communication workshop courses containing a service-learning element, an area recognized to be under-researched (Werder & Strand, 2011).

Student perceptions are strong predictors of course effectiveness (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Flournoy, 2007; Werder & Strand, 2011). The commercial media workshop became more effective as the motivation level of students in the workshop increased as the content became more relevant and driven by the client. As one student self-described, “When I thought of it more as a job rather than a class my motivation and performance got better.”

The students pointed out in their reflection papers that working with an organization is inherently valuable. Beyond the contact hours, the course provided an introspective quality, a real-world reality issue. For instance the “Teaching Kitchen,” an after school program for at-risk youth, allowed students to see that teaching the fundamentals of healthy eating and meal preparation are necessary for young people who do not have anyone to do so in their home.

The commercial media workshop enhanced the students’ academic efficacy through the context of something larger and more dynamic than textbook content. Hands-on experience in real-time situations proved to be salient throughout their reflections. In contrast to the liberal arts experience, described by one student as “a pancake mix of information every semester” that is less likely to produce memorable class experiences, students believed the real-life experience and knowledge gained in the workshop would be memorable because it required the physical act of

doing. One student reflected:

The fact that I can come away from this course with some serious material to use in my future makes it more important to me. And students should appreciate this about the course, and put in more effort even though it is only two credit hours.

While it may be anticipated that experiential learning provides unique opportunities for students, the student reflections underscored the many prongs of the value of service learning—human interest, legitimate deadlines, and real-life situations. One student wrote that “the class provided more educational purpose than just being assigned a ‘possible scenario.’ Getting assigned real-life situations gave us legitimate deadlines and stories.”

Student reflections noted the dichotomy between group and individual work, and high motivation and low motivation. Students also recommended the need for a workshop addressing both traditional and social media. Students noted the importance of learning the necessary technology, an aspect given little time in the traditional three-credit-hour credit mass communication courses. Students viewed the professor’s role as more of a learning facilitator rather than the traditional role of lecturer.

The instructor of the workshop worked alongside the students, keeping up to speed on how she could better assist with technical difficulties, complications that arose and other PR advocacies to be able to connect student with the right people for assignments. The instructor kept open communication with each student, allowing for dialog about problems, questions, editing etc.

Lastly, but equally important, students honed their soft skills, particularly in regard to interacting with a client. One student wrote that “being able to go to events and talk to people made me a lot more comfortable. I’m grateful to have been able to get over the fear through workshop.”

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the size of classes within our program allows for increased one-to-one time with students, it is also somewhat problematic when collecting quantitative or qualitative data. Small class size clearly creates a limitation in gathering quantitative data; the limitation in gathering qualitative data is perhaps less clear. For instance, students typically have a professor for multiple courses within a semester. Consequently,

maintaining a level of confidentiality with the student reflection essay is problematic because professors are able to identify each student's writing style, and by implication, each student's essay. Having the department's administrative assistant compile all responses by question using bullet points did help to improve the level of confidentiality. Confidentiality in regard to student reflection is critical.

While the number of students enrolled in the fall 2012 workshop allowed an in-depth qualitative analysis of their reflective essays, a study involving a larger class size would provide additional insight. A quantitative study of a proper sample size could be generalizable to programs with similar types of workshops. Even so, the reflections on the technical and cultural aspects of the students' experience possess ecological validity for they are reporting about their experience in a specific time and place.

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Appendix A



Broadcast expert coaches class on spokesperson techniques

Public relations is more than social media and writing press releases. Public relations encompasses the image and identity of a company. As a spokesperson, the public relations practitioner promotes the image of the company through their appearance and demeanor during media interviews and press conferences.

Jan Getz, a former broadcast producer, on-air talent and professor, coached public relations writing and production students on spokesperson techniques. "Public relations is all about the communication skills: writing, reading and speaking. Be well read, speak clearly and succinctly and find the key messages that reporters

want to have," said Getz.

Public relations professionals are often the spokesperson for a company in addition to managing the company's media relations. A huge portion of their position involves being energetic about their job and familiar with the company they represent.

Getz stressed that effective public relations practitioners identify the newsworthy points of an event, convey those points to reporters and maintain a professional appearance. According to Getz, when you look professional it shows you care.

"I learned a lot about speaking in front of a camera, for example how to dress, what kind of makeup looks

best on camera and what colors look best as well," said Ricky Emmmons, junior in the mass communication department. "I also learned that it's so much harder than it looks."

After students spoke on camera, Getz provided extensive feedback on their performances to help them improve in the future. Getz noted that college is the perfect time for students to hone their public relations skills. Many clubs and organizations are looking for students to take on the public relations role for them. As future communication professionals students can't have too much practice and experience under their belts.

— Amy Smith

Figure A1. [Mass Comm\(unity\) Newsletter](#), Commercial Media Workshop, Fall 2011. (click on link for full issue)

Appendix B

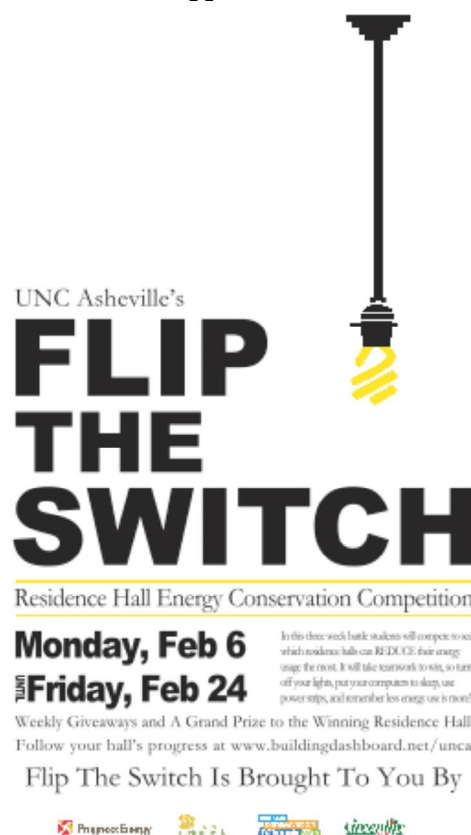


Figure B1. Flip the Switch Campaign Poster, Commercial Media Workshop, Spring 2012.

Appendix C



Video for The Teaching Kitchen (click to watch)
North Carolina Center for Health & Wellness
Commercial Media Workshop, Fall 2012