



Using Service Learning to Teach Communication Skills in the Context of Economic Diversity

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Abstract:

Economic difference and the plight of the economically disadvantaged are areas that media struggle to present. One reason may be that many communication practitioners have little or no direct experience with people living in poverty, and get their information from those who work on behalf of the poor, rather than from the poor themselves. This study investigates whether exposing communication students to people living in poverty, through service learning, can affect their attitudes toward media representations of the poor and toward the students' conceptions of themselves as storytellers about the poor.

Students from three different communication courses participated in a service-learning project with a local food bank. Pre- and post-service surveys and reflection responses indicated that students were, after the experience, more likely to think that media coverage of the poor needs improvement. They were also more likely to see poverty as a result of circumstance as well as an individual attribute, and to see themselves as responsible for telling accurate stories about the poor. Limitations and implications for practice are discussed.

Background

Coverage of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on the Affordable Care Act in 2012 in some ways exemplifies media coverage of issues affecting the poor in the United States. When the court's ruling on the act was handed down, reporters were literally running to get the story first. The most common angle was the effect of the ruling on the ongoing presidential campaign. The effects of the ruling on Americans, particularly on the working poor, were generally not part of the news.

In addition to economic diversity, diversity in

general is an important part of both education and practice in the field of communication, as evidenced by the attention given to diversity by professional organizations such as the [Associated Press Media Editors](#), the [Public Relations Society of America](#), the [Broadcast Education Association](#), the [Online News Association](#), the [International Communication Association](#), and the [Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications](#). Diversity initiatives by these organizations include maintaining committees on diversity, providing training for faculty and students on diversity issues, offering workshops and webinars, and issuing organizational statements on diversity issues as they arise. Within the field, diversity matters.

Related Work

Status of Diversity Education in Communication Fields

Because of the importance of diversity to the communication profession, several authors have examined its status as a topic in communication courses. Ross et al. (Rendell, 2007) reported on the status of diversity in

departments of journalism and mass communication, in accreditation reports generated by the ACEJMC. Diversity is a major area in which ACEJMC-accredited programs need to demonstrate proficiency. The diversity standard was the one area most frequently failed by departments seeking accreditation. / Over time, it was found that all programs that had sought accreditation, whether successfully accredited or not, offered courses with specific diversity-related topics.

Biswas and Izard's (2009) study included diversity initiatives in both accredited and unaccredited programs. They defined diversity in communication education as "... any teaching or research about race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, social class, or multiculturalism in general, either in contemporary or historical contexts of mass communication and offered at both undergraduate and graduate levels" (p. 379). Their survey of individuals about curricula from 105 programs noted 148 courses, of which 17 were required elements of the degree. Gender, race and culture were the most commonly found topics, with culture defined as "intercultural, multicultural and international communication issues" (pp. 385-386). They identified two models for including diversity within a curriculum: offering special courses designed to deal with diversity issues, or infusing diversity throughout the curriculum. Respondents said infusing diversity throughout the curriculum was the most desirable approach, because it was more holistic, because repetition of the idea throughout the curriculum emphasizes its importance, and because diversity is too broad an issue for special-topic courses to cover adequately (p. 387).

Fisher (2010) conducted a critical analysis of textbooks in public-speaking classes, and noticed that content was heavily slanted toward the "how" of communication rather than the "why." This bias is relevant as well. Often, suggestions of how to include diversity come from a top-down perspective—for example, using diverse sources when you tell a story. That is useful, but fails to consider the effects of telling a story in a particular way about individuals or groups. For example, it would be possible to achieve surface diversity by interviewing an African-American community member. However, on many topics it is not realistic to assume that there is a monolithic center of opinion from African-Americans. Presenting one voice as a sort of spokesperson could be misleading.

Models of Including Diversity in Communication

Although it involves mainly case studies, there is a

body of literature in the discipline presenting the results of efforts to teach attitudes towards diversity. One aspect of communicating to a diverse audience involves communicating across cultures. Carrell (2007) examined the effect of diversity training on empathy, which the author stated is a fundamental outcome of intercultural understanding. In reviewing the literature, Carrell noted that both intercultural and general communication competencies include empathy as an important dimension that can be measured as a trait, an attitude, and a behavior. She found that when intercultural constructs were included throughout a theory class, student attitudes changed, but when they were taught as a separate unit in production classes, there was no significant change in student attitudes.

The way students learn diversity lessons also matters. Walters (2010) describes a case study in which technical writing students were asked to create communication artifacts in multiple modes for people with various disabilities. The biggest lesson the students learned, Walters found, was that providing information in multiple modes does not automatically mean equal access. Students' experiences with adaptive technologies suggest that first-hand contact with the challenges faced by diverse sources and audiences may be important.

Exposure to diverse communities may increase the use of diverse sources. Smith (2008), in a content analysis of newscast sources, found that student-produced broadcast programs were more likely to contain interviews representing minority communities than were stories by professional reporters. Reporters who are, themselves, minorities, are even more likely to use minority sources. Smith concluded that access to minority communities had a direct effect on the number of minority sources included.

Duffield's (2011) work observes diversity from a curricular level. As commonly happens, input from educators and professionals was used to plan curriculum revisions. However, in this case the academic unit also sought input from the community. Professionally, media often seek input via reader panels, advocates and advisory boards, but it is not as common in education.

Within communication education, there are different views of desirable learning outcomes when students are exposed to diverse populations. Britt (2012) developed a theoretical typology of the value of service learning for communication students, suggesting that service learning can put the student in the role of learner, citizen or activist. Fixmer-Orais and Murray

(2009) dealt with similar issues in a course on communication activism in which students completed projects designed to make a difference in the community. Student comments at the end of the course suggested that the class was transformational for them, as they realized their power to enact change through their professional work. Smeltzer and Grzyb's (2009) work on experiential learning in communication relates to this theme, as they sought to provide reflection opportunities as part of a program built on critical media analysis. They found that students had to "interrogate their own subjectivities and preconceptions" (p. 5) regarding the community in order to complete the project.

Importance of Economic Diversity

Although the great majority of both policy about and studies of diversity in communication education deal with issues of race and gender, and to a lesser extent sexual orientation, economic difference is also important. Fair.org (2007) noted that advertisers don't like to support content dealing with the poor, while Hanrahan (2009) stated that if issues aren't on the government's explicit agenda, they don't tend to be on the media's either. Media consumers have noticed. A 2010 Pew Research Center Study found that, among U.S. citizens, 45 percent said media coverage of the poor was unfairly negative.

In her work on media framing of social class, Kendall (2011) noted that coverage of the poor was most often absent. When it did appear, it was usually in a negative light that ignored the societal issues that lead to poverty (p. 82). Often, Kendall found, stories were framed to focus on statistical change, enabling journalists to write about poverty as an issue without actually writing about poor people themselves (p. 84). This framing may have been chosen because the media professionals involved lacked exposure to or understanding of the poor. Russo (2012) noted that journalists may do a poor job of covering the economically disadvantaged, simply because college-educated reporters haven't spent a lot of time around working-class people.

Our work focused on this lack of exposure. If, during their media training, students were directly exposed to the poor and poverty issues, we asked, would this exposure affect their attitudes toward media coverage of the poor? Is direct exposure a good path to learning about how to cover the poor as a professional? We formulated three research questions to examine this:

RQ1: How did participating in service learning affect students' views of the adequacy of the media's coverage of the poor?

RQ2: What did students learn from this project with respect to the process of creating a narrative that reflects the sources in their context?

RQ3: What did students learn from this project with respect to the process of packaging a story that reflects the sources in their context for an audience?

Methods

Five sections, representing three different communication courses, participated in the study. The courses included Media Writing, a first course in writing for the media taken by students in all communication majors; Digital Media Convergence, a sophomore-level course for all majors that introduces students to media convergence technologies, prepares them for advanced studies in electronic media production, and teaches basic aesthetic principles applicable to audio, video, and web production; and Web Publishing, an upper-level course, required for print journalism majors and an elective for other communication students, that teaches students how to design web pages, how to use basic web development technologies and issues related to web content including usability, accessibility, and search engine optimization.

The community partner was a large food bank serving the county where the university is located. It provides groceries to 7,000 clients each month as well as other services such as life-skills mentoring, HIV testing, and referrals to other community resources such as GED classes.

Using a protocol approved by the university's internal review board, each section received an introduction to the food bank and its services, near the start of the semester. In the Media Writing class, students completed backgrounders on hunger in America, visiting the food bank for a tour during food distribution hours. They were assigned to write a feature story and given a basic topic, such as health screenings, or the difference the agency makes for a client. In the Digital Media Convergence class, students conducted background research on the agency itself, and were assigned, in teams of two, to produce two videos—a 30-second version and a two-minute version—that were to include client interviews as well as background footage setting the scene. They were given the



Students interview regular volunteers at the food bank about their jobs, their reasons for helping and their views of the clients. Student stories focused on volunteers, permanent staff or clients. Photo by Amanda Sturgill



Photo by Phillip Motley

A faculty member checks the camera set up before an outdoor interview. Students who had to shoot video had to deal with working with unfamiliar equipment to capture their stories. Photo by Phillip Motley



A team of media writing students gets a volunteer's story shot in the context of the food bagging room where she works. Photo by Amanda Sturgill



A team of a media writing student and two digital media convergence students talk with a client at the food bank waiting room. Teams including two videographers, two writers and a web editor from across 3 classes were assigned to create content for and develop a web story. Photo by Amanda Sturgill

option of taking still photographs as well. Topics for the videos were assigned, and planned so they would work with the feature stories from the Media Writing students. In the Web Publishing class, students completed an analytical exercise about charity web sites in general. After the Web Publishing students completed the exercise, each Web Publishing student became a member of a unique, five-person story team that also included two Digital Media Convergence students and two Media Writing students. The teams were asked to create a small website featuring a multimedia story about the organization, packaging the two print stories and one of the videos, plus an optional selection of still photos. Each team worked together across classes to create a planning document that faculty reviewed and gave feedback on, prior to the teams' visits to the site to collect content.

Over the course of a week, the student teams made site visits to conduct interviews, collect video and get background information. While the Media Writing and Digital Media Convergence students were primarily involved in getting information from sources during the visit, Web Publishing students provided direct service to the agency by assisting in packing bags of groceries, which gave them an opportunity to talk with the volunteers about the agency and its processes.

The Media Writing and Digital Media Convergence students completed their work shortly after all students had visited the food bank and, after faculty review, their stories and videos were given to the Web Publishing students.



Web publishing students did not have to capture content on site. Instead, they observed the client/staff interactions in the intake process and then interacted with volunteers while they helped to create bags of groceries for clients. Photo by Phillip Motley

At the end of the semester, all available students and all faculty visited the agency on a distribution morning to read some of the stories aloud, show some of the videos and show some of the websites to food bank staff and clients. They received feedback about how well the students' work did at accurately conveying the situation, and heard listened to a food bank client, staff members and a volunteer as they answered questions posed by one of the faculty members with regards to the portrayal of the food bank and its clients. Feedback was generally positive, indicating that the speakers thought the portrayal was both accurate and sensitive.

Over the course of the semester, students were required to answer reflection questions, including:

1. What questions do you still have about the food bank? Why do you think people in Burlington need a food pantry?
2. What surprised you at the food bank today? What was pretty much the way you expected it? How does what you saw today match up with the media's view of people who get food from charities (give specific examples)—This question was for the Media Writing students only.
3. What ideas did you have about food pantries or their clients prior to taking this class? Were these ideas supported or refuted by your research? How? What is the role of background research for the professional communicator?
4. How is working to present this message similar to, or different from, other work you have done, either in this class or in other classes or media experiences (give specific examples)?
5. How do you see the people who go to the food bank as similar to you? How do you see them as different from you? How might these differences affect the way you present messages about them?
6. Was communicating this message harder or easier to present than those in other assignments for this class? Why? Please answer both from the media you used and the subject matter.

Responses from the reflection questions were used in the analysis. In addition, at the start and end of the semester, each student completed an anonymous questionnaire that asked about his or her perception of media coverage of people needing food aid (open-ended), plus a series of questions about the attributes of people who need food aid that asked students to rate the people along several continua an-

chored by antonyms such as lucky/unlucky and hard-working/lazy. Faculty also kept field notes throughout the process that were available for analysis.

Results from the questions about media coverage were coded for positive, negative and mixed and entered into SPSS for data analysis. Writings in the field notes and reflection questions were subjected to qualitative analysis by two researchers as follows. First, the researchers independently evaluated all text to generate a tentative list of frames. The researchers discussed the frames and then, in tandem, coded the texts on a paragraph basis, assigning them to frames until saturation was reached and no new frames were identified. A formal inter-rater reliability was not calculated, due to the concerns raised by Armstrong *et al.* (1997). Rather, the researchers used dialogue during shared coding to negotiate meaning, in order to maintain consistency. During the project, member checks with both the faculty members and students who participated were used. To address reflexivity, field notes and memos were written throughout the data collection and analysis phase and were used during the analysis as well. As a reflexivity check, a faculty member who was not involved in the coding evaluated all of the thematic groupings and their contents for consonance with her experiences. Additionally, three student participants evaluated the groupings and contents, as a validity check.

Results

Research Question 1: How did participating in service learning affect students' views of the adequacy of the media's coverage of the poor?

Research question 1 dealt with student beliefs about the media's coverage of the poor. Data for these was collected in pre- and post- experience surveys. The results of an open-ended question about the accuracy of media's coverage of the poor which was then coded 0 for not accurate, 1 for sometimes or maybe accurate and 2 for accurate. Table 1 shows that chi square analysis indicated there was a statistically significant difference in student opinion of the media before and after the exposure through service learning. Differences in the overall total number of responses are due to students who elected to not fill out the post-test questionnaire.

As can be seen from Table 1, some students' attitudes on the media coverage did change as a result of the experience. This evidence of attitude change is borne out by the comments in reflection questions.

Table 1

	Not Accurate	Sometimes Accurate	Accurate	Total
Pre-experience	27 (36.0%)	37 (49.3%)	11 (14.6%)	75
Post-experience	27 (52.9%)	17 (33.3%)	7 (13.7%)	51
p<.001				

Students who felt the media were accurate prior to the experience provided justifications such as, “I don’t hear stories about poor people too often, but I don’t believe they are inaccurate. I don’t think the news would need to write false stories.” The majority of the students expressed mixed views, saying the coverage is sometimes accurate. Their rationales tended to either blame the victim or treat the coverage of the poor as accurate, but largely absent. One student wrote, “I don’t think so because the media usually portrays them as doing something wrong to get in that situation, and that isn’t always true. They are right a fair amount of the time, though.” Another, commenting on the absence of stories about the poor, wrote, “When they are told, they are reasonably accurate, but they are not told enough.” Finally, several students commented on media bias in general as a reason for inaccuracy. One said, “I believe different media sources tell stories of the poor differently because of their agendas, so it’s difficult to know which is accurate and which is not.”

While at the start, a majority of students (63.9%) said media representations were either always or sometimes accurate, afterwards the proportions were reversed, with a majority of students (52.9%) saying the media were inaccurate and only 47.1% saying media representations were either sometimes or always accurate.

Many provided direct commentary about elements of coverage that might be inaccurate. One student wrote, “Many times it portrays them as helpless and not in the best light, which I don’t think is accurate because not all people just choose to not have a job.” This sentiment was shared by many others. Students who found the media to be inaccurate also commented on the lack of coverage and the tendency to present the poor as a class. As one student wrote, “I don’t think the media often represents poor people as individuals, which is a shame. Instead they are just ‘the unemployed,’ ‘those on food stamps,’ etc.” A few of the students went on to discuss the reasons for the perceived inaccuracy, with one stating, “It’s just difficult for others to comprehend the problem unless they have been there.” Another noted the ramifica-

tions of inaccurate coverage, writing, “I believe that many fortunate people who are financially privileged have the idea that people who go to food banks are not hard workers, are not invested in their jobs, didn’t go to college, didn’t want to go to college, and are simply waiting for a handout. This is an extremely unfortunate stereotype, and propagates the financial divide we have been our social and economic classes.”

Research Question 2: What did the students learn from this project with respect to the process of creating a narrative that reflects the sources in their context?

Because these were all applied courses in communication, the students were expected to learn about gathering information and presenting a coherent narrative for an audience. Both student and faculty reflection journals indicated that the project provided learning opportunities in the areas of background research, preparation for gathering content, and creating the narrative.

When it came to creating the stories and videos from the interviews, it seemed that the students moved from characterizations about the agency’s clients to seeing them as complex “characters”—people with individual backgrounds and needs.



<https://youtu.be/oyfDpUSVs0>

Prior to the visit, students were asked why the food bank was needed in this community. The great majority of responses to this question referred to the level of poverty in the community. This kind of response is interesting, because the median household income is \$42,097 (U.S. Census, 2010), which is well above the federal poverty level for families with up to eight members. There were also many comments equating hunger with homelessness. Engaging with the beginning stages of research on the project led to some changes in perception. As one student commented, “I thought that food pantries were only for homeless people, and that the pantries survived only

through donations. These ideas were clearly refuted by my research, as this is not the case at all.”

After the students had direct exposure to the clients on their tour of the agency, many introspected about the similarities and differences between themselves and the subjects of their stories, with many commenting on the good fortune or stable family background that meant they did not have to worry about food. One student wrote, “They probably take a lot less for granted than I do.” As the students reflected on the actual situation of the people they met, it affected their plans for gathering further information. One student wrote, “I feel that there is a barrier between us when we talk; I try to be as open and understanding as possible but I feel as though they have their guard up when they talk to me.” Another noted that it was important to take the source’s feelings into account when preparing for an interview, noting, “When I was preparing my questions for the interview I struggled with finding wording that wouldn’t be offensive. It’s hard to ask someone why they need food aid.”

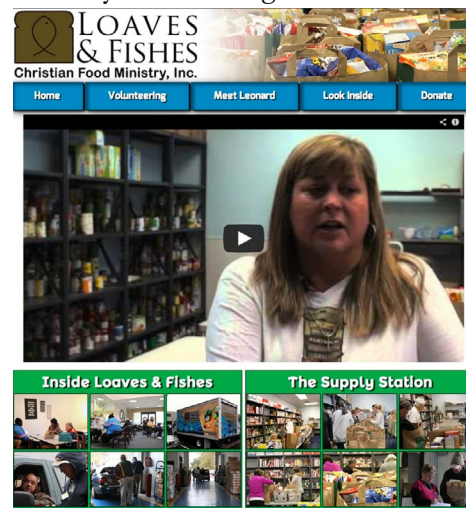
Of particular interest was the reasoning a great majority of students gave for their concerns about semantics and accuracy: their own inability to fully empathize with the sources. A student wrote, “These differences could cause me to place them on a lower pedestal than people like me who aren’t experiencing food shortages. They could also cause me to over-sympathize (with) the situation, which would result in video bias.” Another noted that even simple lack of understanding could diminish the story. “Because I cannot fully understand things from their point of view, I may be less sympathetic to their situation or even not appreciate the effort of Loaves and Fishes like they do.” Students also discussed their solutions to this problem. One wrote, “While writing my feature story, I tried to be very matter-of-fact to avoid a sympathetic tone in my writing.”

Research Question 3: What did the students learn from this project with respect to the process of packaging a story that reflects the sources in their context for an audience?

Many of the comments dealt with actually crafting the narrative after the background, b-roll footage and interviews were completed. Comments focused on integrating the students’ knowledge about the situation of the clients into a fair portrayal for the food bank’s audience. As one student noted, “What was the hardest part was writing in a way that didn’t sound

offensive or embarrassing for the client.” Students worried about the semantics of their stories and how they would be understood in context. A student from Web Publishing wrote, “Words such as ‘poor’ and ‘little money’ could be taken the wrong way, especially on the web. It is important to choose careful wording when creating a website because the text can easily be read and taken the wrong way.” Another, from the Media Writing class, wrote, “It can be easy to paint them as victims of bad luck, but that isn’t fair to them. I think it makes it more important to tell their full story and to avoid sweeping generalizations or playing to stereotypes.”

Web Publishing students, in particular, perhaps because they are further along in their education, offered specific comments on the audience. One wrote, “In my web design, I will be sure to incorporate clean and linear strategies that make the website easy to use and read.” And another wrote, “I’ll be sure to use language that’s easy to understand and do my best to make layout and navigation natural.”



Example of website created by web development students.

Students also indicated learning about the affordances of different modes on a story. One Digital Media Convergence student noted, “Communicating this message was easier because we had many different ways to do so: through audio (voice overs, natural sound, music), through visual (photographs, video clips), etc. Audio can create or enhance a mood and inform your audience, while visual accompanies it to provide more information and details.”

A Media Writing student made note of the difficulties of writing, in which you mostly tell, versus video, where you can also show through images.

However, the need to master technology while conducting interviews in an uncomfortable environ-



<https://youtu.be/ndXiS11o8io>

ment proved problematic for some students. One Media Writing student noted that s/he made a point of audio recording the interviews for this assignment because s/he was concerned about the ramifications of misquoting someone. A Web Publishing student wrote, “The real challenge was found in communicating the subject matter in an effective manner which would also allow for an aesthetically pleasing website. I think the more I played around with the technicalities of the website (HTML, CSS), the easier it was to make the subject matter presentable.”

Both the Web Publishing and Media Writing students dealt with issues of formatting and technology back in the classroom. That wasn’t true for the Digital Media students, who had to deal with technology in order to actually obtain their information. As one wrote, “In terms of setting up the camera, it was difficult to get exactly the shots that we wanted because we had to calibrate the camera each time we moved it. However, the more practice we have, the quicker and smoother we will be able to transition. In terms of the subject matter, it was more difficult to find the exact clips and audio that would perfectly express our message. Because we are working with other people in an unfamiliar place with a time deadline, there was less time to put together the shots we wanted and to interview people extensively until we had the sound clips that worked.”

Discussion

Based on the experiences in this project, although service learning added a level of complexity to course planning, it did seem to have a meaningful impact for students. Contacting the poor in person allowed students to learn first-hand what their situations were. This learning, in turn, seemed to encourage a more nuanced analysis of the way the poor are presented in

the media.

As an applied project, it was also effective in eliciting learning about the process of reporting, creating, and telling stories about a specific population. Students learned about the meaning of background research in shaping their own expectations, as well as plans for gathering first-person information. They had occasion to consider the effects of their reporting practice and narrative construction on their sources, in a way that is less obvious when reporting stories about people like themselves on campus. Several students commented that knowing there would be an audience outside the university made them think carefully about how they would present information. As students had the chance to see subjects of their work react to its presentation, they saw first-hand the power that their words and images could have. And having to use the tools of their craft, such as cameras and code editors, in a high-stakes project helped them to reflect explicitly about the affordances and limitations of these tools.

Limitations

First and foremost, this represents a case study of particular students doing a particular project. Therefore, generalizing the results to all projects and expecting the same results is not appropriate. The exercise itself also suffered from some weaknesses due to the logistical difficulties of having 89 students working in the community on the same project. These difficulties are a part of any service-learning project, but ameliorating them to the extent possible is important in providing the best educational experience, considering the desired learning outcomes. In faculty field notes, in particular, it was noted that the fact that not all students had many direct interactions with clients was a weakness. All students were able to observe the clients directly, the opportunity to talk with them that not all of them took beyond greetings, and the chance and to learn about them, at least, through conversations with volunteers or staff, but this may not have been as effective an experience as those of students who actually interviewed clients in-depth.

With respect to the data collection, the researchers were also the instructors of the classes. This duality is both good and bad, in that the researchers, through their participation with the students, were in a position to interpret and make inferences from students’ self-reports in their reflections. However, in the interests of performing well in the class, it is entirely possi-

ble that students focused reflections in order to please the faculty with whom they worked. The researchers did try to moderate this effect by asking students to evaluate the conclusions well after they were enrolled in courses with any of the researchers, but it remains a concern.

Implications for Practice and Further Study

Although the logistics were, at times, formidable, all faculty involved, by the end, believed that this was an experience worth repeating for communication students. In addition to the opportunity to learn contextually situated communication skills, students also had a chance to reflect on issues such as the role of the media in creating stereotypes that are sometime hard to convey in a skills-based class. Specifying learning outcomes up front and looking for ways to include them throughout the class (like having an assigned backgrounder about hunger issues) was key in managing the service learning while also meeting the course goals. Other suggestions were to communicate early and often with the community partner, to have a single point of contact for the whole project to facilitate communication, and for faculty to be present at the time that the students are on-site to scaffold the experience for the students.

With respect to the students themselves, we noticed that students at different levels within the major engaged with the project in different ways. Students who were enrolled in Media Writing, the first skills class in the major, thought about the reporting process and dealing with the sources, and with societal impacts. Students who were enrolled in Digital Media Convergence thought about the affordances of different types of visual storytelling. The advanced students in Web Publishing were focused on the communication factors at a higher level, including thinking about audience issues. Although service learning is often used in a capstone-type course, where it is more obvious that the students have valuable skills to offer the community partner, we found that if the assignments are planned to grow out of other learning in the class, service learning could be beneficial in an introductory course, for both the partner and the students.

For further investigation, it would be valuable to look more expressly at the outcomes for students at different educational levels and/or different levels of previous experience with service. It might be possible to develop a long-term relationship with a partner that could result in developing cohorts of stu-

dents who work with the same community partner in multiple classes over multiple years, ideally providing more useful students to that partner, as they travel through the major. However, this idea needs to be tested. The focus of this study was economic diversity, but it would be worthwhile to apply this idea in venues where it would be possible to encounter other types of diversity, such as in age or race.

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