



Indirect vs. Direct Service Learning in Communication: Implications for Student Learning and Community Benefit

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Abstract:

Service learning is an increasingly popular pedagogy in mass communication classes. However, it can be difficult to negotiate in the context of student and community partner schedules and cultures. Because working in a community is challenging, students in some classes work on materials for community projects without directly contacting the community. Does lack of contact reduce the effects of service learning? This paper compares two classes working on the same project for the same agency. One class worked on-site and the other in the classroom only. Although both approaches allowed for reflection about professional practice, direct contact was needed for reflection about civic engagement.

Introduction

To provide both practical experience for students and to do good in the community, some communication instructors use service learning as a pedagogy. Often, this pedagogy involves completing an applied communication project to meet a community partner's needs. These projects can sometimes be completed without the students coming into direct contact with the population served by the community partner, a logistical advantage in managing the service-learning experience, but does omitting direct contact diminish the value of the experience? This paper compares the experience of students in two classes who worked on the same service-learning project—one class with direct contact and one without. Advantages and disadvantages of the two models are discussed.

Review Of Literature

Because communication is an applied field, and because some communication subfields have an explicit

public-service orientation, service learning is increasingly popular for communication students. Oster-Aaland, Selnow, Nelson and Pearson (2004) found that, over time, more communication departments are offering service-learning experiences for academic credit. However, the authors were concerned about the nature of service-learning experiences after finding that fewer offered structured reflection on the process, a component of academic service learning that some authors say is essential to the process (Ash & Clayton, 2004). Reflection separates service learning from other important volunteer work (Dunlap, 1998), and it can help students engage with the communities in which they work (Maher, 2003). As Turnley (2007) notes, students can use reflection to place the practice of their respective fields in a larger context.

In communication and other professional fields, service learning can be seen as an extension of experiential education. Katula and Threnhauser (1999) say, "Experiential education makes knowledge into

know-how” (p. 240). They suggest two philosophies on which service learning is based: a need to help others and a need to integrate theory and practice. For students looking to enter professional careers and the faculty who train them, the second—service learning as a form of practical training—is an obvious advantage. As Hafer (1999) notes, service learning provides a “vocational apprenticeship” (p. 417) by letting students accomplish civic good while developing academic skills. According to Kahl Jr. (2010), service learning transfers communication theory to society instead of stopping with students.

But practicing skills and securing knowledge are not the sole goal of service learning. The American Association of Higher Education’s [definition of service learning](#) includes meeting community needs and fostering civic responsibility as key outcomes of the service-learning process in universities. Improving knowledge of important community issues (Silverman, 2007), civic engagement, cultural sensitivity and appreciation of implications of power and privilege (Endres & Gould, 2009) have all been seen as ideal outcomes of communication service learning.

Communication is a field that includes theoretical approaches from the social and behavioral sciences in addition to skills such as writing, editing, strategy and development of communication artifacts like articles and broadcasts. Because of the applied nature of many undergraduate communication courses, effective service learning that engages both professionalism and citizenship is a challenge. Scott (2004) discusses a “hyperpragmatist ideology” (p. 289) in which a student’s professional success drives community-based projects. This ideology limits students’ ability to consider the reasons for their work and the effects of their work on sources and audiences. “The complex, time-consuming tasks of a service-learning project thus leave little time for reflection, ethical intervention, or anything else, especially when the project is initiated and completed within a semester” (p. 289). In Bacon’s review (2004) of a textbook of service learning in technical writing, she criticizes the book for being “resolutely pre-professional” (p. 366). She notes:

Students who limit their role to ‘writing consultant’ are likely to have extended contact with staff members at community organizations [who are usually both middle-class and professional], but minimal contact with the organizations’ clients. Their service-learning experience, then, introduces them to a narrow

slice of the ‘community’ so that, in the case of students whose backgrounds are middle-class or privileged, a valuable learning opportunity goes untapped. (p. 367)

Arranging service learning that meets both professional skills and citizenship goals is a difficult matter. For example, Reams (2003) notes that placing students outside the university can enhance legal risk. Although Reams’ article focuses on health-care students, similar issues exist for communication students—libel, for example. Other potential problems include violating student rights to privacy or placing them in dangerous situations. In addition, faculty lack control when students go to work in the community, which can lead to problems. Rosing, Reed, Ferrari and Bothne (2010) found in a study of more than 2,000 cases that the top student complaints in service learning are a lack of preparation at the site, a sense that sites were not appropriate and time and scheduling conflicts. Further, they found, if sites were unprepared to deal with volunteers, students did not see the experience as meaningful work. Importantly, the authors also found that non-traditional students had more difficulty benefitting from service learning because of logistical problems:

If systematically analyzed, students’ comments provide insight not only into areas of weakness for any one placement site but also into students’ perceptions of their role on the front lines of a sometimes tenuous partnership between two institutions with different missions, practices, and cultures. Students often want more direction and supervision than most community-based organizations are able to provide. (p. 473)

Plowfield, Wheeler and Raymond (2005) note that successful academic-community partnerships rely on understanding. Characteristics of nonprofits that make service learning problematic include over-committed staff and a lack of resources for things like printing and web-hosting. Many nonprofits are informal, loosely structured organizations (McEachern, 2001) with inexperienced staff. Students may be expected to work with volunteers, whose level of preparation and commitment can vary widely.

To allow students to contribute to the public good with minimal fuss, Heckert (2010) discusses two variants of service learning. One redefines the community to include campus groups. In the other, termed end-product collaboration, faculty members further develop the students’ work at the end of the

course to deliver an acceptable product to the community partner. Another way to ameliorate navigation between the community and the university is to minimize or remove altogether the students' dealings with the community partner, or to limit interactions to one or several staff liaisons. In this model, faculty may negotiate with the community partner and turn its needs into a clear assignment for students to complete within the boundaries of a typical student's life, with the scheduling and access to resources students are used to having such as wireless Internet and already known computer software.

This structure allows students to work on real projects and benefit the community at the same time. Evidence exists to suggest that students also learn about issues relevant to the community (Silverman, 2007), but some learning opportunities may be missed. Corbett and Kendall (1999) found that completing volunteer hours on site helped put a face on the agency and led to better understanding of the community partner. Nonetheless, critics of service learning say it's hard to achieve a sense of connection to the community in a short-term project (Panici & Lasky, 2002). Panici and Lasky conducted a survey of faculty and found that courses with a service-learning component required on average 40 hours of on-site work over the duration of a course. They found that work at a service site develops student character, lets students experience aspects of the working world and improves the community as well as the students. But the amount of time required for students and faculty was a major drawback to incorporating on-site service learning. Also, one-shot projects that can be completed in a single semester are not always appropriate. "Product-oriented service learning, although certainly the most evident in the discipline as revealed by this survey, may lead to cursory partnerships whereby the community organization receives a brochure or website but no meaningful connection has been established between the academic unit and the larger community," they write, adding, "A reliance on product-specific experience may diminish the service experience" (p. 120). Whitaker and Albertson (2011) write about what happened when the client was people with intellectual disabilities. The community partners' clients became attached to the students, and when the students graduated, the clients experienced a sense of loss. If students lack a rich understanding of the community partner, according to Corbett and Kendall (1999), they may not communicate effective-

ly or even correctly about the partner. At best, this is useless to the partner; at worst, it is damaging.

Britt (2012) notes three primary models of service learning in communication: skill-set practice and reflexivity; civic values and critical citizenship; and social justice activism. In the first, the student is a learner; in the second, a citizen; in the third, a change agent. This case study investigates the implications of the first model given a product-oriented project, comparing the experiences of students who interacted directly with a community partner and its clients with those of students who did not. Impacts on students were categorized by three domains of potential learning. Because of the logistically challenging nature of service learning, we were also interested in the impacts of the two models on faculty teaching the courses.

Research Questions

We ask:

RQ1: What did the two groups of students learn about the nature of non-profit organizations themselves?

RQ2: What did the two groups of students learn about the clients served by the community partner?

RQ3: What did the two groups of students learn about the role of communication in non-profits?

RQ4: What were the experiences of the faculty teaching the courses?

Methods

For this case study analysis, we used two communication classes at a liberal arts university located in the South with an enrollment of about 6,000 students. In one case, seniors in either broadcast or print journalism were enrolled in a multimedia storytelling class as a senior capstone. The goals of this course include choosing and appropriately telling stories in multiple media—print, graphics, still photo, video and audio—and contributing to complex stories as a part of a multidisciplinary team.

In the other case, juniors, most of them in the journalism sequence, were enrolled in a web publishing class. Goals for this course included communicating effectively with web-based media by making appropriate visual and site architecture choices, optimizing media for the web and coding and styling to display information.

Both classes worked with [an agency near the university](#) that serves resettled refugees in the major metropolitan area closest to the campus. The agency runs multiple sites in residential communities, each serving somewhat different populations. The agency was interested in creating separate but similar webpages for each of its service sites, as well as a general web page for children at all sites who are served by the agency. Each site is managed by an Americorps worker. Faculty for both courses met with staff three times before the semester started. They also visited the community partner sites.



Children at one of the community partner sites get a lesson in video work from a student.

Multimedia journalism students were assigned to teams that included both print and broadcast journalism students. They were told to provide basic information about the programming at their site, as well as feature material highlighting the people served there. The volunteer coordinator for the agency gave an orientation presentation to the multimedia journalism class, during which students asked questions about the project. Multimedia journalism students visited the community partner sites multiple times to collect content. In the first part of the semester, they presented the near-complete content to the volunteer coordinator and the faculty member in charge of the web publishing class. After getting feedback, the students completed the work.

Web publishing students were also assigned to groups to develop one of the web sites (one for each agency site and one for children). The professor gave an orientation presentation to the agency, assigned work to the students and handled questions and issues as they arose. The professor also talked through issues raised by content from the multimedia journalism class. The work that the web publishing students

did was accomplished on their own as homework, with input from both faculty.

Information on student learning was collected in several ways. Students were asked to complete reflection questions about the activities they had completed for the project, what they learned about the course material, why they thought their expertise would be useful for this kind of community partner and what they learned about working in professional teams. Faculty also kept notes and compared them in weekly meetings. At the end of the semester, faculty attended a meeting at which the student work was presented to the agency's volunteer coordinator, director and Americorps volunteers.

All student reflections and faculty records, including memos and e-mails related to the project, were used for qualitative analysis. Two coders worked independently to identify themes that emerged from the written materials. Then they worked sentence by sentence through the material to assign items to those categories. The completed paper was reviewed by student representatives from each class as a validity check. As a reflexivity check, another faculty member who teaches service learning classes in the department reviewed the paper.

Results

With regard to research question 1: "What did the two groups of students learn about the nature of non-profit organizations themselves?" the multimedia journalism students had relevant observations



A student lets a child at another community partner site see what is being recorded on video.

about the nature of their client, and in particular, about the difficulties nonprofits face. For example, one student wrote, “Honestly, the visit today revealed to me just how difficult things are for the [redacted]. They don’t have many staff members, resources, space and, more importantly, volunteers. If nothing else, I learned about the importance of this project for them. It’s an opportunity to create a site that can potentially increase the opportunities for volunteer involvement.”

In planning and making visits to the community partner, students learned about the constraints within which the agency operated. Students experienced difficulty scheduling visits when community sites had programming, and they learned to schedule visits when busy staff could assist them. They also noted how the agency and the clients have schedule differences that make it difficult for the clients to develop trusting relationships with agency staff.

Comments from the web publishing students tended to be more general than specific to the community partner. For example, one web publishing student wrote, “Any group like [redacted for partner privacy] should have a website with images, video and text. Building awareness through these websites is crucial.” Another wrote, “It is useful because many people may be looking to volunteer, donate, or research about the group. By having a web presence the center can be more accessible and more professional.”

With regard to research question 2, “What did the two groups of students learn about the clients served by the community partner?,” as expected, the multimedia journalism students had direct opportunities to learn about agency’s clients and their cultures. Their learning experiences included an overview presentation in class and a site visit to meet with the Americorps director. Once the students were assigned to the centers, they also spent time as a group writing a background document on refugees from the countries served by that center. This document included conditions in the home country, geopolitical events that led to their refugee status and the condition of refugees who resettled in the United States.

They also learned from direct contact while gathering content. For example, students learned that, in many cases, the children of refugees had learned English but their parents had not. They learned that it is hard for some of these families to develop trusting relationships because of the events that led them to seek refugee status. As one student noted, “I also feel that having families that want to talk to us may be an issue.

It was amazing to see how many stares we received simply walking around today. There weren’t many people around, but those who were around seemed to glare. We would wave or say hello and didn’t really receive response, which caused me to worry about individuals being able to open up to us and the amount of time it’s going to take to make something like that happen.”

The web publishing students did not have written comments that dealt with client culture. They did have limited opportunities to learn about the culture, but these opportunities either came from the instructor or the other class—for instance, they learned about the community through the multimedia journalism class’s work. Students in the web publishing class discussed how well the multimedia journalism students’ work met the intended scope of the project. This reference to the scope of the project is an example of the “broad context” of the community partner’s work. The multimedia journalism students also had a more focused context that included day-to-day operations for the organization and its clients.

But students also evidenced difficulty in understanding the community partner. For example, when representatives of the community partner were asked if they wanted to include social media in their web presence, they were concerned about having enough staff input to consistently update it, the faculty member who worked with the web publishing class noted. The idea that social media was neither an ability nor a primary concern was a surprise to a class of social media aficionados.

With regard to the third research question, “What did the two groups of students learn about the role of communication in non-profits?” both student groups identified several relevant aspects of communication practice. In the multimedia journalism class, students considered the role of multimedia as they applied it to their situation. For example, one student wrote, “It is useful because there are different ways to tell each story, and some work better than others for each angle. Things like pictures and videos of the children playing will be beneficial because they show action and make the story interesting, but articles about the site are better because that is fact based and would not be as interesting to watch in a video.” Another stated, “I think visitors to the website should see the conditions under which these students are asked to learn—in puddles, in the grass. Photos have long spurred people into action and I think they will do no less here.” Another

noted, "I have noticed that many of the approaches to storytelling in this project differ depending on the concentration of journalism, which is fascinating." A print major who accompanied a broadcast student on a visit to the agency site found that "the questions we were asking the volunteers were completely different, undoubtedly coinciding with our respective concentrations . . . I was focusing on gathering facts and information that we could use, and I noticed (redacted) questions prompted more of a sound-bite type answer to be used in a video clip."

The web publishing students also showed evidence of learning about applied communication concepts. Because of logistical issues with site visits, not every group of web publishing students had the same quantity and type of content to work with. As one web publishing student noted, "I have learned that when you are working with a client you have to be extremely organized and work with them to fit their needs." There were other lessons as well. One student commented on the need to integrate appropriate web design and content. "I also learned the importance of selecting good fonts and colors to convey some kind of goal for your site—professionalism, 'just for kids', etc.," the student wrote.

As for the final research question, "How did the two different types of projects affect the faculty teaching the courses?" Overall, these projects require a cost-benefit calculation. The faculty member who taught multimedia journalism wrote, "There are communication issues and logistical mismatches that are just inherent in doing this kind of work with people who have other day jobs. This causes stress for the students." This stress results in push-back and a perception that the class is poorly organized. This faculty member worried about how this would affect student course evaluations, which are used as a career assessment tool for faculty.

In contrast, the faculty member who taught web publishing wrote, "They didn't complain about the work and, actually, seemed motivated by it at times. Outside of their buy-in to the service-learning idea, I think having a real client, especially one with obvious needs, motivated many students to do a quality job. They were as concerned about the outcome of the project as they were about their actual learning in the class. For many students, being able to make a tangible connection to a professional outcome is an important factor in a class that is technically challenging to them." This does not mean the web publishing stu-

dents didn't have logistical difficulties. As the faculty member also wrote, "There were plenty of other issues that I had to manage in order to have the project work smoothly. One was working with the multimedia journalism class: doing so was challenging in terms of communication, planning, sharing of resources, and over direction of goals and outcomes."

Although both faculty members experienced challenges, both believed the service-learning process increased learning opportunities. The multimedia journalism faculty member wrote: "I also see my students learning some things that would be hard to teach them in the abstract. For example, my students observed differences in the way interviews are conducted in print and broadcast. If I gave them a well-organized assignment that was close to campus, even if they had to have both print and video content, they would undoubtedly collect information separately and then pull a project together at the end. So the limited availability and distance of the service-learning component really forced them to work together in a way that they learned things I don't think they would have otherwise." The web publishing faculty member wrote: "I do believe that teaching the class in a project-based approach is beneficial, especially when the outcome of the project is authentic. Working for a real client, in a group, and across multiple classes are all valuable professional practice skills for students in a web publishing class."

Discussion

Definitions of service learning indicate two desirable outcomes: practicing skills and reflecting on that practice, and learning about issues in a way that improves future citizenship.

As an extension of experiential learning, service learning helps students to connect the idealized, theoretical world of classroom learning with the larger world of professional practice. Students in both the contact and no-contact classes seemed to make this connection. Both the multimedia journalism students, who worked directly with the community partner, and the web publishing students, who did not, showed ability to contextualize their experience as communicators.

When it came to learning about issues that might improve future citizenship, multimedia journalism students, who had direct contact with the community partner and its clients, received clear benefit. The multimedia journalism students considered their val-

Table 1
Comparison of experiences for direct contact
and indirect contact models

	Multimedia journalism: direct contact	Web publishing: indirect client contact
Collaborative work		
Work within small team	Yes	Yes
Teamwork within class	Yes	Yes
Teamwork across classes	Yes	Yes
Professional training		
Manage client relationship	Yes	No
Develop own work process	Yes	Yes
Complete team task	Yes	Yes
Integrate task across types of classes	Yes	Yes
Civic Engagement		
Understanding of culture— direct observation	Yes	No
Understanding of culture— mediated observation	Yes	Yes
Situating culture in the larger context—direct observation	Yes	No
Situating culture in the larger context—mediated observation	Yes	No

Table 2
Costs vs. benefits of including direct client
contact in the course of a project

	Cost or benefit?
Logistical factors	
Real cost to students or institution (materials, gas, etc.)	Cost
Stress to scheduling	Cost
Time spent managing community relationship	Cost
Professional factors	
Work on professional task	Benefit
Work in authentic environment	Cost & benefit
Work with group autonomy	Benefit
Civic engagement factors	
Ability to see client situation holistically	Benefit
Need to communicate across cultures	Cost & benefit

ue and limitations as storytellers in context, and their reflections indicated that they identified and understood some of the clients' cross-cultural issues. For the web publishing students, who didn't have direct contact, benefits were less obvious. The web publishing students were able to think in general terms about the scope and value of their work for the community partner, but they did not connect the value of their work to the outcomes for society. Table 1 summarizes the students' experiences.

As the table shows, students in both web publishing and multimedia journalism did collaborative work, which gave both types of students the opportunity to learn from working with multidisciplinary teams. For both the multimedia journalism and the web publishing students, the ability to practice professional skills was similar. One goal of service learning is practicing skills and reflecting on that practice; students had this benefit regardless of whether they worked with the client directly.

When it came to civic engagement and cultural understanding, however, multimedia journalism students had the advantage because they were dealing with the society first-hand. The web publishing students, who did not contact the community partner or its clients directly, had to rely on mediated experiences of the society, primarily from students in the other class. The consequences of this lack of contact were found in their reflections, which did not offer the same introspection on cultural issues and their relevance to communication and society.

Students were challenged on two levels: All students had to negotiate work with other students, and they had to work toward the objectives of a real client's interests. The multimedia journalism students did more. They also had to solve the logistical problems of working in the client's environment—travel, scheduling, language barriers and cultural differences. The multimedia journalism students experienced more of the messiness associated with service learning, but in turn they received more of the benefit. This ability to experience an ill-defined problem provided a valuable opportunity for students to solve a real—not simulated—problem. They also interacted with and learned from members of their civic community they otherwise would not likely encounter in their daily lives as privileged university students.

Often, service-learning courses for communication students involve producing a tangible communication artifact for a community partner, which

benefits students because the project mimics the professional roles, environment and situations they can expect in their careers. The service-learning work in this project provided this benefit but also something more: the chance to work collaboratively within their respective classes and across the two classes as a larger team that depended on the skills of each group to meet a client's goals. This, too, mimicked the real world manner in which separate divisions within an organization, or two discrete businesses, work together on a project. However, the chance that working on a project like this might promote future civic engagement was lower for the web publishing students, who worked on the project without direct contact with the beneficiaries.

For faculty, managing the service learning and integrating the work of two classes proved logistically formidable—more so for the professor of multimedia journalism, because the students had to interact directly with the community partner and its clients, which necessitated negotiating schedules and working with the students on appropriate dress, manner and language. Although both classes showed evidence of learning about the larger cultural aspects, the thinking was more project-based for the web publishing students and a mix of project-based and community-focused for the multimedia journalism students.

For the instructors, providing the chance to think about the community may make the increased logistical challenge worthwhile. Table 2 summarizes the costs and benefits of this project, as a tool for instructors to think about the affordances of using indirect and/or direct service learning as a pedagogy.

Limitations

This study is limited by its small size (36 participants) and lack of generalizability. It is further limited by the project scope. Although the students who spent time on-site had a better appreciation of the clients' situations, they still had few opportunities to work with their community partner client, due to the length of the assignment and the difficulty of managing the content gathering. A more robust study could examine the differences between indirect and direct service learning better if the students who had contact were involved for longer or more extensively. That said, even with the relatively limited exposure of the contact group, differences still emerged.

Although service learning is messy, complex and often uncomfortable for students—and challenging

and time-consuming for faculty—eliminating direct contact with the community partner proved costly. Perhaps doing so means a lost opportunity to fully experience the civic engagement aspect of service learning.

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