

Student Reflection and Reading Reports in Service Learning: An Analysis of a Service Learning Course at Pace University, New York

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Abstract

This paper analyzes both reading and reflection reports assigned in a service learning course taught at Pace University during the Fall 2004 and Spring 2005 semesters. The reading reports were based on instructor-selected articles, poems and speeches. The reflection reports took the form of written reports, graphic presentations, video documentaries, and pieces of artwork. Both components of the course were treated as separate projects, but in the course of grading and discussing the reports, the integral relationship between both components was revealed. It was further evident that the reading assignments had an impact on how the students viewed the community service project they were engaged in and, in some cases, changed their perspectives of community service as a whole. The results of this analysis led to the reassessment, by this author, of how each component could be further utilized in future courses.

Keywords: service learning, reading reports, reflection reports, community service, community engagement, experiential learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Pace University's Center for Community Outreach (CCO) administers several service learning courses, in conjunction with the various Schools of the university. These courses fulfill a Civic Engagement and Public Values credit requirement and are open to all majors. The School of Computer Science and Information Systems (CSIS) has recognized the importance of such courses to the students, faculty, university and community and has created successful course models since 2003, such as "Web-Design for Non-Profit Organizations", which combines technology with service learning.

The joint CSIS/CCO service learning courses integrate well into any CS or IS curriculum and have served to benefit all majors. The course teaches the use of technology in a nonprofit paradigm and the important role

technology plays in assisting community service organizations to better serve and empower their target populations. It allows the students to interact with the community service organization and put into use what they are learning in the classroom with their real-world service.

Service learning courses include reading and reflection report components. Student reading reports are based on required reading of articles related to community service on all levels -- local, national, and in some cases, international -- and students follow guidelines in writing the reports. Students are required to reflect on their community service experience within the course. The reflection can be in the form of creative writing, a written report based on interviews, an oral presentation, artwork, graphical slide presentation, photographic or video presen-

tation, or individual or group journal. Both types of reports foster discussion of community service experiences in the classroom.

2. DEFINITIONS

"The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC), a program of Learn and Serve America, operates America's premier website supporting the service-learning efforts of schools, higher education institutions, communities, and tribal nations." The NSLC defines service-learning as "... a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities." Since it is still an evolving area, different agencies and educational institutions may define service-learning differently, but conceptually it is widely agreed upon that "Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content."

"Community Service is volunteerism that occurs in the community--action taken to meet the needs of others and better the community as a whole." Many students are engaged in community service projects while in high school and college as part of the curriculum and may be engaged in their personal lives voluntarily or as part of required national service, as in foreign countries. Many don't always view community service as volunteering when it is attached to receiving some concrete reward. "Volunteerism - The performance of formal service to benefit others or one's community without receiving any external rewards; such programs may or may not involve structured training and reflection."

At Pace University, the focus on community engagement requires students to take a number of credits towards fulfilling their Civic Engagement and Public Values requirements. "Community Engagement - A central value affirmed by the service-learning movement. Colleges, universities,

and community colleges cooperate with nonprofit agencies, government agencies, faith-based organizations, and individuals to improve the community in which the institution resides. Service-learning, faculty participation, and student volunteers represent community engagement. This ethic of service affirms the responsibility of educational institutions to bring their resources to impact gaps in community services."

"Experiential education - Emotionally engaged learning ... combines direct experience that is meaningful to the student with guided reflection and analysis. It is a challenging, active, student-centered process that impels students toward opportunities for taking initiative, responsibility, and decision making." As the students' reflection reports reveal, the act of doing and being involved in the service project is attractive for many reasons.

Every course or program involved in service-learning includes a reflection component. "Reflection - The critical component of successful service-learning ... describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during and after a service-learning project. Effective reflection engages both teachers and students in a thoughtful and thought-provoking process that consciously connects learning with experience. It is the use of critical thinking skills to prepare for and learn from service experiences."

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The service learning course referenced in this paper is titled "Web Design for Non-Profit Organizations".

The prerequisite for the course is CSIS' "Introduction to Computing" course, which is required for all majors. The "Web Design for Non-Profit Organizations" course is described as introducing students to the methods of designing Web sites for non-profit organizations and involves the development, implementation and enhancement of the sites in the field with teams that include students and clientele of the agencies. Through this effort of collaboration, the agencies have fully functioning Web sites that facilitate identified endeavors in serving the community, and the students have an increased knowledge of the social functions and issues.

This knowledge is reinforced in class through reading of select articles and study of non-profit agencies that have effected Web empowerment and also through evaluated reflection of the student roles in satisfying the immediate needs of the agencies. (Taylor, 2004, 2005)

The course objectives include describing the content and experience of community service, introducing methods of innovative Web solutions that facilitate the mission of a community service agency and initiating informed discussion of current and future issues in community service in a democratic society. (Taylor, 2004, 2005)

The approach to the course taken by this professor includes a primer on HTML, use of an HTML editor (Chami's HTML Kit) and web design template (Penchina), instruction in effective web design, and touches on the fundamentals of systems analysis and design in how the students approach the problem to be solved, group collaboration and the roles played by team members and delivery of the final functional website.

4. ABOUT THE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Nations of New York Project

Students participated in the Nations of NY Project (NONY) in which Pace University partnered with the NYC 2012 organization to highlight the city's multicultural non-profit organizations as part of the effort to have the Olympic Committee consider NYC as the site of the 2012 Summer Olympics. As the organization states on its website, "New York is an Olympic Village everyday". NYC2012 is a 501(c)(3) organization that pledged to bring the Olympic Games to New York City without relying on public funds. Pace University was involved as a Marketing and Communications partner.

Pace University selected more than 200 nonprofit organizations which would benefit from having a website designed in an effort to market the city as an international city. The Nations of New York organizations assisted by the students in the Fall 2004 course included Accion Latina, Inc., Artistas de Loisaida, The Friendship Games, OMNA Ancient Art, and Athens Square Park. These websites can be viewed on the NYC 2012 website (nyc2012.org). Unfortunately, New

York City was not chosen by the Olympic Committee, but the project was still seen as a success to the many organizations that benefited from the new websites.

New York Trendsetters Network

Trendsetters Network was organized as an informal working group in October 2003 by its current president, Joyce Freeling, also president and founder of the Legacy Project and Digital Democracy USA., in response to the need for young girls to be encouraged to enter the SET (science, engineering and technology) fields and the lack of interest fostered in these areas. The group, which was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in January 2004, consisted of women from business, government, education and various nonprofit organizations. To this date, the all-volunteer effort has successfully formed alliances with the New York education community and national women's professional and cultural organizations in an effort "to foster the enrollment of girls in nontraditional career fields and positively impact the perceptions of women in these fields by highlighting the value of their contributions and expanding their visibility." The organization's target population is teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and K-12 students, especially girls, in the New York City area. (Taylor, 2005)

Trendsetters Network is supported and sponsored by several business enterprises, including Microsoft, PeopleSoft and Wachovia Bank; the US Women's Department of Labor; organizations such as, the Museum of Women's History and the Leadership Center and The Producer's Project; and Pace University. (Taylor, 2005)

The focus of Trendsetters Network is to address the issues of low female enrollment in SET career fields by changing the negative stereotype of women in these fields, by preparing the educational community to better educate K-12 girls about SET opportunities, by closing the gap for girls from low-income and minority communities, and by changing policy. (Taylor, 2005)

The efforts made by Trendsetters Network to address these issues include 2004 and 2005 conferences on nontraditional careers for girls, both held during the month of March, recognized nationally as Women's History Month. The conferences are geared towards

female ninth and tenth grade students, parents, educators, guidance counselors, and administrators. The conference panels and workshops are presented by representatives of business, education, government and nonprofit organizations and highlight SET-related opportunities in various fields. This year's conference was hosted by Pace University and held on the New York City campus with 500+ in attendance. (Taylor, 2005)

5. FALL 2004 SEMESTER

The Fall 2004 semester course had 23 students enrolled with various majors declared, most were either juniors or seniors. Of the 23 enrolled, 2 were Technology Systems majors, 1 was a Computer Science major, 2 were Professional Computer Studies majors, and 1 was an Information Systems major.

The students met with a NYC2012 representative to learn more about the NONY project and the clients they would be working with. Five teams were formed to work with five non-profit organizations. They then made contact with their NONY clients, found out about the organization and the services provided and the population served, and what information would be presented on the website. The students then used a web design template to design and create the sites, based on feedback from the clients.

6. SPRING 2005 SEMESTER

There were 29 students enrolled in the Spring 2005 semester course, again with various majors declared (only 1 was a Technology Systems major) and were either juniors or seniors.

The students met with one client contact, the president of the Trendsetters Network, Ms. Joyce Freeling, and interviewed her as a group. The project involved the design and implementation of a Career Library Database website to be attached to the organization's main web page. The Database is geared towards young girls and highlights technology-related careers in an effort to make such fields more attractive and information about them more accessible.

The class was divided into six groups, each representing a career field – Accounting and

Finance, Art and Design, Education, Engineering, Health, and Sales and Marketing. Each group researched their respective fields and created six websites with information including definition of the field, types of positions, qualifications and requirements, resources of knowledge and experience, and scholarship and internship opportunities.

7. REFLECTION AND READING REPORTS

Reflection Reports

During each semester, four reflection reports were required. They were submitted in various forms, including written individual and group journal reports, artwork, poetry, Powerpoint and video presentations. Students selected which type of reflection they would submit.

According to Eyler and Giles (1996), there are 4 principles of reflection -- continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized. In order for reflection to be continuous, reflection should take place before, during and after community service experiences within the course. Students were given deadlines for submission of each of the four reflection reports required for the semester. This principle of reflection reveals changes in attitudes or beliefs over the course of the semester.

Students demonstrate more effective service when it is coupled with an understanding of the connection between what is being studied and what is being done as part of their service. For example, the students who worked with the New York Trendsetters project researched career information for their clients, but also found the information to be useful in their academic pursuits.

By doing reflection, students may perceive a particular project or service differently as they progress than when they did upon beginning the project. The act of describing the experience challenges the student to explain their observations and thoughts.

Although the students were able to select any method of reflection, most were either in written form or graphic presentations. Some students journalized their experiences and used the reflection as a record of their progress. The Powerpoint presentations also recorded progress, but used photos and

other graphics as verification of their involvement and identification of their client.

Reflection reports should describe or explain the project and process, context of experience, role played by the student, analysis of experience, challenges and obstacles, personal growth, impact on/benefit to them, any modifications in behavior or actions that should have been made, demonstrate understanding of benefit to community, and impact on/application to future education or career or community service.

Reading Reports

As with the reflection reports, four reading reports were assigned throughout the semester. Eighteen reading sources were selected by the instructor and included articles, poems and speeches taken from "From Education for Democracy", by Barber & Battistoni (1993).

Students were given guidelines to follow, such as critiquing an author's work, or comparing the author's perspective with the student's community service experiences, either past or current, or comparing reading sources. The list of reading sources (most related to youth) and covered various periods on history, were written by famous world leaders and noted educators in the field, provided insight into the various motives for service, and both positive and negative views on approaches to service. Following is a list of the eighteen reading selections and their authors:

- "I Hear America Singing", Walt Whitman
- "Community, Citizenship & Service, Selected Essays"
- "The Call of Service", Robert Coles
- "Words to Love By", Mother Teresa
- "National Service", Bill Clinton
- "Here Comes National Service", Jon Van Til
- "Educating for Service", Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.
- "Moving In From the Margins", Allen Wutzdorff
- "A Mandate for Liberty", Benjamin R. Barber
- "What is Wrong with this Picture?", Bernadette Chi

- "Community Service and the Transformation of the American University", Ira Harkavy
- "Song of the Insufficiency of Human Endeavor", Bertholt Brecht
- "Why 'Servanthood' is Bad", John McKnight
- "Politics & National Service: A Virus Attacks the Volunteer Sector", Bruce Chapman
- "Untitled", Anna Akhmatova
- "Community Service: A New Requirement for the Educated Person", Edward J. Bloustein
- "Address on National Service, March 1, 1993", President William J. Clinton
- "Special Message to Congress on the Peace Corps, March 1, 1961", John Fitzgerald Kennedy

All reading selections were written about by the students, but the more popular selections students chose to write about in both courses were Clinton's speeches; Mother Teresa's and Walt Whitman's poetry; and the articles by McKnight, Bloustein, Van Til, Hesburgh, and Harkavy.

8. ANALYSIS OF STUDENT READING AND REFLECTION REPORTS

In reading and grading both the reflection and reading reports, certain observations were made. The reading sources sparked passionate and interesting comments and opinions about the various subject matters and the reflection reports revealed the changes in their perceptions of the course and their experiences throughout the semester. Also included in this section are student voices excerpted from submitted reflection reports.

On the subject of diversity, all students believed that community service promotes diversity, enhances understanding of different cultures, and provides an environment for people from different backgrounds to work together. Many felt that racism and bigotry were outdated concepts and agreed that working together in service would help people to overcome such obstacles to a better future. Pace University's student population is multicultural, therefore, the students in the courses worked on teams with students from various nationalities and learned about experiences with service in other countries, which is sometimes in the form of manda-

tory military service. They also learned more about service from the reading report articles, for example, one of the international students stated that his knowledge of John F. Kennedy centered around his assassination and was thrilled to learn about his involvement in national service.

Students were divided on whether or not service should be rewarded with stipends, tuition assistance or other monetary benefits and how it affects the idea of volunteerism. Some felt that getting rewarded for doing community service would provide better quality of service, others felt it destroyed the altruistic nature of service and doing the service would be the same as doing a job. Most students agreed with the benefit of tuition assistance as it would allow low-income youth to pursue their education, which in the long run would benefit the nation.

Again, the students were divided over the issue of service being mandatory or voluntary. One of the articles argued the pros of making community service a mandatory requirement for receiving an undergraduate liberal arts degree. Most students seemed to agree with this and a few felt it should not be limited to liberal arts. Many students felt that if service were not a part of the curriculum, they would not have time to perform it. Most agreed that students should be exposed to service early and felt that since there is no tuition or degree associated with high school graduation, it should be mandatory.

The motivating factors for doing community service that most students agreed upon were sense of duty, love, charity, and moral obligation; a few mentioned faith. Some students mentioned resumes and college applications as motivating factors. They felt that students with volunteer service experience have an edge over students without, even where grades are equal. A few mentioned free job training as their motivation.

All students were enlightened about community service in some way, although most did not feel that the viewpoints of the authors of the reading report articles changed their perception of community service. The article that most affected students' perceptions of service was John McKnight's article, "Why 'Servanthood' Is Bad". In it, he describes community service as being based on a community's deficiencies, making the peo-

ple dependent upon the service agencies, instead of focusing on the needs of the people. Many students passionately disagreed with him and defended their experiences with service as being positive and helpful to those they assisted. A few students agreed with him and questioned their motives and experiences in their past and current service work.

Some students realized an understanding about the difference between local and national service and others realized that civic engagement is a part of the curriculum at most universities.

Many students realized some of the benefits of service included an increase in various skills, job training, and preparation to work in the community. Broader results of students being involved in community service are the change in public perception of youth as selfish, lazy and uncaring. They also felt that as with education, where youth are involved in service, the less likely they are to be involved in crime.

The reading reports formed an intellectual basis from which students were able to draw in forming their reflection reports. Students compared viewpoints they read about with their classroom experiences and used their enhanced understanding of civic engagement and community service as they reflected on their current project.

For the most part, the reflections recorded individual student or group progress with their service projects. The reports revealed excitement and eagerness to begin the work; frustration with technology, team members and clients; challenges and obstacles to project completion; and satisfaction with the completed project. Many students stated an interest in continuing with their service project or any community service and some were anxious to create websites for the community service organizations they were already involved with.

Some of the excerpts from student reflection reports follow:

"We have finished working on our web-site project. Our course has finished however; I know that it is not the last contact with the community service (Omnia Ancient Art Center) for me. I learned not only how to design the web-site but it brought closer the Indian

culture to me as well. I had a great experience from working together with my classmates on [the] web-site project. It helped me also with [a] better understanding of the community service idea. It encouraged me also to work in the future for [the] community again because it is important to think not only about your future but about the others future as well."

"I am pleased with how our semester of community service based learning has gone. Now that it is over I am able to reflect on the ups and downs of our project. I would and actually have recommended this class to other Pace University students in other classes. I think the community service based learning is a great opportunity. One which I would look to be involved again in the future,... I still will remain active in my community with my services in EMS and continue to support the prevention and safety education which I have recently become involved with."

"The [Trendsetter Network's] conference was definitely worthwhile to both the Pace Community and all the participants. As for myself, I also benefit from the event just like the high school students. I learned about the endless opportunities in the field of technology, which I never thought existed."

"After participating in the event (Trendsetter's Network conference), I learned more about Trendsetter Network and the essence of their work. Also, as student of Pace, I was proud to represent the school to answer questions students may have regarding programs, culture life, student body (etc.)."

"The experience of bringing [a] real world project to the class is to convert the class into [a] work place. Sharing each other's ideas is the greatest part in my team work. I realize that a combination of members who have various backgrounds makes such a great contribution to good quality of team work. Besides that, I kind of play central role in web design because my major is computer science. It is quite a good experience."

9. CONCLUSION

Service learning courses are prevalent in many universities across the nation and the practice of community service among youth

is becoming more common because of this. The value of such courses is readily apparent in the voices of the students who are enrolled in these courses and who participate in community service and their active citizenship as a result of both.

The relationship between student reading and reflection reports should be made clear to the students to assist them in formulating ideas for each and to have them realize their involvement in a movement that is steadily gaining ground. Student reports can be used as a tool to promote interest in enrolling in service learning courses by other students and by encouraging faculty to be involved in planning, structuring and teaching such courses. Based on past student reports, it seems that by exposing students to the knowledge that service learning has a place in the university, it changes their perceptions of service.

Students also learn how to research and how to use information gathered to improve their community and themselves. For example, the students working on the Trendsetters Network project were able to refine their career interests and think about their futures in a more defined direction and understand how technology plays a role in any career they choose. Reflection also serves as feedback on the course and evaluates teaching. Although course evaluations are required, many times students don't have much room to comment openly about the course and its instructor.

Both types of reports are valuable components to service learning and this author will continue to analyze student voices about service learning and continue to gain new knowledge about the subject, both from others in the field and from the students who write and reflect.

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