OUTCOMES OF UTILIZING THE SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING

Does the Benefit Outweigh the Effort?

Tamara L. Wandel

twandel@usi.edu
University of Southern Indiana

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the learning outcomes associated with public relations writing courses, specifically comparing traditionally taught courses with those courses utilizing service-learning. Students participating in the survey (N=136) were asked to respond to variables such as motivation to learn, problem-solving and communication skills, and awareness of the link between classroom work and professional work. Focus groups were also conducted to obtain more in-depth information.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The complexity of service-learning is intriguing. A relatively recent surge of interest in the pedagogy is showing the multiple benefits as well as the multiple forms of service-learning that exist. At the heart of service-learning, though, is a simple idea. Combine needed service to the community, academic learning, and a reflection component for the betterment of students, faculty and the community. David Kolb's (1984) description of experiential learning consists of four steps and appears a solid model to use for describing most service-learning experiences. These steps include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Of course, arranging for a successful service-learning experience is not so simple to accomplish as to follow a set of specific steps. For instance, college students might prepare a media kit for an upcoming celebration honoring low-income children who completed a cultural enrichment program. The media kit may include a news release, a backgrounder or fact sheet, brochures, an organization newsletter, an annual report, and a feature story about the children who took part in the cultural enrichment activity. All of this would be written and prepared by the college students. In these situations, the hands-on-experience the student receives is typically seen as being as important as the reflection of that experience.

The research undertaken for this paper focuses on college students participating in public relations writing courses, with a comparison of service-learning courses and traditionally taught courses. For the purpose of this paper, traditionally taught courses will be defined as those courses not exercising an experiential education component. Service-learning is defined as an educational methodology that combines needed community service with explicit academic learning objectives and deliberate reflection (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring & Kerrigan, 2001).

Service-learning courses can be challenging for many reasons, particularly given the confines of the academic calendar. Students often need to define a community need, work with associated community members to create goals toward solving the need, and then carry out the writing that can help lead toward a solution all in one semester. Time for continuous reflection, an important aspect of effective service-learning, takes even more time. How much learning, or learning above what a traditional course could offer, can take place given this temporal constraint?

Research shows a myriad of student benefits exist when a service-learning component is adequately executed. Studies have shown that service-learning positively influences three major areas: academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills (Gray et al., 1996).

Academic development comes in many forms. Students are able to build upon their problem analysis skills and creativity through service-learning participation (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). By dealing with real people with real problems, students improve their critical thinking skills as well as their writing, especially the ability to comprehend rhetorical variations (Huckin, 1997). Researchers have also found other areas that service-learning positively impacts. These include observation techniques, open-mindedness, and aiding students in insight and judgment that cannot be explained in a textbook (Conrad & Hedin, 1989).

Students also benefit from the development of civic values. Service-learning has the power to make students aware that they can change the social and political systems in which they live (Herzberg, 1994). In addition, students are often confronted with particular ethical issues in service-learning, as they narrow the distance between themselves and others (Lempert, 1996) so ethical behavior may be strengthened or reinforced. Social responsibility, political efficacy and civic participation are all noted as benefits, as well as the time for students to have the opportunity to explore service-related careers (Conrad & Hedin, 1989).

Service-learning advocates argue that through reflection upon service, students become aware of changes in their ideas, skills and beliefs. These changes lead to the development of a meaningful outlook on life. The benefits often integrate into all three categories, as service-learning has been used successfully to increase pro-social behavior and link youth with their local communities. Academic learning takes place, civic responsibility increases and students gain understanding and confidence that are certainly life enhancing. Also life enhancing are the improvements in self-esteem and self-efficacy that are often seen in service-learning participants. Students realize they are responsible for their actions and learn how to accept the consequences of this. For many students, the development or refining of morals, values and beliefs can be a significant benefit of service-learning.

The student benefits that were considered for this article include the establishment of a link between school and work, a motivation to learn, knowledge of discipline, problem-solving skills, and communication skills. A link between school and work can help a student bridge the connection between theory and practice. As McEachern (2001) notes, not even the best-written case study can demonstrate the rhetorical complexity that comes from a real person working to solve a real problem.

Having more motivated students is another benefit characterized by service-learning, meaning that students more readily accept responsibility for their own learning. Because students are given more input over the global goals and concrete objectives of their work, they find a connection with their academic work and the positive impact on a community need (Adler-Kassner, Crooks & Watters, 1997). The more students see and feel success, the more motivated they are to repeat this success. When a student's self-efficacy is on the rise, they realize that they are responsible for their performance level. This is usually reflected in their intensity

and persistence, strong determiners for success (Bandura, 1995). Rosenberg, McKeon and Dinero (1999) found that students who participated in service-learning had improved attitudes toward school, showed more initiative, and were more tolerant of individual differences.

INSTRUMENTS AND METHOD

Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used in this study. Student perceptions and attitudes regarding learning outcomes were measured via survey research. The survey was given to students at a southern Indiana university. The total student enrollment at the public institution is 10,000, with about 600 students within the department of communications. A seven-question survey netted a total of 136 respondents: 76 participating in a traditionally taught course and 60 participating in a service-learning course. These figures include two traditionally taught courses and three service-learning courses. Respondents were asked to answer questions based on their Spring 2004 and Fall 2003 writing courses. A five-point Likert scale was used with the following variables: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree.

As a second component to the data gathering process, service-learning participants were asked to answer a set of questions designed specifically to provide information on the service-learning experience. Each student (100 percent) completed the anonymous survey.

Finally, a focus group of selected public relations writing students yielded in-depth information regarding the impact of service-learning on their course experience. Two smaller focus groups were held as opposed to one larger one for better results (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). The focus group analysis was systematic and verifiable. The first focus group lasted one hour and consisted of seven individuals. The second focus group comprised nine people and lasted 45 minutes. Questions posed to the group include:

- What was most helpful about participating in the service-learning experience?

- How do you feel the course could be enhanced?

- What type of academic learning do you feel occurred?

- What was your best and/or worst experience with the course?

The courses used for this study had a service-learning component that lasted one semester. Service-learning courses can require significant out-of-class time for students and these courses were no exception, even possessing requirements

for the time spent on site. Students of one service-learning class had a minimum requirement of one hour per week for 13 weeks to work on site at the nonprofit agency. Focus group participants estimated the number was closer to three hours per student each week. There was no on-site requirement the first two weeks of the semester as this was used as a time for orientation by the pubic university professor and nonprofit agency representative. The other two service-learning classes had no specific requirement for hours to be worked at the nonprofit site, but focus group participants estimated they averaged 10 hours for the semester. As for site selection, the students at both universities were assigned nonprofit agencies to work alongside, with the professor choosing the sites. The needs of the community (the service-learning "topic") that students focused on varied per class. They included service-learning projects that dealt with homelessness, latchkey children (two classes), expecting mothers, and education for disadvantaged youth.

RESULTS

The arithmetic mean and standard deviation for each cohort can be found in Table 1. Eighty-four percent of respondents said they would prefer to take a service-learning course over a traditionally taught course of the same nature. Of the 16 percent that disagreed, 14 percent cited the time commitment required to successfully complete a service-learning project as the main reason they would not want to participate in another service-learning course.

Thirty-seven percent of respondents planned to continue their community service at a nonprofit agency while still continuing their undergraduate education. An additional 31 percent said they would resume a community service role after graduation.

In response to a question about learning, 90 percent of respondents believed they learned more in the service-learning setting than they would have in a traditional classroom.

The focus group participants discussed their initial negative reaction about the heavy workload and time expectations. As one student said, "It's difficult to carry a full load and be expected to drive across town in the middle of the day to meet with a client." This same student, however, noted the experience in totality as "eye-opening, stimulating and great for building my confidence." Numerous students commented on their appreciation of getting a chance to work with "real clients" and having the opportunity to develop materials that will enhance their portfolio. Another student discussed the benefits of working on a project that does not go exactly as planned, which is most often the case with real clients.

Four of the seven focus group participants disliked the group project aspect of the service-learning class in terms of grading, feeling as if they tended to be the group leader and did the majority of the team's work. Having defined leadership positions and specific responsibilities within the teams seemed to be of help. For example, a team may consist of a director of publicity and a director of publications. In addition, offering areas for students to express their individuality and be graded on these areas separately was useful. For instance, each student serving on a publications committee could turn in his or her own brochure creation as part of a media kit and receive an individual grade for that particular part of the package.

RESULTS
comparing service-learning and traditionally-taught courses

ITEM	Mean	Standard Deviation
This course helped me understand the link between school and professional work.		
Service-learning respondents	4.29	0.49
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.00	0.84
This course increased my motivation to learn.		
Service-learning respondents	4.25	0.96
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.25	1.00
The course increased my knowledge of the discipline.		
Service-learning respondents	4.18	1.20
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.14	0.92
This course improved my problem-solving abilities.		
Service-learning respondents	4.38	0.52
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.25	1.28
The course aided in critical thinking development.		
Service-learning respondents	3.60	0.89
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.18	0.90
The course was challenging.		
Service-learning respondents	3.83	0.99
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.33	0.52
This course helped me improve my communication skills.		
Service-learning respondents	4.06	0.87
Traditionally-taught respondents	3.13	1.13

Another area of concern noted by a student was the discomfort of having to consider issues that have unpleasant aspects (hungry children living in a low-income housing situation, for example). The same student did say she gained an appreciation as the course progressed for "what's at stake and how I could play a role in helping

the situation." In fact, several students said they were now considering changing emphases in order to focus on the nonprofit sector within the public relations realm. To show a different perspective, however, one student said the experience made him realize there was "no way I could work with not-for-profits regularly, given the work environment and the standard low pay." He did acknowledge, though, that he still found the service-learning experience worthwhile and that it was valuable career exploration. Finally, all respondents agreed they learned more from their service-learning course than in traditional courses.

CONCLUSION

Survey results show that students participating in a service-learning public relations writing course report higher satisfaction on each of the seven survey items than those students in traditionally taught courses. The greatest gaps in mean scores between the two student cohorts occurred with understanding the relationship between school and work/theory and practice (a mean difference of 1.29), an improvement of problem-solving skills or problem analysis (a mean difference of 1.13), and increased knowledge of the communications discipline (1.04). Following that, in terms of mean differences, was an increased motivation to learn (a difference of 1.00) and that the service-learning students felt the course improved communication skills (a difference of 0.93).

While this study was limited in size and scope, it does demonstrate the positive attributes associated with service-learning and public relations writing courses. It appears that many of the benefits realized by academic service-learning in composition courses can also be found when integrating service-learning into a public relations curriculum. Researchers have long known that properly executed service-learning programs benefit the community. This research demonstrates how academic learning was heightened for students. While the chance for students to develop public relations writing skills was realized, other similarly valuable areas such as the improvement of communications skills and the heightened ability to problem solve were also enhanced. In addition, a majority of students stated they planned to participate in community service in the future. While community service is only one aspect of service-learning, it is civic participation and demonstrates respect for social responsibility.

Lastly, an overwhelming majority of the service-learning participants demonstrated from their survey responses as well as in the focus group setting that they believed they learned more because of the service-learning experience. These students placed a high value on the experiential activity. As educators, we know that satisfied students who enjoy their learning environment net more motivated students, better retention rates, and ultimately a more talented workforce. Is the time and energy that a faculty member must devote to a service-learning class worth the trouble? Indeed.

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