Service-Learning Integration in a Public Relations Program
PEDAGOGY FOR ENHANCED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In professional educational programs, such as public relations, students are expected to develop special-ized skills to meet the challenges of a demanding workplace. Thus, service learning offers a unique opportu-nity for public relations students to apply classroom concepts in a real-life setting, hone their skills, and gain insight into the field. Moreover, service learning can help students enrich their understanding of the impor-tance of social responsibility – a key concept in public relations education. This study explores the percep-tions of students and the community partners they serve and the nature of those relationships. This paper also describes the integration of service-learning projects in the public relations program at an urban, compre-hensive university in Southern California. Data were collected from 243 students enrolled in four different public relations courses with a service-learning component and 138 of their community partners.

Movements in the academy are much like waves in the ocean. Some crash and go nowhere while others swell up slowly, making a splash that resonates through all of academe. Certain issues in higher edu-cation have created strong currents of debate: the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, revitaliza-tion of general education, diversity, assessment, and service learning. Many of these concepts become part of mission statements as they make their way through administrative bodies and faculty-governance com-mittees. Nowhere is service learning seemingly more important to curricular outcomes than in professional programs. Most professional programs, like public relations, focus on societal needs. Equally important is the skill attainment of students in such programs. Therefore, experiential learning, particularly service-learning, appears to be an ideal pedagogy for pro-fessionally oriented programs. Students gain a deeper understanding of their power to influence and con-tribute to society, and they are better able to perfect their classroom-taught skills.

Service learning could also have a major impact on public relations education. The 1999 Port of Entry Report by the Commission on Public Relations Education cited the importance of experiential learn-ing – applying course concepts in a real-life setting – in the form of an internship or practicum experience. Of course, professionals expect public relations grad-uates to have a broad-based liberal arts background; knowledge of concepts like strategic planning and issues management; and the ability to research, communicate effectively and think critically. But professionals want much more. They want public relations graduates who can write releases, develop media lists, construct questionnaires, create publica-tions, and compose backgrounders with little or no instruction. They want graduates with well-developed portfolios and practical experience that will shorten the learning curve in their new positions.

Many public relations programs have opportuni-ties for students to acquire practical experience. Most encourage internships and offer campaigns courses in which students develop work for a client. Never-theless, many public relations students still enter the workforce with limited skills and practical know-how. Service learning, however, can strengthen public rela-tions education from a critical perspective. This ped-agogy can help students enrich their appreciation and understanding of the interests of stakeholders and the importance of social responsibility – key concepts in public relations education.

FOCUS OF STUDY

The service-learning movement can be an oppor-tune time for public relations programs to seize the moment by embracing service learning, thereby giving their students more ways to develop their skills, apply course concepts in real-life situations, and enhance their understanding of social responsibility. In journalism and mass communication, few studies have focused on the nature of student-community partner relationships and their outcomes. This study explores the perceptions of students and the commu-nity partners they serve and the nature of those relationships. This paper also describes the integra-tion of service-learning projects in the public relations program at an urban, comprehensive university in Southern California.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, definitions of public relations have changed to reflect the growing sophistication and maturation of the practice. Cutlip and Center (1971) defined public relations as "the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance, based on mutually satisfac-tory two-way communication" (p. 2). Even the first-established public relations counselors understood the importance of good deeds and responsible per-formance. Considered the father of public relations, Ivy Lee saw the need for organizations to respond to public opinion and align themselves with the public interest (Wilcox, Ault and Agee, 1998). Lee is credit-ed with recognizing that good publicity is generated from good works and performance (Cutlip and Center, 1971). Likewise, Edward Bernays called for "a movement toward public responsibility in private business" (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1985, p. 49). He believed that organizations need to recognize changes in their social setting and must respond to those changes in order to meet a common ground with stakeholders (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1994).

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

During the industrial revolution, business was con-cerned with profit-making and had few government controls. Social responsibility began to evolve as a concept in the 1960s in response to society's chang-

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ing social values (Buchholz, 1982; Chrisman and Carroll, 1984). Public policy debates of the 1960s and 1970s raised awareness of social issues. Legislative agencies were established. Corporations had new legal responsibilities, and public expectations for the social accountability of business heightened (Mau and Dennis, 1994). Social issues surfaced, such as equal employment opportunities, the environment, and product safety. Federal cutbacks in the 1980s forced business to expand and redefine its obligation to society. Business was pressured not only to support social causes but also to consider the social consequences of its activities.

Social responsibility is the development of processes to evaluate stakeholder and environmental demands and the implementation of programs to manage social issues (Thomas and Simerly, 1994). Corporate social responsibility deals with ethical codes, corporate philanthropy, community relations programs, and law-abiding actions (Woods, 1991). Corporations are responsible for effectively producing and distributing goods and services for consumer consumption and generating profits for stakeholders. However, society also feels that corporations should contribute to worthy social causes (Cavanagh and McGovern, 1988; Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988). Corporations became viewed as both economic and social institutions. As social institutions, corporations have responsibilities to society (Bick, 1988). In fact, some scholars argue that all organizations – profit-making and nonprofit-making – have an obligation to society. Organizations exist at the pleasure of society, and society expects organizations to anticipate and resolve social problems (Drucker, 1974).

Since social responsibility is a key concept in public relations education, service learning is an ideal teaching strategy. As future public relations practitioners in business and nonprofit organizations, students must realize their responsibility to society as they make decisions about the policies affecting their stakeholders (e.g., employees, residents of the local community, and government agencies).

Confusion about the meaning of service learning abounds among public relations and other mass communication educators. Service learning is often mistaken for other forms of community-based, experiential-learning methods. Community-based learning encompasses many different activities: working as a volunteer for a charitable institution; conducting field work or developing a thesis through independent study; taking an internship to gain on-the-job experience; enrolling in cooperative education to work in a paid, off-campus environment; participating in a short-term course-related activity; developing a community-based assignment for a course, such as conducting research or shadowing a professional for a day; and being a service-learning, which combines meaningful community service and in-class learning through a process of structured, regular reflections. (Office of Community Collaboration, California State University-Sacramento, 1997).

Service learning is a teaching method that blends community service and academic instruction through reflective, critical thinking. Student learning is promoted through community service experiences that meet the needs of a particular group, include structured activities for students to reflect on their experiences, and enhance students' academic studies. Service learning involves using course concepts and applying them in a real-life setting for the good of society.

Some scholars strongly assert that service learning requires a reflection component where students think critically about their experiences (Olney and Grande, 1995; Rhoads, 1997). Commonly used methods of reflection include journals, writing assignments (Cooper, 1998), and group discussions (Silcox, 1993). The result of service learning is experience for students – honing their abilities and perfecting their skills – and an appreciation of good citizenship. The organization benefiting from the efforts of the service-learner receives much-needed skills

and volunteer time. Thus, service-learning can be seen as a win-win situation for both the service-learning and the organization benefiting from a student's work.

Many researchers have documented the benefits of service learning. Simply put, service learning promotes social and moral responsibility (McElhaney, 1997), helps students become more involved in their communities, and impacts students' belief in the importance of social justice and the need for public policy change (Eyler and Giles, 1999). For students, service learning helps then learn the course material (Eyler and Giles, 1999), enables students to better identify issues in their community and act on them (Melchior and Bailis, 2002), and heightens their sense of citizenship (Corbett and Kendall, 1999). Plus, it introduces them to the complexity of the world (Miller, 1997). Undergraduates develop a stronger sense of competence, are more likely to graduate, get better grades, be more favorably predisposed and connected to the educational institution, and feel as though they are living up to their potential (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Eyler, Giles and Braxton, 1997; Giles and Eyler, 1994). Bourland and Fall (1997) found that students saw service learning as lasting learning, an effective form of pedagogy. Students develop academically and cognitively by increasing their ability to write, read and calculate; subject matter knowledge; and critical-thinking skills and by becoming engaged learners (Schuman, 1994).

Students also like service learning. They report that service learning increases their self-knowledge and spiritual growth, and it offers them opportunities to develop close personal relationships with fellow students. Students believe their learning is richer and more applicable to real-world contexts than traditional classroom experiences (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Faculty who embrace service learning tend to value the meaning and purpose of their endeavors and enjoy positive feedback from students and colleagues; yet they struggle with varying student skill level, an increased time factor, and challenges in evaluating student work (Hammond, 1994). Service learning can renew an instructor's love of teaching (Weigart, 1998). Most faculty reward systems fail to acknowledge the contributions of faculty engaged in service-learning pedagogy. Rather, other traditional forms of teaching and scholarship are given more consideration and weight in matters of retention, tenure and promotion.

INTEGRATION OF SERVICE LEARNING INTO PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM

Service learning was embraced by the campus community at California State University-Long Beach when the institution joined the Campus Compact, a coalition of college and university presidents committed to helping students develop the values of citizenship through participation in community service. Cal State-Long Beach is a large urban, comprehensive university located in Southern California. Public relations majors number around 130 and are required to fulfill the same curriculum prescribed by the Commission on Public Relations Education for a public relations program. Experiential learning has long been included in the program through two required courses – "Internship" and "Public Relations Agency," which is a campaigns course. To receive credit for an internship, students must apply course concepts at the work site. Most of the work produced by students helps develop their skills. Therefore, specific job tasks must focus on writing, production and research, rather than clerical work. Site supervisors must be public relations professionals with five years of experience, be at the managerial level, and sign an agreement to mentor the student. In the agency course, students work in teams to develop a comprehensive public relations campaign for an actual client.

In both experiential-learning courses, students refine their skills and produce work that can be displayed in their portfolios.

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But, as most professors realize, the more experience and opportunities to apply course concepts in real-life settings, the more demonstration of higher-order learning processes and mastery.

Therefore, the public relations program at Cal State-Long Beach looked seriously at the possibilities offered through service learning. Not only did service learning give students more opportunities to refine their skills, it provided a way to enrich their appreciation of the importance of social responsibility – a key public relations concept.

A natural place to integrate service learning into the public relations curriculum came easily in the skills courses – three required courses in the major after students completed their foundation courses. The skills courses are "Internal Communication for Public Relations," "External Communication for Public Relations" and "Publications for Public Relations." In these skills courses, students create public relations tools – a crisis communication plan, press kit, brochure and newsletter – for a nonprofit organization in need of such materials. In the "Public Relations Agency" course, students work in teams to create a comprehensive public relations plan for a nonprofit organization and also pair with another community partner on an individual basis to develop a plan tailored to the unique needs of that organization.

In each course, students approach a nonprofit of their choice. Once the organization is approved by the instructor, the contact at the nonprofit institution, usually the agency's director, and student sign a service-learning contract, outlining expectations for both parties.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Integrating service learning into the curriculum of public relations programs appears to be an ideal method to train students to become adept in the skills needed for the workplace and to shape their value system so they will perform their work in a socially responsible way. Since few service-learning studies have focused on outcomes for both student and community partner and little research exists on service learning in mass communication education, particularly public relations, research is needed to explore these issues in more depth.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Therefore, the following research questions were investigated:

- What is the nature of the relationship between service-learning and community partner in public relatioins courses that include a service-learning component?

- What are student perceptions of their relationship with the community partner and the benefits of the experience?

- What are the community partner perceptions of the relationship with the student and the outcomes of the experience?

METHOD

A two-page questionnaire was developed for students enrolled in 14 sections of the four courses with a service-learning component over a two-year period. Each section had an enrollment of 20 students or less. The survey instrument included 24 questions pertaining to the nature of relationship, perceptions of receptivity, amount of contact with the nonprofit organization, how the experience affected them, and demographic questions. Questionnaires were administered to 243 students.

Likewise, a one-page questionnaire was developed for community partners. The questionnaire was sent with a letter and postage-paid return envelope. Questionnaires were coded to track non-respondents, and non-respondents were mailed a follow-up questionnaire. The instrument contained 19 questions regarding the nature of the relationship and number of contact hours. A Likert-type scale was used to determine attitudes toward students and their work. Of the 243 mailed questionnaires, 161 were returned for a response rate of 66%. Of those questionnaires returned, 138 were usable (57%). The average ratings reported are from those respondents who answered the questions. The means and percentages reported do not include missing cases.

FINDINGS

When asked to check the reasons students selected a specific nonprofit organization, they most often responded that they wanted to do something important by helping the nonprofit, the nonprofit needed their help, they had a contact whoworked there, and they were interested in the nonprofit's programs. About 20% indicated they selected the nonprofit organization because their admire its work. Students found their nonprofit organizations to be cooperative (80%), accessible (85%) and receptive (82%). The average amount of time spent at the nonprofit was 10 hours, ranging from two hurs to 48 hours. The average amount of time spent developing the project, excluding the hours spent at the nonprofit organization, was 24, ranging from four to 80. The median number of hours students spent on the crisis communication plan was 15 hours, while the median for the comprehensive public relations plan was 50 hours.

About 77% reported the nonprofit was appreciative of their work. Interestingly, 83% said they may continue to volunteer their services at the same nonprofit organization, and 70% said the service-learning experience made them more willing to help other nonprofit organizations; 83% reported the experience made them better understand the importance of social responsibility in public relations and the need for good citizenship in society. About 67% said the experience helped them explore their career options, but only 53% said the experience encouraged them to consider a career in nonprofit public relations.

In response to an open-ended question asking students how they could have improved their own learning, 40% said they would have spent more time at the nonprofit organization observing, researching, probing and strategizing. Another 40% reported they would have started their projects earlier or better managed their time. When asked what advice they would give community partners to improve the experience for students, 82% said nonprofit organizations should be cooperative, available, accessible, open to ideas, and willing to offer strategic guidance.

In an exploratory data analysis using chi square, it was found that students experienced an increased understanding of the importance of social responsibility if they felt the nonprofit organization appreciated their work. As expected, the hours spent at the nonprofit organization were also positively correlated with the number of meetings held with the community partner ($r=.395$, $p=.001$, $n=238$).

Community partners reported formally meeting with students an average of four times and spent more than seven hours with them personally advising them about the development of the project. More than 86% reported that students followed their direction when establishing goals and objectives for the work; 81% said the student became fully acquainted with the organization, and 74% said the work produced by the student met their expectations. Almost 88% said students produced quality work for their organization. Respondents who said students were fully acquainted with their organization were more likely to say students produced quality work ($r=.649$, $p-.000$, $n=119$). Ninety percent reported they would work with the student again on another project, and 91% said they would welcome more opportunities to work with students on service-learning projects. Only 54% said they were able to use the work produced by the student, and 29% said they may be able to use the work. Of the 17% who reported they would not be able to use the work, 46% said the work contained writing or content errors. When asked in an

open-ended question how the service-learning experience could be improved for the organization and student, community partners most often mentioned the need for early student contact and increased communication between the institution and the organization.

DISCUSSION

The service-learning projects in each of the four courses vary, and most community partners and students report positive outcomes. In reflection, however, students report various obstacles. Some students have difficulty explaining the purpose and need for a crisis communication plan because some organizations believe they know what to do in the event of a crisis so they feel no plan is necessary. Once presented with a plan, students say most community partners are enthusiastic and present the work to their board members. Explaining the importance of a crisis plan to a community partner poses a challenge for students – one that strengthens their ability to communicate clearly in a persuasive way.

The problems students encounter with the press kit assignment usually deal with the scope of the project – that is, the event or newsworthy topic originally discussed does not evolve into a subject matter that warrants a press kit, but rather a news release instead. In addition, community partners sometimes do not understand the nature of journalistic writing and want students to produce work with little substance (fluff information and quotes, exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims, subjective writing instead of objective).

In addition, students find educating their community partners challenging in the publications course. Most community partners want brochures that speak to the masses and are not targeted at a particular audience, overlooking the importance of understanding the needs and wants of a key public. Again, students must educate community partners about the need to speak directly to the reader using the reader's language and visuals that attract the attention of the target audience. More importantly, many community partners want to produce a newsletter, without a legitimate justification for such a vehicle. After discussing the goals of the newsletter, students, with the help of the instructor, may discover that it may not be the best channel to use. In these cases, a flyer or even a meeting with volunteers may be a more effective method of communication. The message may be best relayed in a simpler form – opposed to the time, energy and cost of a newsletter that is generally cyclical.

Overall, the development of a comprehensive public relations plan appears to be the most successful. Students report community partners are extremely appreciative of the research collected; the development of the goals, objectives and strategies; and the creative materials produced by the student. Even if some of the tactics created by the student are not appropriate for the organization, community partners report they use the work for many different purposes, such as using the material in grant proposals and discovering problems and resources available to them.

Instructors of this course say they find assessment of learning objectives more reliable. Some students can contribute little to the group project, and most students tend to be generous in peer evaluations, wanting to retain a positive relationship with a classmate. Therefore, instructors are better able to assess knowledge of course concepts in an individual campaign proposal produced solely by one student rather than a group. Students, of course, complain about the excessive workload, but a majority report that the course is the most valuable in the program despite its difficulty.

CONCLUSION

Service learning appears to be beneficial for both learner and community partner. The service learning activities at Cal State-Long Beach engage the student firsthand in public relations problem-solving and skill development. Moreover, the service-learning projects heighten the student's understanding of the importance of social responsibility in public relations. When armed with these experiences, students are more likely to think critically about their actions and how they affect social issues and justice. Not only does service learning support the goals of higher education (Eyler and Giles, 1999), it is keenly appropriate for the mission of professional programs that serve societal needs.

On the other hand, students need to be closely monitored and continuously assessed to ensure quality education and output. Reflection is an important aspect of the service-learning process to help students cope with the unknown – variables that seem like obstacles. In turn, faculty are challenged by their students' needs – the need to understand and relate to real-world experiences. Instructor must take advantage of teachable moments through frequent reflection activities that encourage discussion of these important issues.

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