



Communicating Hunger

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Abstract

A teaching model that includes collaboration between two courses – one JMC and one first-year writing seminar for multiple majors – provided opportunity for a small program to break students out of their university-safe “bubble” and overcome their stereotypes by engaging with diverse populations while simultaneously developing practical communication skills taught in the two distinct courses. This article takes a critical look at a constructivist active learning model using service learning that allowed students to engage with a vulnerable population to create meaning by accurately reflecting the needs of the population through the messages of their community client.

Introduction

When undergraduate students from predominantly white, upper-middle class families learn that 25% of the population of their university’s community is food insecure they conjure images of homeless people in soup kitchens. In truth, food-vulnerable populations and food pantry clients include diverse racial and ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged, many of whom are educated, employed home owners. Such misconceptions students often hold of diverse populations provide valuable learning opportunities to educate and address stereotypes – and thus teach critical diversity-centric programming – while simultaneously permitting the development of practical communication skills through client-based service learning.

As research has shown the effectiveness of skills-based instruction through constructivist learning models (e.g. Jonassen, 1999; Roettger, Roettger, & Walugembe, 2007), particularly experiential service

learning (e.g. Motley & Sturgill, 2014; Place, 2017), two classes engaging 40 students collaborated to create discrete elements of a semester-long project: to study and then address problems they identified while serving and interacting with vulnerable groups.

A first-year writing seminar (FYS), with students of various majors, and an introductory public relations (PR) writing course both engaged a community organization whose need was to enhance supplemental food assistance services by transforming an existing food pantry into a new “choice” system that encourages clients to select healthier foods. The project goal from the community partner’s vantage was to promote implementation of the new pantry system by informing target audiences on its purposes, as well as the importance of choosing healthier food options. Thus, the project enabled diversity-centric service learning that reflected the school’s commitment to fostering greater awareness of vulnerable populations while simultaneously promoting client understanding and

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development of critical communication skills.

Project Overview

FYS students were assigned to survey pantry clients and volunteers on site in order to collect data in the initial phase of the pantry transformation and assist the community partner in analyzing data and reviewing results. After compilation of findings, FYS students delivered a formal presentation to students in the PR writing course and community partner representatives. Additionally, PR students visited the food pantry to simulate the role of a pantry client and experience the new food selection process. PR writing students were then tasked with developing communication tools and appropriate messages to reach target audiences identified by the community partner. The semester concluded with PR student groups presenting their portfolio of deliverables and rationale for collateral usage and messaging to client representatives and FYS students. In so doing, the project met a key learning objective of the PR writing course: *evaluate a community partner's market position, and create, present and defend a portfolio of public relations writing on behalf of that client.*

Additionally, the cross-course service learning project embodied SJMC's commitment to developing innovative methods to "teach" about diversity consistent with the school's [core values](#). Expressly stated the curriculum prepares students to:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communication.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

Challenges

Teaching about diversity on a campus and in a community with small minority representation creates challenges for engagement. Research suggests students learn more long-lasting skills by practicing skills – using active learning – once the concept being studied has been taught by more traditional methods. Thus, this project relied on Jonassen's (1999) constructivist learning model by creating environments where learners actively engaged in cooperatively constructing meanings from their classroom instruction

in communication methods and message design. Moreover, this project expanded experiential learning by requiring students to research food-insecure populations, necessitating interactions with diverse clientele.

For students in both courses to better understand the population for which they were producing messages intended to inform and change behavior, they must truly engage. Rogers (2003) asserted in "Diffusion of Innovations" that when introducing an idea to a target population it is important to understand the characteristics of the population in order to clarify what will be necessary for assisting adoption. Thus it was important for students to hear directly from pantry clientele for which a change in behavior was being suggested (selecting healthier food items). This required overcoming both philosophical and logistical barriers of getting students out of their campus "bubble" and traveling to unfamiliar pantry locations to interact with client representatives and diverse pantry consumers.

Simultaneously, students had to overcome their own stereotypes of pantry clients to more effectively communicate to target audiences. As students' perceptions of marginalized populations tend to be inaccurate, in part due to infrequent experience with poverty and the poor (Motley and Sturgill, 2014), the current project attempted to vanquish unrealistic views of the population through immersion with diverse clientele. Doing so helped promote the understanding needed to develop persuasive deliverables.

Outcomes

Evaluating effectiveness of the experiential project took multiple forms: 1) pre- and post-class assessments evaluating student learning; 2) individual student reflections; and 3) client feedback. Overall pre- and post-class assessments revealed marked improvement in student learning of the client and greater understanding of food pantry clientele. For example, the percentage of students correctly identifying the number of food pantries serviced by the client improved from 13% to 93% upon project completion. Similarly, the overwhelming majority of students recognized their original inclination that most clients were homeless and uneducated was wildly off the mark.

To that end, a second critical-reflection assessment required students to evaluate their experience with the project and identify their own misconcep-

tions about issues surrounding food pantries. Sample responses pulled from student essays across both courses demonstrate the effectiveness of community engagement in overcoming stereotypical views:

I thought only people who were homeless and unemployed used food pantries. After learning more I realized that it is more common than I thought for families to be food insecure.

—PR writing student

This class has taught me much about the issue of food insecurity, about how to treat people and humanize something that was frequently mentioned in such an inanimate way, and in general how to approach issues that are so complex. This is important because people need to be able to approach issues in order to learn and develop solutions to them.

—FYS student

Through this service project, I became less ignorant about who the food insecure are and what their circumstances are. For me, they became more human in my eyes. I now see their stories and with the knowledge that I gained, I feel so much more educated. Furthermore, service projects help you become more involved with your community. It allows you to understand who exactly is in your community and the issues that surround where you live.

—FYS student

As a project with applied components, final assessment of student learning and skill development took the form of client feedback. Client representatives were provided links to an anonymous online survey to permit candid feedback on the project and deliverables. Client feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with representatives commenting:

The work we received provides valuable information to help our organization... This experience working with Drake University's public relations students was a great investment for our organization.

Indeed, client representatives saw so much potential in the students' work, the organization hired a student from the PR writing class as an intern to help implement presented deliverables.

To date, work produced by both classes and the

PR student intern has contributed to organizational messaging promoting awareness of food insecurity and provided valuable baseline survey data that was recently submitted as part of a grant application to secure necessary funding to expand the choice system to other pantries. Moreover, project success has resulted in the FYS instructor actively working with community organization representatives to expand service-learning opportunities to future classes in the form of additional post-implementation survey research at the pilot pantry facility as well as potential research projects at additional pantry locations when the "choice" program is implemented throughout the regional pantry network.

Taken as a whole, review of class assessments, student reflections and client feedback demonstrates the value of creating diverse experiential community-based partnerships to promote more nuanced understanding of organizational clients and marginalized populations while simultaneously honing communication skills necessary for success in increasingly multicultural communities.

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