

Community-embedded learning experiences: putting the pedagogy of service-learning to work in online courses

Kim Becnel and Robin A. Moeller

Leadership and Educational Studies, College of Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the applicability and adaptability of service-learning pedagogy to online and distance education teaching environments. More specifically, it looks at the community-embedded learning model (CEL), which asks distance students to conduct service projects in their local communities, as manifested in a project undertaken by online graduate students in the library science programme at Appalachian State University, a mid-sized university in the United States of America. For this assignment, students, who are located throughout the state of North Carolina and surrounding areas, performed service work in libraries located within their own communities and neighbourhoods, coming together to discuss their experiences in regular synchronous course meetings conducted online. In addition to describing this project, this paper will offer analysis of student reflections, describing what students perceived as challenging, important and rewarding about the experience. Through this study, the researchers highlight the potential value of community-embedded learning experiences for classes conducted in online environments.

KEYWORDS

Service-learning;
Community-embedded learning; library science; online education; distance education

Introduction

Service-learning has long been a mainstay in the field of library and information science. It most often takes the form of internships that are offered late in a student's graduate programme of study (Most, 2011), but instructors have also implemented it in course-specific assignments as well. For example, instructors have described their students providing technology training to the community (Albertson & Whitaker, 2011), redesigning library spaces (Gerrish, 2006), developing websites for public libraries (Elmborg et al., 2001) and stocking the library of a local gaol (Pierce, 2006). Given the success of service-learning pedagogy in the library science field and the move that many programmes are making to entirely online offerings, some instructors have begun to experiment with e-service learning assignments, which require their distance education students to complete service projects either entirely online or within their local communities. This paper will describe one such assignment, in which students in the Masters of Library Science programme at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina completed a collection development project for their local libraries as part of

the requirements of an online course. The researchers, who served as instructors for this course, also present an analysis of student reflections, describing students' perceptions of the experience and the benefits they gleaned through participation.

Literature review

It has become well established that, when carefully planned and thoughtfully executed, service-learning pedagogy brings enormous benefits for students, positively impacting their academic success, sense of moral development and social responsibility, capacity for the practical application of knowledge and ability to think critically (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). It is not surprising, then, that instructors working in distance education programmes have sought to make use of this pedagogy that has worked so well in more traditional settings. The convenience of online learning combined with the opportunity for practical application can and does make for an enticing and effective learning experience (Bennett & Green, 2001; Waldner & Hunter, 2008). In e-service learning assignments, some distance students complete both coursework and service work online, while others participate in service activities in their home communities while accessing the related coursework online (Strait & Sauer, 2004). In either case, this type of pedagogy brings with it a specific set of challenges from both the instructor and the student perspective.

For the instructor, e-service learning assignments require a considerable time investment to respond appropriately to individual students involved in unique projects and situations (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010a). Further, instructors must devote time to developing and maintaining connections with agencies and students, often helping students through the process of identifying and approaching community partners who are comfortable with virtual or independent volunteers (Eudey, 2012). For students, especially those whose service projects involve some type of collaboration, it can sometimes prove difficult to accomplish team goals because of differing work schedules and personal obligations (Waldner & Hunter, 2008). Also, it has been suggested that a high level of self-direction and motivation is required of students in e-service learning courses, making them a possible challenge for students who need a high degree of structure and guidance to succeed in the classroom (Killian, 2004).

Despite these challenges, instructors working in the field of library and information science have reported successful forays into both types of e-service learning: service projects conducted entirely online and those completed in students' home communities. With regard to entirely online ventures, Agosto, Abels, Mon, and Harris (2009) discuss a project in which students were asked to perform librarian duties for the Internet Public Library, while Sanchez (2009) writes about a project anchored in Second Life, in which students helped to host virtual events for non-profit agencies. On the other hand, Kazmer (2005) describes the CEL, in which students who are taking online courses perform service activities in their home communities. In the discussion of this model, the development of which involved multiple interviews with 47 library science graduate distance learning students, Kazmer (2005) acknowledges that students, particularly adult distance learning students, draw from their course content, online community and face-to-face communities to inform their learning. Thus, in the CEL model, students interact with course content via the context of the community in which they live and work, and they share their experiences and developing perspectives with peers in their online learning communities (Kazmer, 2005). Kazmer notes that

the CEL model for online learning has the potential to serve as a more varied, meaningful learning experience for students when compared to more traditional modes of instruction. However, the author also offers a warning, suggesting that the immediate, experiential lessons students learn in their service placements may limit the value they place on their peers' experiences and the content instructors wish to foreground in the classroom.

Studying a distance learning library science course that utilised the CEL model, Most (2011) examines whether student work reflects the concerns raised by Kazmer (2005) regarding the students' tendency to focus so intently on their embedded service experience that they ignore or devalue classroom content not directly related to their particular experience. Most confirms Kazmer's concerns and concludes with suggestions that modifications be made to assignments, such as asking students to discuss their projects with the class and respond to each other's work, to encourage them to become more receptive to all class content and responsive to the views and experiences of peers in their online learning communities.

CEL assignment and research questions

The Masters of Library Science programme at Appalachian State University in a south-eastern United States town currently conducts all of its courses entirely online, enrolling students from across the state as well as surrounding areas. In one of the first courses students take in this programme, Collection Development and Management (CDM), students are asked to complete an extensive service-learning project based on the CEL. When designing this assignment, as with all e-service learning assignments, we first considered the course goals and how students might be able to meet these goals within their local communities. We decided to have students select a library located within their own geographic area, and analyse a portion of its non-fiction collection, helping the professional librarians with whom they are working to revitalise it by producing two lists: one including items for potential purchase and another with titles to be considered for deselection. Before crafting these lists, students perform a community analysis to understand the needs of their library's patrons and analyse their library's collection development policy to familiarise themselves with the library's stated mission and collection goals. The community analysis asks students to provide a general overview of the community served by their service-learning library. Students are then asked to examine the library's own infrastructure, including services, resources, staff and culture. Finally, students are directed to discuss the implications of their findings on the library's collection. Students also write weekly journal entries reflecting on their experience, complete class readings and discuss their experiences in synchronous, online class meetings throughout the semester.

The development of this project presented some challenges due to the fact that these students were learning from a distance and being asked to work locally. In order to mitigate some of the challenges of sending students to conduct service-learning in communities and libraries where we wouldn't be able to provide direct supervision, we made sure to create a very scaffolded group of assignments. This scaffolding approach was developed so that we could check in with students as they moved throughout the experience. This confirmed to us that each student was ready to move forward to the next step of the project as well as ensuring that they were doing quality work at their library sites.

As instructors teaching the CDM course, the researchers were interested in what challenges, logistical and otherwise, students might be encountering as they worked through the service-learning process as distance education students. We also wanted to understand what benefits the experience had to offer from the student perspective. Finally, we wanted to discern whether students were developing the ‘tunnel vision’ that Kazmer (2005) and Most (2011) identify as a danger in community-embedded projects such as this one, or whether instructors’ use of relevant class readings and discussions enabled students to fully connect with both the academic theory presented in class and the experiences of their peers.

Methods

To answer our questions, the researchers collected and anonymised the weekly journals and final reflection papers of students completing the service-learning project over the course of a one-year period (22 students in 2013–2014). The researchers initially coded these reflections individually, using an inductive approach in order to allow themes to emerge organically from the data instead of determining them in advance. After the initial round of coding, the researchers met to compare results and agree on significant themes. Emerging themes included the importance of conducting research on a given community before providing service, the support and sense of community provided by class discussion and related readings and, finally, a more nuanced understanding of what a career in librarianship entails. A second round of coding followed this initial session, after which the researchers again met to resolve any differences in assigned codes as well as to interpret and analyse the data.

Findings

Importance of community context

The first step in the multi-part project asked students to complete a community analysis for which they researched census data, interviewed teachers, administrators and librarians, and generally explored the needs of those people who are potential patrons of the libraries in which they worked. Almost every student took the time to report on this particular aspect of the assignment in their reflections, commenting on how important it was to learn about the community they would be working in before actually doing any work that would affect the citizens of that community. Strikingly, even students who were working in communities they had lived and worked in for years reported on the value of this portion of the assignment. According to one such student:

I have been very busy collecting data to put into my Community Analysis. . . . I have discovered several things that I didn’t know. I knew that [my county] has a small minority population; however, I never realized how small it actually was until I saw it on paper. Our school has 530 students of which only 24 are African American. I was also surprised to discover that only 36 of our students are considered Hispanic. Twenty-two students fell into the ‘two or more race’ category. This essentially means that we have eighty-two minority students. Percentage wise this means that roughly 15% of our student body is made up of minorities. This statistic more than any other has really struck me.

In other instances, students did not necessarily gain new knowledge, but had previous knowledge confirmed or put into greater context by their work on the community analysis. One student, for example, who was a teacher in the school he wrote about, remarked on

how his perception of the difficult home situations faced by many of his students was confirmed and heightened by looking at the 'differences in income and education levels' in his home community as compared to those in the surrounding counties and the state. Several students commented on how important it was to have this increased understanding of a community before making decisions about the resources the local library would be providing to its citizens. One student summed it up this way:

It would be impossible to know the needs of the library 'community' without, at the very least, some basic analysis of the community makeup. I found the community analysis portion of the service learning project to be the most helpful portion because the thorough knowledge base that it gave me of my patrons and their needs helped to inform every decision that I made from there on out.

Relevance of readings and discussion

Another theme that surfaced repeatedly in the data concerned the helpfulness of the course readings and in-class discussions. One student wrote, for example:

I found that readings truly complimented the component that we were working on at that give [*sic*] time; for example, when we read the Selection Theory pdf we were getting ready to begin working on our acquisition list. Having these readings beforehand allowed me to begin thinking about what I was going to be doing in the library and being formulating any questions that I had about the given task at hand. In addition to the classroom readings, the classroom discussions allowed me to see other viewpoints, help reinforce the information learned, and begin thinking about the information in other ways. I feel that without these readings and classroom discussions, I would not have had the understanding that I did about completing the deselection and selection processes.

Another student, having made similar remarks, added: 'It's as if my brain had all these random puzzle pieces floating around, and now, I feel like the puzzle is slowly being put together as a result of our discussions and readings.' These responses indicate that the course readings and discussions helped students to synthesise and absorb all of the information they were receiving about the many disparate factors involved in collection development. As a result, they did not simply accept and seek to emulate everything they saw their partner librarians doing as the best practice. Instead, they were able to articulate questions and critiques regarding the practices they encountered in their partner libraries.

Finding that her school lacked a current collection development policy, for example, one student wrote: 'The policy seems to have been put in place in the late 1980's and has not been updated since that time. While it does give general guidelines for the management of library collections, it does have some problems. Many discussions in [this course] have made me realise the importance of a collection management policy and its place in the library.' Prepared through readings and discussions with an understanding of the theory of collection development as well as how that theory is put into practice in schools across the state, this student was able to view her library's policy with a critical eye and provide useful feedback to the librarian and school administration. Interestingly, some students went even further, beginning to question and critique elements of the library that were only tangentially related to collection development. For example, one student reflected on her media centre's budget: 'I am taken aback by the idea that the budget is causing the librarian at my service learning school to facilitate guided reading groups instead of implementing a flexible schedule which

would allow her time to collaborate with the teachers. There has to be another way. So, my question is what is the better alternative to this situation I have encountered?’

Developing a deeper understanding of the field

Many students’ comments indicated that the service-learning project helped them to come to a more complete understanding of the nature of librarianship, a career for which they had just begun to prepare in earnest. In the words of one student: ‘I realise now that I had only a vague idea of what it is, exactly, that school librarians do. Throughout the semester, every assignment has helped with my (rather steep) learning curve.’ Another student wrote:

I never thought that library/ media coordinators had easy jobs, but I never realized how complex it is to develop a collection. You can’t just go buy random books and hope for the best. You have to consider your audience, the cost, the quality, and about fifty other things that I have found to be a little overwhelming. And forget about trying to randomly search online for a book. There is a method to that too. I think if I am being honest, I thought you just bought books. I never considered all the leg work that goes into choosing a book.

Significantly, this deeper understanding of librarianship caused several students to pause for reflection on whether or not the career they have selected is actually a good fit for them. One student wrote, for example:

I was able to listen to a story time being held for a 2nd grade class, and just loved how engaged and excited they were during their time in the media centre. It really reinforced for me the reasoning of why I chose this path for myself.

Another student had this to say:

I was very worried early on that I might have made the wrong decision choosing this programme to further my education. I really wasn’t sure that the day to day business of a library was going to be for me. My concerns were allayed once we started the process of working with our partner librarians.

While these confirmations of students’ career choices are certainly comforting from an instructors’ point of view, some students learned a different, but equally important lesson – that librarianship, or certain areas of the profession, at least, were not as appealing to them as they had once imagined. One such student explained:

Also this week I learned that I have very little desire to work in a public library as a librarian. . . . I do not like the lack of control these librarians have. Every aspect of the job has been broken down and a different person/group takes charge of that aspect. I understand this need because the library is part of a system, but it is not for me! I want to be essential in choosing the books under my roof. I want to be a part of why a book is no longer in my collection.

For some students, their perception of librarianship changed and grew not only as a direct result of the collection development project, but because the positive relationships they had forged with their partner librarians had opened the doors to new opportunities outside the scope of the project. For example, one student wrote that she was invited to join her school’s Media and Technology Advisory Committee (MTAC) because of the good work that she had done on the collection development project:

Something pretty cool happened today at school - from working with my school librarian I was asked to join the MTAC committee at my school. I usually don’t get asked to be on these ‘important’ committees since I’m the art teacher and technically just a teacher assistant. MTAC had its first meeting today and I was able to get a feel for what it is like. . . . I was really shocked to see on the agenda for the meeting that we would be discussing developing a CDP [collection

development policy] for the school's library and that our librarian is forming a committee of teachers to make selections for developing the 500s section of nonfiction in the library. I was listed as a resource on both of the agenda items. I am excited that our librarian is putting so much trust in me and using the work that I'm doing to improve our library.

In other cases, students were asked to help out in other ways, such as with the school book fair, for example. One particular student noted that 'it was a way I could give back to the librarian, who has assisted me quite a bit this semester.' Experiences like serving on the MTAC or other committees, helping with book fair or assisting with book checkout may not be directly related to the collection development course; however, these activities helped students to develop a fuller understanding of the many and varied roles librarians perform by providing them with some valuable first-hand experience in some of these duties.

Limitations and further study

One limitation of this study concerns the fact that the students initially handed in the reflections and essays examined here as part of a course. Although they were encouraged to write honestly and authentically about their experiences, students may have felt pressured to speak positively about the service-learning assignment and/or to minimise any frustration they may have encountered in order to please the instructors. Students did rate the method of instruction used in the course highly (with an average rating of 4.5 out of 5 for this element on anonymous end-of-course evaluations), which correlates well with the positive responses provided in the writing samples analysed. Nonetheless, in the future, collecting additional data after the course has ended, including a detailed survey, focus group or interviews, might be helpful in delving more deeply into student perceptions and responses.

Furthermore, based on the population enrolled in the MLS programme at Appalachian State University, the sample for this study consisted largely of non-traditional students undertaking a graduate degree in library science while working full time. The specificity of this population, in addition to the small sample size, limits the potential to generalise on the basis of these findings. It is worth noting though, that while they do not necessarily employ the language of 'community-embedded learning,' teachers in multiple disciplines have begun to experiment successfully with assignments that ask students in online courses to undertake service-learning projects in their local communities. The literature includes references to courses in e-learning design (Fasso & Knight, 2015), advanced nursing (Downes, Connor, & Howett, 2014; Fairchild, 2012), business (Hervani, Helms, Rutti, LaBonte, & Sarkarat, 2015) and social justice and leadership (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010b). Research that looks at how community-embedded learning works across disciplines and diverse student populations could be very useful to instructors considering the implementation of a similar pedagogical strategy.

Finally, from our perspective as course instructors who conducted synchronous meetings frequently throughout the semester, we observed that the immediate and spontaneous nature of these conversations are conducive to productive discussions with students about their service-learning experience and offer opportunities for sharing knowledge as well as peer bonding. However, because we did not record, transcribe and code the synchronous meetings for this course, we cannot draw substantive conclusions about the effectiveness of synchronous meetings or student response to them. In the future, such data collection and analysis would be helpful to ascertain student response to assignments, as would studies

that compare various means of communication – specifically synchronous versus asynchronous – in order to determine which work best for helping students to truly engage with their peers' experiences would be helpful to instructors who are assigning e-service-learning or CEL projects.

Conclusions and implications

The overwhelming majority (20 of 22) students indicated that they felt the CEL project was beneficial to their learning of course content and concepts. The researchers learned that students had very few problems finding a service site and that they tended to develop positive relationships with their partner librarians which often led to opportunities to learn and collaborate outside of the boundaries of the service-learning project. Further, though we had feared that students might develop a narrow, limited view of collection development, accepting the methods of their partner librarian – whether good or bad – as the professional norm, the data suggests that course readings and frequent small group and whole class discussions helped the students to develop a nuanced and complex understanding of the collection development process, one that empowered them to objectively view the practices of their partner libraries. Not only did students develop a more sophisticated understanding of collection development, they also deepened their understanding of what it means to work in the profession and reflected on whether this career would ultimately be a good fit for them. Finally, we learned that one of the most time-consuming early pieces of the multi-part assignment, the community analysis, was valuable to all students, even those who had been living and working in their service communities for years. In fact, based on student feedback, it appears that this preparatory piece of the larger assignment – asking students to turn an objective eye on the community they are preparing to serve – was a crucial factor in the CEL project's overall success.

Based on this information, the researchers conclude that the benefits of this particular community-embedded project outweigh the challenges that can come with conducting service work locally as a requirement for an online course. We will run the course in much the same way in the future, building on this initial success. Small modifications will include increasing the number and frequency of class conversations and providing students with some guiding questions to assist them in their small group and written reflections. We will also do our best to keep class sizes manageable (12–15 graduate students per class) because success depends on each student contributing to class conversations and the instructor's ability to respond to each stage of the students' projects in a timely manner.

More generally, this study has led us to the conclusion that community-embedded learning is more than just a way to solve the logistical hurdle of incorporating service-learning into distance education courses. In fact, when a CEL assignment is fully integrated into course content and used as a cornerstone for crucial conversations, the feared tendency towards tunnel vision drops away and students' eyes are opened to a fuller range of perspectives and experiences, making them more thoughtful, self-aware practitioners upon graduation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Kim Becnel is an associate professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Becnel teaches and researches in the areas of distance education, public libraries, and youth literacy and literature.

Robin A. Moeller is an associate professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University. She received her PhD in Curriculum Studies from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research interests are visual representations of information, as they apply to youth and schooling, as well as the use of virtual learning environments.

References

- Agosto, D. E., Abels, E. G., Mon, L., & Harris, L. E. (2009). The internet public library as service-based experiential learning. In L. Roy, K. Jensen, & A. H. Meyers (Eds.), *Service learning: Linking library education and practice* (pp. 133–141). Chicago, IL: American Library Association.
- Albertson, D., & Whitaker, M. S. (2011). A service-learning framework to support an MLIS core curriculum. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 52, 152–162.
- Bennett, G., & Green, F. P. (2001). Promoting service-learning via online instruction. *College Student Journal*, 35, 491–497.
- Downes, E. E., Connor, A., & Howett, M. (2014). An innovative approach to enhance dermatology competencies for advanced practice nurses: Service-learning with a migrant farm worker health clinic. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 53, 710–713. doi:10.3928/01484834-20141118-15
- Elmborg, J. K., Leighton, H., Huffman, H., Bradbury, J., Bryant, T., Britigan, D., ... Miller, C. (2001). Service learning in the library and information science curriculum. The perspectives and experiences of one Multimedia/User Education class. *Research Strategies*, 18, 265–281. doi:10.1016/S0734-3310(03)00003-X
- Eudey, B. (2012). Civic engagement, cyberfeminism, and online learning: Activism and service learning in women's and gender studies courses. *Feminist Teacher*, 22, 233–250. doi:10.5406/femteacher.22.3.0233
- Eyler, J. S., Giles, D. E., Stenson, C. M., & Gray, C. J. (2001). *At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993–2000* (3rd ed.). Retrieved from <https://www.mnsu.edu/cetl/academic-service-learning/Service-Learning.pdf>
- Fairchild, R. (2012). Hold that TIGER! A collaborative service-learning academic-practice partnership with rural healthcare facilities. *Nurse Educator*, 37, 108–114. doi:10.1097/NNE.0b013e318250415b
- Fasso, W., & Knight, B. A. (2015). Knowledge transfer in community-embedded learning: A case study. *Journal of Education Research*, 9, 267–281.
- Gerrish, B. (2006). Service learning: A great experience for LIS students. *Colorado Libraries*, 32, 32–35.
- Guthrie, K. L., & McCracken, H. (2010). Making a difference online: Facilitating service-learning through distance education. *Internet & Higher Education*, 13, 153–157. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.02.006
- Guthrie, K. L., & McCracken, H. (2010b). Teaching and learning social justice through online service-learning courses. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 11, 78–94.
- Hervani, A. A., Helms, M. M., Rutti, R. M., LaBonte, J., & Sarkarat, S. (2015). Service learning projects in online courses: Delivery strategies. *Journal of Learning In Higher Education*, 11, 35–41.
- Kazmer, M. M. (2005). Community-embedded learning. *Library Quarterly*, 75, 190–212.
- Killian, J. (2004). Pedagogical experimentation: Combining traditional, distance, and service learning techniques. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 10, 209–224.
- Most, L. R. (2011). Hands on from a distance: The community-embedded learning model contextualizes online student coursework. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 52, 295–304.
- Pierce, J. B. (2006). Service learning sustains hope. *American Libraries*, 37, 45.
- Sanchez, J. (2009). Virtual worlds: New spaces for virtual learning. In L. Roy, K. Jensen, & A. H. Meyers (Eds.), *Service learning: Linking library education and practice* (pp. 169–178). Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

- Strait, J., & Sauer, T. (2004). Constructing experiential learning for online courses: The birth of e-service. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 27, 62–65.
- Waldner, L. S., & Hunter, D. (2008). Client-based courses: Variations in service learning. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 14, 219–239.

Copyright of Open Learning is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.