



Making a difference online: Facilitating service-learning through distance education

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ABSTRACT

Development in the understanding and education of responsible citizenship is an important priority for higher education institutions. Evidence of this importance is expressed in the mission statements of many colleges and universities throughout the United States. As increasing numbers of students take advantage of distance education, it is essential to consider both the ways students can engage in experientially based learning environments that promote civic engagement as well as the manner by which institutions can fulfill this aspect of their missions. This article explores service-learning pedagogy delivered in an online format, specifically a case study describing the way one institution, University of Illinois at Springfield, successfully uses the Internet to provide such instruction.

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1. Introduction

Service has been emphasized as a primary goal of postsecondary teaching and learning since the beginning of American higher education (Pollack, 1999). The actualization of service is expressed, however, in ways that are as diverse as the institutions themselves. As a result, liberal arts colleges, research universities, professional schools and community colleges have developed varied interpretations of their service missions based on their primary identity. The service function of the liberal arts college focuses on building character in students irrespective of its connection to day-to-day concerns (Rudolph, 1962). In contrast, research universities have traditionally defined their service mission through their primary role of creation and application of knowledge (Rudolph, 1962). However, professional schools were designed with mandates to integrate public service broadly throughout curricula (Pollack, 1999). One way to actualize such a mission is by educating students about the importance of responsible citizenship and facilitating their engagement in positive social change. As technologies are increasingly integrated into instructional delivery across the curriculum, it is a logical progression to explore ways to facilitate learning through distance education, using the Internet as a means by which students engage in both coursework with geographically dispersed peers as well as participate in the unique communities in which they are placed.

In the United States service-learning found its beginning in the early 1970s when community activists and educators identified that structured learning could be combined with action in the community to provide stronger, deeper, and more relevant educational experi-

ences for students (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Waterman (1997) defined service-learning as “an experiential approach to education that involves students in a wide range of activities that are of benefit to others, and uses the experiences generated to advance the curricula goals” (p. xi). Further, service-learning is defined as education facilitated through active service within the context of specific course structures and field seminars linked to ongoing critical reflection and various assessment methods (Jones & Abes, 2004; Stanton et al., 1999; Strain, 2005; Wang & Rodgers, 2006). Service-learning joins the two complex processes of acquiring individual knowledge concurrent with initiating positive collective community action. A critical aspect of this instructional approach is the identification of appropriate community service experiences that complement specific academic learning through the creation of authentic service-learning experiences. This is an interesting and challenging process that is made complex by ever-changing needs and demands of the unique communities in which students are engaged.

To explore service-learning pedagogy and how the Internet can be a tool in providing this type of instruction, data collection using case study methodology was used. The investigation led to learning implementation strategies and ways in which technology has been infused with service-learning pedagogy. This understanding provided the impetus to integrate lessons learned within service-learning to further conceptualize the use of technology to foster active citizenship. In this article, the method used for investigating, present existing literature, results of the case study and, finally, the implications of service-learning being offered through distance education will be discussed.

2. Case study methodology

Describing and exploring service-learning courses which are delivered online is important in understanding practical strategies of

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implementation. Framing this description and exploration in a case study is appropriate to gain further knowledge. Case studies take into account a variety of evidence including documents, observations, interviews and artifacts (Yin, 1994). In this case study, the authors examined documents related to online service-learning courses, observed students enrolled in courses, interviewed various stakeholders and explored artifacts including technology used to support such use of the Internet.

Case studies concentrate on experiential knowledge and pay close attention to contextual influences (Stake, 2005). In exploring online service-learning pedagogy, which is contextual, a singular case study on why and how a program is successful is appropriate. Stake (2005) specifies that an “intrinsic case study” (p.445) is undertaken because a better understanding of a particular case is the goal. An “instrumental case study” is a particular case that may provide insight into a broad issue (Stake, 2005, p.445). The design of this case study takes both intrinsic and instrumental types of case studies into account. Gaining a better understanding about how a specific service-learning program uses the Internet as a tool for education and what insight it can provide to educators are both important goals for this case study.

3. Service-learning and online instruction

Service guided within a structured curricular framework assists students to connect already existing knowledge with personal and academic development that continues throughout the experience (Jones & Abes, 2004; Stanton et al., 1999; Strain, 2005; Wang & Rodgers, 2006). Such experientially based pedagogy is typically achieved through intentionally constructed curricula, field seminars and critical reflection seminars. The introduction of technology into this learning environment enables access to instruction to extend beyond the institution's immediate geographic region to those communities in which individual students live and participate every day. The potential impact facilitated through the introduction of technologies in experientially based curricula allows the effects of service to extend well beyond the classroom as students from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds collectively investigate community development and dynamics within the framework of civic engagement, social action, ethics and leadership, and promoting influence and change.

3.1. E-service: integrating technology with experientially based service-learning

Strait and Sauer (2004) adopted the term “e-service” to describe a distributed approach to facilitating collaborative virtual partnerships between coordinating institutions, students, and their service-learning placements, associates and service recipients. Such collaborations extend beyond technological connections, dependent upon effectively supporting the development of relationships between members of the learning community, their peers and the instructor, among learners and their placements, and to the technology itself. When collaboration is the center around which instructional design and delivery is based, it is possible to create a cohesive approach to curricular implementation, maintain the integrity of the learning environment, and deliver contextually relevant experiences that are both individually and collectively meaningful, meeting the needs of all stakeholders in the e-service infrastructure.

E-service refers to an instructional approach by which students participate in community-based placements and complete associated course work online. Such placements may also include those service opportunities that can be completed exclusively in a virtual environment (for example, coordinating specific caused-based interest groups on behalf of one's placement using a social networking website). In order to actualize instructional objectives within a virtual classroom it is critical to create a secure web-based environment in which technologies are utilized in such ways as to support applied

collaborative learning experiences (Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004). Three goals direct the continuous use of technologies within this curricular framework: facilitating productive and participative learning communities; enabling assignment delivery; and promoting the development of significant areas of secondary learning, such as mastering the use of new media (King, 2002).

3.2. Creating a virtual learning environment

A web-based learning management system, Blackboard Inc.®, provides the technical infrastructure for the online service-learning courses, featuring a range of functions that enable ongoing interaction among peers, instructors, community service contacts and the learning environment itself. Individual applications are integrated as relevant to curricular goals and manageable by course participants in such ways as to move beyond simple information sharing to the development of substantive dialogue rooted in service experiences (Barab, Thomas, & Merrill, 2001). Certainly, promoting access and information sharing is among the most basic priorities in a virtual classroom, including the implementation of uniform minimum requirements for software, hardware and bandwidth; the availability of requisite plug ins and databases; and, the utilization of text-based lectures, podcasts and streaming video (Hall, 2003; Van de Pol, 2001). Because stable and secure technologies are critical to enabling the most basic communication and interpersonal exchange, applications are selected based on their capacities to facilitate interaction and enable collaboration, for example, through the use of basic email, conferencing platforms, threaded discussions, or real-time chat and instant messaging. Moreover, it is important to integrate applications that enable archiving various learning objects (such as discussion transcripts or recorded audio and video presentations) from the course system, which can then be made available to students for ongoing documentation, review and reference (Lebow, Wagner, Marks & Gilbert in Gilbert and Driscoll (2002)).

Finally, it is imperative that any learning management system include applications that enable the administrative functions that accompany instruction, for example, identifying student participation patterns, generating assessment data, and enabling the ongoing distribution of content and collateral materials (Hall, 2003; Ullman & Rabinowitz, 2004). Noting that software, hardware and digital access are not uniformly available media are integrated into the courses based on their capacity to advance communication as well as facilitate students' secondary skill development, promoting proficiency related to the applications themselves. However, it is critical that assignments, resources and other course materials are available to students in multiple formats to appeal to a range of skill levels and abilities, as well as to address multiple learning styles and preferences.

4. Case study results

While the technologies themselves afford media-based frameworks for ongoing interaction, the actual opportunities promoting participation are facilitated through instructional approaches that capitalize on formats that reinforce reflective teaching methods. Approaches utilized effectively across media include promoting authenticity in teaching, encouraging the development of autonomy through critical reflection, fostering collaborative inquiry in community through dialogue, and integrating learning situated in experience throughout all aspects of the course. Additionally, instructors teaching web-based service-learning courses must motivate and facilitate participative action through the use of technologies. Meyers (2008) remarked that the exploration of important social concerns extends beyond one-dimensional information sharing; this level of dialogue is particularly effective when migrated to a media-rich learning environments.

To develop a pedagogical approach that promotes learning within an online academic setting, methods are selected that specifically

capitalize on features of the learning management system. For example, the virtual environment offers many interesting options for continuous dialogue, through the use of such tools as asynchronous email or threaded discussion forums, real-time conferencing platforms or basic chat and instant messaging functions (Barab, et al., 2001; Meyers, 2008). Instructional goals are also extended to areas for secondary skill building, such as the development of abilities to interact in meaningful ways in virtual learning environments, collaborate to achieve shared goals, and communicate using various media (King, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Moreover, strategies are implemented that enable explorations of broader issues as they are actualized within service placements, such as socio-economic privilege and its relationship to the utilization of technology in general and, more specifically, the development of information literacy. Furthermore, instructional activities are implemented that facilitate the identification and development of practice-based competencies specifically required by local community service sites. Skills uniquely learned in collaboration with community members and organization leaders promote a level of critical inquiry and knowledge building that extend beyond the immediate instructional environment to the on-site communities of practice (Gilbert & Driscoll, 2002).

Finally, promoting the development of information literacy skills and examining the role of culture in individual participation and communication continue to be critical to ensure curricular goals and instructional methods, including the selection and utilization of technologies, are congruent with the best practices as reflected in current scholarship and research, pedagogical priorities and social realities.

4.1. University of Illinois at Springfield

At the University of Illinois Springfield two distinct online service-learning courses have been offered over the past three years to over 300 undergraduate students. Students participating in these classes are largely online majors, studying from locations beyond the physical campus in Springfield, Illinois. The majority of students originate well beyond the central region of Illinois, including most of the United States and several foreign countries. These variables contribute to a diverse context in which to explore service. In general, these students represent both traditionally-aged and adult returning students, with the average age of participants being 34. They are particularly excited about the potential to study from a distance yet perform service in their local communities.

These two distinct online service-learning courses have similar structures; however, they focus on community engagement and responsible citizenship through different lenses. The first course, titled *Learning and Serving in the Community*, focuses on community engagement broadly, exploring, for example, its relevance to individual development as well as community organization. Upon completion of this course students have a working knowledge and comprehension of the history and philosophy of American community service; the nature and magnitude of social issues in student's local community; processes, structures and collaboration in community service; basic strategies and tactics utilized by groups and organizations to maintain or improve the quality of life in their communities; activities that lead to personal, professional and academic development through community service experiences; and, the ability to develop, present and implement action plans in a community setting.

The second offered course, titled *Social Change and Leadership*, examines community engagement from a positive social action framework, exploring the means by which different leadership styles enact positive, sustainable change within organizations, neighborhoods, and larger communities. Students identify and develop community service projects that result in specific outcomes planned in collaboration with their on-site supervisors. Upon completion of

this course students gain a general understanding of service-learning through participation in an ongoing reflective learning process; recognition of various historical models of leadership in social change; development of core personal values and an ethical framework as applied in action to civic engagement and leadership issues; and, the identification of strategies for social influence and change in relationship to both the individual and larger society.

4.2. Instructional scope

In addition to selecting appropriate pedagogies and teaching methods, the topics selected for inclusion in the curriculum provide opportunities for students to explore engagement and responsible citizenship while using their own communities as "laboratories." Both courses require students to examine their personal definitions of community service; this is accomplished through the development of reflective papers and other exploratory assignments that encourage students to contemplate civic and community engagement within a personal framework. For example, educating students related to specific public policies, programs and activists facilitates insight into the development of the Western concept of community service; this, in turn, helps to situate service-learning within the context of their involvement in current civic engagement experiences. In addition, the knowledge of major leaders and activists helps to develop students' consciousness about the potential of the individual to enact change. Additional topics are focused upon to the extent that they further awareness and understanding of the primary curricular goals. For example, in the course titled *Learning and Serving in the Community*, oppression, privilege and social capital are included in the course scope: reflection on and dialogue about the ways these topics contribute to social issues in the world to create positive change is an important aspect of community service. In the course titled *Social Change and Leadership*, topics focus around community organizing and leadership; the conceptual framework of leadership as a process in creating positive social change is integrated throughout the course.

4.3. Course requirements

Beyond publicized technical requirements, both service-learning courses require the completion of individual action plans, 60 h of community service, reflection journals, participation in structured discussions, and reflective essays that conclude with final culminating papers. Each of these requirements promote critical inquiry and reflection related to course materials, students' community service experiences and the shared dialogue about the process of translating theory into practice.

Students are asked to select non-profit agencies and organizations in which their service will be performed. Once service sites are selected and confirmed with agency representatives, students are asked to determine individual learning goals for successful completion of the community service experiences. Students are required to create service action plans during which they are required to create three learning outcomes for their service experiences. With each learning outcome, they plan associated learning activities they will complete to accomplish the objective, those resources they will use to support their learning and assessment measures that indicate learning occurred.

The curricula are focused around creating opportunities for continuous critical inquiry and reflection; this is accomplished through the use of synchronous chats and asynchronous threaded discussions, structured collaborative projects, and written essays. For example, in the course *Social Change and Leadership*, two reflective essays that focus on course readings and experiences are required. One essay requires the review and written analyses of two excerpts, one from Jane Addams' (1910) "Twenty Years at Hull House" and another from Andrew Carnegie's (1889) "The Gospel of Wealth,"

comparing and contrasting these two leaders and the means by which they created social change differently.

In particular, reflection journals are an important required element of both courses; such assignments facilitate personal insight as well as productivity towards learning outcomes. The documentation of the reflective process is substantial: twenty journal entries, approximately one to two pages in length, are required, or, roughly one entry for every three hours of community service provided. The journals are structured to provide guidance to those students who have never written in this specific format to reflect on individual and collective experiences. Students are instructed to discuss events, activities, discussions and other experiences, and subsequently follow up with descriptions of associated thoughts, feelings and learning moments. This general format allows students to focus more on substantive learning through a developing awareness of meaningful thoughts and feelings.

Both curricula require students to develop final reflective papers that represent a culmination of learning that occurred throughout the semester. Students reflect on both individual and collective learning goals, include analyses related to course content and materials, community service experiences and personal lessons learned throughout the semester. While majority of students write a paper, options of creating projects, such as a website or video presentation, are also available. This final reflective project allows students to see their development in a snapshot of the entire semester.

5. Discussion

Instructing hundreds of students through online service-learning courses has enabled a wealth of observations and pedagogical lessons, both successes and challenges. Successes, such as fulfilling institutional mission, reaching and impacting national and global communities, facilitating long-term commitment in communities, and witnessing the evolution of individual change are among the most valuable and are utilized in and integrated throughout the continued development of curricula. Because web-based service-learning courses extend broad access to learning within a context of geographic, socio-cultural and economic diversity, not only do students provide service in their own communities, they also travel outside of local regions to provide needed assistance throughout the United States and beyond. Participation in these types of experiences and the subsequent dialogues with peers enables a rich environment that promotes deep learning.

The facilitation of longer-term commitments in communities is a unique success. For those students who have lived their entire lives in communities but have never had opportunities to serve, these courses provide structures around which to explore potential interests, assistance in identifying unmet needs, and support for locating specific agencies and connecting with the appropriate individuals. As previously noted, while some students travel outside of the communities in which they live to serve, most students explore local issues to creatively investigate ways they can collaborate to make a difference. Students often report continued involvement in service following the conclusion of the courses. This affords a more substantial commitment to communities and enables the completion of long-range project planning and implementation as well as ongoing personal growth.

While there are significant successes in instructing web-based service-learning courses, there exists a range of challenges inherent in developing and teaching curricula that utilizes highly interactive instructional approaches. The establishment of the virtual teaching and learning environment is in and of itself challenging. It requires capturing and nurturing teaching moments that occur both during planned web-based activities as well as through spontaneous learning experiences encountered in face-to-face interactions at community service sites. The construction of such instructional experiences is made particularly complex as they occur within virtual learning environments in which students and instructors never come into physical contact with

one another. As in most virtual communication, nonverbal body language and unspoken cues are difficult to discern. Moreover, supporting students as they develop essential skills to generate and continue ongoing engagement is a constant instructional challenge. It is a difficult task for an instructor to identify and understand what are often disparate skill sets among enrolled students; this impacts instructors' abilities to facilitate and assess learning in ways that are personally relevant to individual students.

Challenges to facilitating online service-learning, such as the management of increasing course sizes and implications for instructional workload, require continued attention as web-based curricula continue to be developed and managed. For example, balancing the development and delivery of meaningful learning experiences within the context of increasing enrollments is a growing concern related to both teaching and course management. Increased enrollments pose challenges in managing the level, quality and quantity of the type of intimate course discussions required to facilitate individual awareness and collective knowledge building. While varying formats and media assist in creating an environment in which to conduct intimate course discussions, it is sometimes at the sacrifice of collaborative learning opportunities and the connectedness of the students to the curricula as well as to one another.

Additionally, the continuous integration of evolving technologies into instruction while meeting curricular goals, monitoring student capabilities, and managing provider communications and needs requires ongoing attention. Certainly, the continued integration of new media in curricula is a priority as it facilitates expanded access to the learning environment, enables multiple learning styles and processes, and allows multiple modes of creative expression and responsiveness. However, the integration of media in curricula must correlate directly to the median competencies of enrolled students so that the virtual environment does not become unwieldy or create barriers to participation.

Finally, explorations of broader issues such as socio-economic advantage and privilege and their relationship to accessing information technology, developing skills in information literacy, and the role culture plays in individual participation and communication continue to be critical to ensure curricular goals and instructional methods. Additionally, including the selection and utilization of technologies need to be congruent with the larger academic field, pedagogical priorities and social realities. Consideration of these types of variables is critical, both for the instructor when planning instructional methodology as well as for students as they provide service to organizations and agencies.

6. Summary

Online service-learning courses provide new opportunities for civic education. The Internet becomes an educational tool that expands working in a local community to working in a global community. Specifically, the University of Illinois at Springfield has provided new opportunities for faculty members, community members and students through expanding the use of the Internet to offer service-learning to students located around the world. While service-learning pedagogy has been actively explored in the United States since the 1970s (Stanton et al., 1999), facilitating this type of learning using the Internet is relatively new. As a result of providing this type of pedagogy online for over three years, lessons from the virtual classrooms provide information for additional practitioners to develop and deliver such courses successfully.

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