

Service Learning: A Case Study in an Agricultural Communications Course

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Abstract

Academic service-learning can be an effective and successful educational tool across many disciplines. The benefits afforded students and the community they serve are reciprocal in nature, thereby providing service to the community and capitalizing on a real-world learning environment for the students. Agricultural communications programs can offer for service-learning opportunities within the academic arena. The Campaign Planning for Agricultural and Natural Resources course at Oklahoma State University captures the essence of service-learning and provides students with an opportunity to use knowledge gained in previous courses to develop usable communications campaigns for small businesses or organizations. This case study should serve as a starting point for service-learning research in agricultural communications.

Introduction

Undergraduate students pursuing degrees in agricultural communications are offered a variety of courses designed to prepare them for careers in the agricultural and natural resources industry. Many times the courses provide a theoretical framework for communications application, but they do not allow students to gain hands-on, real-world experience. Communications professionals know “actions speak louder than words”; therefore, allowing students to gain real-world experience makes a service-learning course in agricultural communications truly beneficial.

The concept of service-learning can be an effective teaching method that enables students to recognize the relationship between learning and life experiences (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). The idea of service-learning dates back to philosophers John Dewey and Jean Piaget, who believed learning occurs best when students are actively involved in their own learning and when the learning has a distinct purpose (Billig, 2000). Waterman (1997) stated students develop a more thorough understanding of and an appreciation for the academic material taught if they are able to apply what they’ve learned in a manner that makes a difference in their own lives or that of others. In addition, service-learning for a student preparing to enter the job market has distinct benefits. Prentice and Garcia (2000) affirmed students are not only able to explore career opportunities through service-learning, but also they enhance their interpersonal skills and academic learning as a result of the experience.

The term service-learning encompasses many different definitions as it relates to the fusion of learning and service. At the secondary level, hands-on experience coupled with knowledge-based learning addresses both sides of the educational coin. Jacoby (1996) defined service-learning as follows:

As a pedagogy, service-learning is education that is grounded in experience as a basis for learning and on the centrality and intentionality of reflection designed to enable learning to occur. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (p. 5)

Additionally, the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Corporation for National & Community Service) stated service-learning combines student learning with service to a community so both community and student are improved. This document defines service-learning as a teaching method in which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; this service activity must be:

- coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service programs, and with the community;
- designed to foster civic responsibility; and
- integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled.

Following the activity, the organizers must provide structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience (Corporation for National & Community Service, 1993).

In reference to noted experiential-learning theorists Dewey, Piaget and others, learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection and is not merely rote recitation of fact. Eyster and Giles (1999) noted the easiest way to understand service-learning is to address the central claim of the theory, which was stated by Honnet and Poulen (1989): “service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (p. 1).

Higher education has long been charged with the tradition of service. In fact, the triad mission of land-grant colleges and universities encompasses service along with research and teaching. Speck (2001) stated service-learning is a way to overcome the barriers presented by traditional education that separates students from participation in public life and fails to provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to attain such involvement. Using real-world projects to attain authentic experience within service-learning can serve only to strengthen its attributes. Schuldt (1991) stated a real-world project is cultivated by the instructor, can be individually or group-based, and allows the students work with a client in an organization.

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) stated academicians have general agreement that service-learning entails:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

While the definitions of service-learning fluctuate among scholars, advocates argue that for service-learning to be legitimate, ethical and useful, it must adhere to certain criteria (Butin, 2003).

These integral criteria are respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection. Butin (2003) stated respect of the circumstance and outlooks of those being served must be foremost in a service-learner's mindset. The reciprocity of service-learning should be highly apparent; not only should the service benefit the server, but also those being served should determine what the service should entail (Butin, 2003). In addition, the service must be relevant to the course in which it is occurring (Butin, 2003). Finally, reflection of the service provided must occur for context and meaning to be construed by the student participating in service-learning (Butin, 2003).

Eyler and Giles (1999) found students believed learning received via service-learning experiences was more applicable to real-world contexts and richer than material learned in traditional classes. Thus, students developed a personal connection between the information they learned within the classroom and the application of these skills outside the classroom and within the community. Butin (2003) stated service-learning can "enhance student outcomes, foster a more active citizenry, promote a scholarship of engagement among teachers and institutions, promote a more equitable society, and reconnect K-16 schools with their local communities" (p. 1675). Likewise, in the field of engineering, real-world projects in conjunction with NASA and the Universities Space Research Association were found to be a conduit to link classroom learning to experience in the real world (Bak, 1992). Thus, academic service-learning today continues to serve as an effective method of juxtaposing classroom learning with real-life applicability.

Methods

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), a case study provides a detailed examination of a single setting, subject, depository of documents, or particular event. Case studies vary in their type and principles, yet each serves as a research approach to studying a specific and unique situation. This case study examined service-learning and a particular course in agricultural communications.

The researchers used a qualitative case study as they sought to understand the educational theory of service-learning in the agricultural communications discipline. In addition, it was an observational case study, one in which the major data-gathering was accomplished through participant observation and the focus of the study was on a specific organization or some aspect of the organization (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Merriam (1998) stated, "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case" (p. 27). In this research study, the case was AGCM 4403: Campaign Planning for Agriculture and Natural Resources, which has been taught at a Oklahoma State University since 2003 and has an typical enrollment of 25 to 40 students. The boundary of this case was one semester, or a four-month period. The 25 students registered in the course served as the participants; all were agricultural communications majors within the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

The lead researcher approached this study as a graduate student enrolled in the course and had several years of experience in communications campaign development and planning as well as nine years of experience in the agricultural communications industry; however, she had a limited educational base in the course content. Merriam (1998) noted the researcher must draw upon "concepts, terms, definitions, models and theories of a particular literature base" (p. 46) to develop and conduct a case study properly. The canon of literature for this study was related to service-learning and experiential education.

The campaign-planning course was taught by a seasoned instructor with multiple years of professional experience in planning communications campaigns and had served as the instructor for the course since its inception. The course was interactive in nature, with the instructor challenging the students to apply campaign planning theory and guidelines learned through texts to their real-life campaigns. The 25 students enrolled in the course were divided into three- or four-member teams based upon their self-appointed strengths and areas of like and dislike with regard to communications activities. Based on the number of groups, an appropriate number of clients were identified in the community and around the state who desired a communications campaign to facilitate their new businesses or ventures. The students met as a team with their clients and received all necessary information regarding the respective businesses and their goals. Upon completion of the communications campaign, the teams presented their campaigns to the clients, and the clients could implement the communications campaigns based on the students' suggestions. The teams were graded on the various aspects of their developed campaign plans, peer and client feedback, and overall quality of work.

The design of the course facilitated students emulating a communications team in a professional setting. Each student team submitted weekly memoranda to the course instructor, updating her on the team's progress and timeline of plans. Students took weekly quizzes based on their readings from a campaign-planning textbook. Additionally, each team developed a team name, slogan and letterhead, creating a real-world scenario for the project. The teams completed a three-part analysis of the client — industry, competitive and company — that guided the development of a campaign. The teams also produced a budget as well as sample communication materials for review during the final presentation to the client.

Stake (1978, p. 5) stated, "Case studies will often be the preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization." Qualitative data was collected through the course syllabus, course materials and their delivery, student-instructor interaction, student perceptions, student assignments, client interaction, participant observation in the course, and course evaluations. The researcher participated in the course as a graduate student and observed both the educator and the students. The researcher approached the course with considerable objectivity, having experience in campaign development and planning but having received limited formal training in the area. The researcher observed the educator and the students in a classroom setting as well as in group interactions and professional presentations. Campbell & Stanley (1963) argued the likeness of a study's setting to its natural environment lends to increased validity and overall generalizability of findings. The methods of information collection were chosen by the researcher based on the environment of the course and students. The researcher used observation notes, course-evaluation comments, and the course syllabus to observe common instances, or patterns, related to service-learning.

Looking for patterns within collected information serves as a "major mode of analysis" (Tellis, 1997, p. 1). Closer examination of the data and for the development of patterns allows the researcher to adequately describe the events in a case and can lead to a better understanding of a case. Because this is a descriptive case study, "the predicted pattern must be defined prior to data collection" (Tellis, 1997, p. 1). Garsen (2003) agreed with this principle and described the development of patterns as the attempt of the researcher to show links to the theoretical model, which drives the case study. The predicted pattern or theoretical model in this case was the criteria established by Butin (2003) as respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection.

While searching for patterns among the notes, course-evaluation comments, and the syllabus, the researcher worked alone to find repetitive comments made by students about objectives outlined in the syllabus and catalog description of the course. Patterns were identifiable through observation and the use of a tally marks to record each observance, which the researcher to make note of similar comments as they occurred in the classroom as well as in course evaluations. In addition, the service-learning criteria of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection were examined with regard to the course syllabus to determine if they were present from the onset of the course and served as framework on which the course was based.

Results and Discussion

In reviewing the syllabus, the campaign-planning course allowed students to learn how to create a communications campaign for any organization. The course developed a student's ability to convey written and oral information, use multiple media, work as a professional and team player during a campaign, conduct market research, and use the knowledge gained in planning a campaign. Students were grouped into teams and were instructed to develop a functional communications campaign for a client.

Through the course and its service-learning assignments, students used the knowledge gained in other courses throughout their college career to create a usable communications campaign for a client, as observed by the researchers through student presentations, course evaluations, and client materials. Students refined their individual abilities and worked with other students with differing levels of talent and skills. In providing materials for each client, students developed portfolio-building materials for themselves. Students used their skills in a real-life situation comparable to what they would experience in the workplace. In addition, the clients received an actual communications campaign plan with appropriate research and products to use at their discretion. Ultimately, the students produced tangible, real-life projects worthy of professional utilization.

In justifying the agricultural communications course as a service-learning course, the definition set forth by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 was used. The first guideline looks at student participation in service that meets the needs of the community. In this course, the clients approached the instructor of the course in search of quality workmanship at a minimal or gratis cost, thereby allowing the students to participate in a genuine service-learning opportunity and contribute to the community. Specifically, the clients were in search of student assistance regarding the development of communications campaigns for their businesses. While many of the clients were owners or principal stakeholders in new businesses, several of the businesses were established and looking for assistance in the revitalization of their communication outreach plans. The clients outlined the goals for the assigned student teams, but students were active participants in determining why the client felt a certain goal or vision should be achieved. As Schuldt (1991) confirmed, in real-world projects the students must identify succinctly the needs and expectations of the client so the project meets his or her overall needs and the client is duly satisfied with the end product. In fulfilling the second guideline, the course was offered at an institution of higher education and assisted businesses in the community surrounding the university. By nature of the interactive relationship between student teams and clients, the clients served to foster civic responsibility. The clients and students contributed to the well-being of community in a reciprocal fashion. The use of service-learning in this course enhance the students' skills and applicability by allowing the students to exercise their skills for actual clients in a professional setting. Schuldt stated the use of real-world projects affords

students “practical experiences that enrich the students’ academic experiences in a relatively safe environment free from job security concerns” (1991, p. 35). In addressing the final guideline of allowing for student reflection, the students in the course submitted weekly memos regarding their campaign experience as well as participated in class discussion and laboratory sessions where the campaign experience was discussed as a whole. Most importantly, students used critical thinking skills to assess themselves and their teammates regarding their project. While student grades in the service-learning course were determined in a multifaceted basis, students indicated they reflected upon their communication plans thoughtfully before grading their teammates and ultimately themselves in an unbiased and truthful manner. Although this type of assessment may not be the norm in the real-world, the ability to think critically and arrive at thoughtful and intelligent decisions are skills learned and expanded upon as a result of the course.

Additionally, the findings of the study examined the four criteria given by Butin as essential for service-learning. The findings are based upon the assignments and instructions given to the students in class as well as the students’ interaction with the client. The first criterion explores the notion of respect and involves the students’ overarching goal for the course: creation of a communications plan for a real-world client. The students were instructed to create a plan for their client that solved a central and existing problem addressed by the client. The instructor of the course emphatically reminded students they were serving the client and in doing so gaining valuable real-life experience based upon their skills learned as agricultural communications students. In many cases, the researcher noted students indicating the client was not acting in their own best interest, yet they were forced to be respectful of the client’s wishes and only address the problem(s) highlighted by the client. Working in teams also allowed the students to work with peers with differing ideas and skill levels, similar to that which would encounter in a professional setting. Therefore, the notion of respect is primary in affording students the opportunity to gain real-world experience that could not otherwise be gained through a typical classroom setting and learned set of skills.

The relationship of reciprocity goes hand-in-hand with respect for the client. The students in the course gained valuable experience in the application of their skills in designing a communications plan, yet the client being served set the framework for the students. This reciprocity enables both student and client to benefit from the course and the material being taught, thereby illustrating the service the students provided and the learning that took place.

The relevancy of any service is fundamental for learning to occur. The campaigns course provided students with an opportunity to use the knowledge gained in other courses throughout their college careers to develop usable communications campaigns for clients. The design of the campaigns course created a framework for the bigger picture of service the students are providing to the clients. Through weekly readings, assignments, meetings, and expert referral, the students were measured as to the service they were providing. In the end, the clients chose the communication plan that best met their needs, the instructor evaluated the students based on pre-determined criteria, and the students evaluated one another on performance.

Reflection is essential to the process of service-learning. Conrad and Hedin (1991) stated reflection allows students to develop a wholly substantial viewpoint that extends beyond their individual service-learning projects; it allows them to see their individual changes about their own ideas and beliefs. For effectiveness, the students must reflect on what they have learned throughout the course and on how the skills impact them in the future. In the campaigns course, students reflected throughout the duration of the course on the context and meaning of their tasks in developing communications

plans. Student teams submitted weekly memos on their progress, completed supplemental readings and quizzes to test their knowledge of campaign planning, developed client products, developed a detailed budget, and presented their completed communications plan to the client, instructors and peers for evaluation. Additionally, students played an active role in planning the syllabus of the course and determining the goals to be met at culmination. Each of these content areas allows for extensive reflection throughout the duration of the course and ultimately led to a thorough and honest evaluation of their work.

The overall findings of the study are parallel to the theory and principles behind academic service-learning. Each of the four criteria was addressed in detail within the course and support the positive outcomes derived by students and clients alike involved in this service-learning opportunity.

In this case study examining service-learning in an agricultural communications course, student comments were indicative of learning how the course met the guidelines for service-learning and determining what needed to be improved upon in the future. Derived from course evaluation, the thematic table (see Table 1) summarizes the findings related to the course overall, its workload, and its benefits for students as they relate to achieving service-learning.

Table 1
Thematic Conceptual Matrix of Course Values Related to Service-Learning

Value	Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Course	1. Worthwhile	“The course was fun and worth my time.”
	2. Learning	“I learned a lot in this course.”
Workload	1. Prerequisites	“Everything was an excellent learning experience.” “Prerequisites should be established/enforced.” “I saw times where groups were unequal.”
	2. Credit Hours	“Wow! We did a lot of work. It should be worth four hours.” “A lot of work is required outside of class.”
Student Benefit	1. Real-world Experience	“Helped to see what goes on behind the scenes and opens eyes.”
		“I liked having guest speakers, they brought real world to the class.” “It helped with teamwork and to prepare for the real world.” “I am walking away with a lot of confidence in knowledge acquired.”

The findings of this study indicate the Campaign Planning for Agriculture and Natural Resources course was indeed an effective portrayal of a service-learning course in agricultural communications at this midwestern land-grant institution. Students involved in the class generally had positive feelings toward the course overall and the benefits afforded them. In particular, students found the course to be beneficial because it left them with more confidence and knowledge in communications planning. Students stated they learned a lot in the course and it helped to prepare them

for the real world. Based on student and client evaluations and feedback, service-learning does prove to be worthwhile for students in a campaigns course. Clearly, based on the literature and the outcomes of this study, service-learning is an effective teaching strategy to use in some agricultural communications curriculum.

Summary

As students attend college before entering the workforce, it is imperative these students be equipped with the skills necessary to succeed. While part-time employment and internship opportunities provide excellent experience for the traditional college student, more real-world experience is necessary to afford them the competitive edge in the job market. Academic service-learning with its real-world experiences fills the void often left from traditional coursework. In agricultural communications, in particular, service-learning is an effective tool for combining marketing, communications, public relations, and journalism knowledge with practical application. As the agricultural communications discipline continues to grow, it will be imperative for students to not only grasp the multitude of skills necessary to succeed in industry but also to have the confidence and know-how of applying the skills in realistic situations. Through service-learning, students have input in the end result of their work as well as a direct impact on the lives of others.

This case study should serve as a starting point for future research in the area of service-learning within agricultural communications coursework. Other denoted “capstone” courses should be examined within the discipline to determine if criteria could be added to make these service-learning in nature, as well. Additional studies should be conducted that not only use participant observation and anonymous evaluation but also incorporate students’ perspectives through interviews and additional evaluation tools. While the case study method was fruitful in examining this particular course, content analysis of assignments, the course syllabus, and student evaluations would ensure objectivity and avoid potential researcher bias. Further studies should be conducted to determine if service-learning is appropriate in all areas of agricultural communications and to delineate the specific benefits gained through participation in such a course.

Service-learning is a judicious method of combining learning and service. The challenge ahead lies in structuring the activities to ensure students and clients reap the maximum benefits of real-world experience afforded through such an opportunity.

Keywords

service-learning, capstone courses, teaching, case study

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