

Incorporating a Service-Learning Option in an Online Course

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I. Introduction and Background

The popularity of online learning is and has been growing for some time. In fact, it has arguably been growing rapidly. According to IPFW Division of Continuing Studies, between 2002 and 2012, the number of registered IPFW student credit hours in online courses increased by over 400% (DCS Report, 2012). Further, as offerings of other distance formats such as studio and cable broadcasted courses has decreased, offerings of online courses have dramatically increased; now accounting for roughly 95% of all DCS credit hours (DCS Report 2012). The desirability of online courses seems obvious. They offer students, and instructors alike, the benefits of more flexible schedules, hopefully not at the detriment of rigor. Additionally, universities undoubtedly enjoy the financial returns generated from the growth in popularity of online courses.

In 2002, when I completed my Masters in Professional Communication with course work focusing most heavily on classroom communication, the title of my thesis was "Online courses ineffective due to lack of interpersonal communication" (Dircksen 2002). The following semester, I was offered the opportunity to teach my first online course. From this first hand experience, I developed the opinion that there were some strategies that I had used that supported my thesis yet, other strategies seemed to yield discussions and other learning opportunities that were perhaps even more fruitful than some in-class techniques that I thought were effective.

Since that time, I have taught roughly fifty online classes and have had the opportunity to review many others through my position as Online Course Director for the Department of Communication and also in my role as a member of the Online Course Design Review Team through IPFW's CELT. Simply put, it is my opinion that the teaching techniques that I have used (and have seen other faculty use) that follow some or all of Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (1987), yield the most effective strategies. However, it is not always possible nor time/financially feasible to develop creative strategies in online courses that do this. Logically, as teaching and learning in higher education quickly becomes more and more reliant on strategies used on online courses, it is essential that instructors research, develop, and test new and innovative techniques in order to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning. This grant has given me the opportunity to develop and implement a service-learning option in an online course.

II. Project Description

A. Rationale

In my face-to-face classes I have used service-learning as a teaching strategy for the past three years. I believe these service projects have resulted in applicable and effective learning. This is a strategy that, to my knowledge had not been tested in an online format. The impacts of service learning are well researched and well documented. Summarizing studies cited on the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse: "...service-learning produces an array of positive impacts in the area of prosocial behaviors, acceptance of diversity, connection to cultural heritage, development of ethics, and strengthening of protective factors related to resilience. Service-learning clearly helps students to develop caring, altruism, and other social emotional learning."

B. Course Description

COM 318: Principles of Persuasion Principles of Persuasion is a course that serves many different majors and students. In my online sections, the highest concentration of majors come from Communication, General Studies, and Organizational Leadership, though generally combined, these majors make up not more than half of the students. Students across campus, from Nursing, Education, Engineering, Psychology, etc, complete this class. It is a diverse group of students with diverse needs. As such, the class is a survey course in which we cover foundational principles of persuasion through the basics of rhetoric, followed by a study of persuasion within three specific and important components of our lives:

1. Persuasion in Family and Interpersonal Communication
2. Persuasion in the Media
3. Persuasion in Politics

All sections focus on pushing students to think critically about effective principles and the ethics of persuasive tactics in two ways:

1. How others (family friends, media, politicians) attempt to influence him/her (the student) and society and
2. How the student plays the most important role in their own process of persuasion.

The course objectives are: By applying yourself and working hard, by the end of this semester, you should expect to be able to:

1. Identify and evaluate persuasive strategies of commercial media.
2. Identify and evaluate persuasive strategies of voter directed political communication.
3. Identify and evaluate the persuasive strategies of your communication with your friends/family.

4. Evaluate the ethics of persuasive strategies in your communication to your friends/family, in voter directed political communication, and in commercial media.

Achievement of these course objectives is measured through Unit group analyses, individual papers, comprehensive quizzes, and synchronized online meetings (through Adobe Connect). Of the online classes that I teach, I felt that this class would yield itself best to a service learning option.

C. *Implementation*

I developed agreements with three teachers at different schools:

- A middle school teacher with a need to teach persuasive speaking to her students
- A mixed-aged classroom (grades K-6) teacher with a need to teach media literacy/persuasion in the media
- A high school government teacher who had a need to teach persuasion in politics

To the COM 318 students, I offered the option to either complete a service-learning project (described below) or to participate in class discussions (beyond the universally required group discussions). Each semester, about 15 students (roughly 1/3rd of the class) chose the service project.

The students who chose the service-learning option collaborated with the school teachers to develop a database that the teachers could use, to pull readings, videos, activities to use in their own classroom. The databases contained resources that the teachers could use to teach anything from effective group communication negotiation, interpersonal conflict negotiation, issues related to public speaking (ethos, pathos, logos), issues surrounding persuasion in the media and political persuasion, etc.

Specifically for the service project, learning and participation were assessed through:

1. Regular (every third week) instructor evaluation of progress of projects
2. A final evaluation of the finished project by the instructor (in collaboration with the elementary/high school teacher)
3. Regularly submitted (every third week) individual student logs
4. A final individual reflection paper

III. **Results**

A. *Goals*

The details of the results of this project will be brief. I did not seek IRB approval and will therefore not report any specific nor identifiable results. This was the first time such a project, to my knowledge, had been undertaken. Not knowing specifically what I wanted to measure, I chose to focus my attention on learning simply what

worked well within these projects and what would be best to adapt in future semesters.

The goals of this project were to address three of Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles" (1987), to encourage:

1. Student-Faculty Contact (including school teacher in this case)
2. Cooperation among Students
3. Active Learning

and also

4. Student Engagement in the Community (not a specific "Seven Principle")

The goals currently and for future semesters are expected to remain the same, however I have made some changes to the structure since the first semester of this project. I also am looking to make specific changes in the future (discussed below).

B. Lessons Learned and Changes

1. The time commitment was overwhelming for me (the instructor).

Because some students are not doing a service-learning project and those that are service-learning students are split into three groups (one for each of the three teachers), different groups of students, in one section, are covering different content at different times during the semester. Setting up Blackboard to "Adaptive Release" the correct folders/content at the correct time to the correct students takes a burdensome amount of time. Additionally, Blackboard's grade book took a notable amount of my time, throughout the semester, to set up for different requirements for groups of students. Sending weekly updates, simply communicating via e-mail, and answering very different sets of questions also took much time.

Some of the above issues have been resolved simply by taking a good deal time over breaks setting up grade books, pre-writing dozens of updates and e-mails. Another helpful strategy, which I have not yet implemented, could be to separate service-learning students into a separate section in Blackboard; though this could have negative effects on learning since this would be a very small section.

2. Some students found it confusing to have requirements in the syllabus and in other course materials that they were not required to complete.

For example, I received a few questions about the "service-learning logs". These were required of the service students but not others. While they were described as such in the syllabus, in e-mails, and in some weekly video updates on the homepage, some students still did not understand.

I have learned to send out the course syllabus, tips from past students, and an e-mail explaining the course (including the service-learning) option twice before the semester begins: Once at the end of priority registration and once

the week before classes start. This way, more students have more opportunity to clarify more questions ahead of time.

3. It is essential to communicate the same information through different modes
Without passing judgment, for reasons that I do not care to guess, it seems some student either do not read/watch or retain some information that is either in the syllabus, in e-mails, posted in forums, in video lectures, in feedback, in homepage video updates, etc. However, I have found that if I post the same information through all of these modes of communication, I receive fewer questions that were likely to have been answered by reading/watching one or more of the above.

IV. Conclusion

Through my experiences, evaluations, feedback, etc., it is my strong belief that offering or requiring a service-learning option in an online class is a viable teaching technique. It is of course important for the instructor to align the activities of the project with the goals of the project which need to be aligned to one or more of the course objectives. While developing these activities, through my experiences, I feel it is extremely important for the instructor to anticipate the amount of time that it will take her/him to implement and execute the strategies she/he feels will work best. In the future, I hope to offer a section of COM 318 online where the service-learning project is required of all students. I believe this would make the course more manageable for me and would make the requirements and the navigation of the course more easily understandable to the students.

The experience of this project has been a valuable one to me. I hope by sharing my trials and errors, it can be of value to others as well. Teaching and learning in higher education is becoming more and more reliant on the strategies we use in online courses. It is becoming ever more important to be given opportunities to develop, test, adapt, and implement innovative and effective strategies that yield online courses as effective and as rigorous as our face-to-face counterparts. I feel this grant has given me an opportunity to do so.

References

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