



ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING

Moving Your Students Outside the Classroom—Literally

Rachel Smydra

Many instructors are using social media to move students “out of the classroom” into virtual worlds; however, constructing a method to move students—literally—outside of the classroom exists as a viable option as well. As a pedagogical methodology, Academic Service Learning is more than an internship or experiential learning. It is both a technical and anti-foundational approach to teaching that can move students beyond mere regurgitation of course content and engage students in the discovery of course content. In simpler terms, service learning is an opportunity for instructors to move students out into the community setting in order to explore and experience course content in a literal way.

Volunteering, civic action, and community service are nothing new on college campuses. For decades, students have participated in student-organized events such as fundraisers and walk-a-thons. Building on these platforms and ideals of volunteering, civic action, and community service, Academic Service Learning allows instructors to construct and tailor specific service opportunities that relate to course learning objectives and in turn enhance knowledge of course content.

Because there are a multitude of options for how and when to implement Academic Service Learning into a course,

theoretically, any class could incorporate some type of service learning to enhance course content. For example, some instructors design service projects that require students to take on semester-long projects and to accrue a certain number of service hours; others incorporate a one-time service learning project to enhance a particular component in a specific unit. Regardless of the service learning project design and implementation, both instructors and students agree that there are both short-term and long-term benefits for everyone involved.

Instructors are able to move away from disseminating information to developing active roles as learning facilitators and guides. The University benefits as well. Academic Service Learning projects go a long way in building and fostering community partnerships with organizations in desperate need of help. In addition, universities that implement Service Learning into classes also retain students at a better rate. According to “The Role of Service-Learning on the Retention of First-Year Students to Second Year” (2010) survey results show that “students who participated in service during their first year of college or in service linked to their coursework reported higher levels of satisfaction with both academic aspects of involvement and personal development than students who did not participate in these experiences.” Most importantly, however, are the tangibles and intangibles that students reap from Academic Service Learning.

Acting as extensions of the University, students not only grow personally from their experiences but professionally as well. By putting classroom theory into practice, students build and improve on transferable skill sets such as organizing, collaborating, and networking. Reaching out to different communities allows them to bridge course content to real-life applications all while assisting service organizations that benefit from the relationship as well.

Because Academic Service Learning has gained recognition and respect as pedagogy, it is now flourishing on most college campuses across the country. At Oakland University, Scott Crabill, Director of Integrative Studies, has been instrumental

in increasing the visibility of Service Learning. As a Faculty Learning Community facilitator, Crabill was motivated to start a Service Learning program at Oakland University after he heard Dr. Kathleen Stacey's presentation about Academic Service Learning at Eastern Michigan University.

In an effort to establish and institutionalize Service Learning at Oakland University, Crabill created the Office of Academic Service Learning and initiated the Oakland University Faculty Fellows Program with the goal of recruiting faculty to participate in semester long training sessions on Academic Service Learning. Choosing from over 20 proposals, Crabill selected five diverse courses and initiated the inaugural group training session of Academic Service Learning Fellows in Fall 2009 with a six faculty members: Tom Pedroni, School of Education; Karen Markel, School of Business; Sara Maher, Physical Therapy; Tanya Christ, School of Education; and co-instructors Pamela Mitzelfeld and Rachel Smydra, both from the Department of English.

Throughout the fall semester, faculty members met twice a month to share experiences and to discuss topics ranging from assignment development and implementation to pedagogy, faculty and student risks, and grading rubrics for Academic Service Learning. The meetings fostered enlightening discussions on such topics as what constitutes service learning, measuring outcomes, and the importance of constructing and adding a student reflection element for students to consider the connections between the service projects and course content.

Tiffany Sims, from Oakland University's Office of Service Learning and AmeriCorps VISTA, Chris Jensen, Assistant Director of Student Activities & Greek Life, and Margaret Leahy, from Risk Management, attended sessions and gave Faculty Fellows informative insight into how to build community partnerships, alternative spring breaks options, and manage student risks.

The following excerpts are from the six faculty Academic Service Learning Faculty Fellows.

English 209: Literary Subjects, Virtual Subjects

Rachel V. Smydra and Pamela Mitzelfeld, Co-Instructors

In the Winter 2010 session of *English 209: Literary Subjects, Virtual Subjects*, 22 students analyzed and compared literary self-narrative to blogs of the same genre. Moving from journals and memoir to personal essay, students compared the construction of digital personal, public, and persuasive voices to the textual voices we find in traditional texts such as Emerson, Franklin, Pepys, and Woolf. We chose to integrate our service projects into our unit on persuasive essays. The objective was to share a collective experience as a group that we could then use in a collaborative blogging project.

We took two groups of students on two different days for an afternoon of work at the Baldwin Center located in Pontiac just a few miles from Oakland University's campus. Each group interacted with both clients and center staff. One student group sorted clothes and reorganized storage to allow clients easier access to needed clothing; the other student group cleaned, organized, and unpacked food and supplies in the Center's food pantry. While working, students got to hear staff members address the services and programs offered to local residents. Most importantly, students learned that even though the Baldwin Center is about providing basic needs to local residents, the Center seeks to empower people by providing an array of other services to meet people's needs.

After time at the Baldwin Center, we regrouped in the classroom to discuss our collective experiences. Individually, students reflected and posted about their experiences; most students posted about how they didn't even know the Baldwin Center existed and that they intended to return to volunteer in the future. Other students noted that they enjoyed working with peers and that they wished the service project was something that we had incorporated throughout the entire course.

Using these collective experiences, we discussed digital activism and how to blog for a cause successfully while studying persuasive literary writers, such as Emerson and Kingsolver, in order to analyze how to construct persuasive voices that can motivate readers to take action. Students had to discuss their experiences and then decide how to create and design group blogs that incorporated a public persuasive voice that reached out to the Oakland University community to take up Academic Service Learning. Our experiences at the Baldwin Center in the unit on persuasive digital voices not only enhanced the classroom discussion on how to connect and persuade readers, but the service project gave students a window into local community needs and services that we hope will turn them into lifelong community advocates.

Physical Therapy 302: Physical Therapy as a Profession

Sara F. Maher, PT, DScPT, OMPT

As part of the requirements to complete a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences with a Pre-Physical Therapy Concentration, undergraduate students must take a class called Physical Therapy as a Profession (PT 302). In general, this course examines professional development, professional behaviors, and the roles of physical therapists in clinical, academic, and research settings. In the winter of 2010, a requirement of service learning was added to the class, replacing a previous observation in a physical therapy setting.

The service learning assignment was structured to allow students to select a site from a list of provided choices or create one of their own. Students were expected to participate in four hours of service to a patient population they had never experienced or to the profession of physical therapy. After completion of the experience each student wrote a 4-5 page reflection paper with

direct connections to the class, the population being served, and the student's own life experiences.

Thirty students completed the class and participated in this assignment. Ten students selected individualized placements, while the remaining 20 students choose to participate in "Bridge the Gap," a treatment program offering free physical therapy for stroke patients in the community. Treatment in "Bridge the Gap" is provided by graduate physical therapy students under the direct supervision of physical therapists in the community.

Students in PT 302 were able to observe not only an individual with a stroke and his/her family members, but were able to watch a graduate physical therapist learning hands-on skills. Student statements on the reflection paper were extremely positive. Examples of student comments included the following:

"Observing and absorbing all was extremely eye-opening and motivating. I cannot wait to be in those students' shoes and learn hands-on what it is to be a physical therapist."

"Through my service, I really learned a lot about not only physical therapy, but my desire to become a physical therapist. Before this, I always had questions and a slight amount of doubt, but now I have a lot more confidence that this is what I want to do."

In addition to the reflection paper, students completed a shortened version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) with permission from Indiana University. With the addition of service learning, students reported having more opportunities to develop faculty relationships, more opportunities to work with other students both in and out of the classroom, better relationships with peers, feedback that was prompt, and multiple methods of getting feedback. Students also reported less reliance on low level thinking (memorizing, synthesizing, etc.) and more reliance on higher level thinking (analyzing, judging, applying theories, etc.).

Overall, this project was a tremendous success. Students in PT 302 were extremely pleased to see actual physical therapy applications, while feeling like they were providing a service to the field. In addition, all of the service learning facilitators, students, and patients were extremely grateful to have the student help. The experience was truly a “win-win” for all participants.

Org 460: Compensation and Benefits

Karen S. Markel, Ph.D. SPHR

All undergraduate Human Resource Management majors must take a course on Compensation and Benefits (ORG 460). In general, this course covers material related to the design and administration of employee compensation and benefits programs. As part of this course’s requirements during the Winter, 2010 semester, students completed a service learning project for the human resources department at the Leader Dogs for the Blind (Leader Dogs) organization.

The Leader Dogs organization is located nearby in Rochester, MI. Founded by three Detroit area Lions Clubs members in 1939, Leader Dogs provides dog guides to people who are blind and visually impaired to enhance their mobility, independence and quality of life. Each year, over 270 students attend their 26-day residential training program to be paired with a dog guide (www.LeaderDogs.com).

Fifteen students were enrolled in the course and participated in this service learning assignment. The main purpose of the project was to evaluate the organization’s current paid time off policies. These policies include vacation leave, personal leave, birthday leave and paid holidays. The class was divided into teams and instructed to evaluate the current paid time off program in relation to

its effectiveness with employees, the organization as well as current human resource trends in this area.

The project began with a class trip to visit the Leader Dogs organization. The Leader Dogs' Human Resources Manager, Karen Bracey, discussed the project and gave the class a tour of the organization (i.e. administrative, dog care and residential training areas). Upon returning to the classroom, students used the information gathered from Leader Dogs to analyze and develop new recommendations for the paid time off program.

After practicing their presentations and submitting a draft of their final executive report, the class returned to Leader Dogs and conducted final presentations for the organization's executive team. I met with Karen Bracey to debrief the project after the end of the semester and she informed me that the organization is considering implementing several of the recommendations made by the students.

Overall, this project was a great addition to the course assignments. Students were able to get out of the classroom and apply the course material to a real-world organization. Students commented that they really enjoyed the experience and although challenging, they found it worthwhile.

Elementary Education 470—Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary and Middle Years

Thomas Pedroni, Ph.D., Teacher Development and Educational Studies

Social studies, perhaps more than any other area of the school curriculum, is designed to prepare elementary and middle school students for active citizenship in a democratic and multicultural world. Elementary Education 470 serves as a catalyst to prospective teachers' thinking about what active citizenship means and requires, and

how teachers might promote it in their elementary and middle school classrooms.

A culminating assignment in the course, the community action project, seeks to foster prospective teachers' competency in helping elementary and middle school students both *understand* and *act* upon current social issues. For the assignment, teacher candidates identify a social issue of their choosing and spend a minimum of seven hours taking action to address the social issue. They then complete a final writing assignment in which they reflect upon their experiences and identify strategies for implementing similar experiences in their future K-8 classrooms. Successful final projects identify clear strategies for implementing curricula in the social studies classroom that combine understanding with action regarding pressing social issues.

Many prospective teachers report this culminating assignment to be the most valuable and engaging experience of the semester. Viewing social studies as an opportunity to combine understanding with action helps classrooms to go beyond the limitations, common in elementary and middle schools, of taking action through projects such as canned food drives without also exploring underlying social issues such as hunger and poverty. Similarly, this insistence on connecting understanding to action helps teachers confront the paralysis and feelings of helplessness that result when students learn about pressing social issues such as rainforest destruction, but they are not given opportunities, as emerging citizens of an increasingly globalized world, to take action on such issues.

Reading 414

Tanya Christ, PhD

All elementary education majors take three reading methods courses. Across these courses they learn to teach

reading (RDG 331), teach the language arts (RDG 333), and plan their instruction of literacy based on formal and informal assessments of children's strengths and needs (RDG 414).

Last spring, I initiated a service learning approach to fulfilling the requirements of RDG 414. Eleven pre-service teachers met at the Baldwin Center in Pontiac throughout the Summer 2010 semester to learn about literacy assessment and assessment-based instruction, and to practice these skills by assessing and teaching children attending the Baldwin Center's after-school program. The Baldwin Center provides after-school homework assistance and activities for children from kindergarten through high school. Currently, their staff does not include formally trained teachers, and they have been interested in providing more educational programming through partnership with local university students.

Our partnership with the Baldwin Center was symbiotic. Working with the children at the Baldwin Center allowed pre-service teachers more opportunities and support than they typically receive in their field placements to learn to implement literacy assessments and to engage in assessment-based small group literacy instruction. Simultaneously, pre-service teachers were able to provide the valuable services to the Baldwin Center. Pre-service teachers identified each child's instructional reading levels, strengths, and needs. These data were provided to the adults who continued to work with these children over the summer after the course was finished. In addition, resource packets were made for these adults that included teaching methods and lesson plans that corresponded to the children's reading instruction needs.

The pre-service teachers that took this service-learning course said that they found value in working with the children in the community, and in working with one another and me. They stated that the service-learning ap-

proach really facilitated their confidence and skill development for assessing and teaching reading.

Because of the success of the first group of Academic Service Learning Fellows, a second group of Academic Service Learning Fellows is slated for participation in Fall 2010. We expect that these instructors will take back their experiences to their respective departments and share their learning outcomes so that Academic Service Learning at Oakland University eventually moves from grassroots to mainstream.

WORKS CITED

Bringel, Robert G., Hatcher, Julie A., Muthiah, Richard, N. "The Role of Service Learning on the Retention of First-Year Students to Second Year." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. Spring 2010. pp. 38-49.