

Proceedings of the
2012
Roosevelt University
Mini-Conference on Teaching
Volume 8

April 6, 2012
Murray-Green Library
Auditorium Building
Chicago Campus



Integrating service learning into your class: merging educational and social justice goals

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Too often students' experience in higher education is to absorb information passively. It is then students' responsibility to apply this material to areas of their lives (e.g., families, careers, or communities) at some later point in time. However, faculty can use a teaching method that simultaneously links information taught in the classroom with the skills and insights that students learn when they volunteer in their communities. *Transformational service learning* allows students to use course knowledge in a way that helps others outside of the university, and it provides them with an opportunity to become agents of social justice.

Transformational service learning has several key ingredients. First, students spend a significant amount of time at an external site (such as an agency, school, or hospital) as part of the class requirements. This typically occurs outside of the regular class meeting time. The focus of the site's work needs to connect with themes that are closely related to the class. Second, the work that the student performs at the site needs to be meaningful and mutually beneficial for the organization and the university. In other words, the students' responsibilities must not only be enriching or challenging for the student, but the community partner also must find it helpful for their own operations. Third, the instructor needs to provide students with the opportunity to identify and reflect on the connections between the site work and the course material. Instructors accomplish this objective through in-class discussions as well as written assignments emphasizing these linkages. The most common written product is the reflective journal, in which students describe the work they complete at the site, make concrete connections between the

class and site information, and describe their personal reactions to the experience.

At Roosevelt University, our service learning program is distinguished by its commitment to social justice. Students have the opportunity to interact with people who have been underprivileged, and they learn how to make a difference individually or on a broader level through civic action. Instructors often direct students' attention to how societal forces affect those whom the community partner assists. Students can expand on their service learning to interview community members to identify relevant issues, conduct relevant policy analysis, use research methods to assess the scope of the problem and disseminate findings to influence change. Professors can also build on service learning to create class assignments that positively impact others on a political level, allowing students to advocate for those who are disenfranchised. These sorts of projects can ask students to contact their elected officials to concretely explain how a particular piece of legislation has a direct bearing on the community in which they serve. Thus, transformational service learning allows students to observe and to have an impact at two levels: the individual, micro-level as well as the social, macro-level.

Service learning and lessons learned

To illustrate how to make an existing course into a service learning course, we present the example of the transformational learning course, Psychology 254: Childhood and Adolescence. The Childhood and Adolescence course introduces students to the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children from the prenatal period through adolescence. The challenge for instructors in this course is to give students a real, meaningful experience of child and adolescent behavior that they can apply to the facts and studies that they are learning about in class. What better way to do this than to give

students actual experience with children and adolescents? Service learning is a perfect way to meet the instructional needs of the students in this course while providing service to community organizations and forging important community partnerships.

The key to optimizing students' learning in their service learning placements is to provide structure for the experience. In designing the service learning version of *Childhood and Adolescence*, we adapted a behavioral observation assignment Dr. Dienes had previously used for this course. Students were asked to observe and take notes on the behavior of two separate children at the service learning site. Subsequently, students wrote up their behavioral observations in two five-page papers, called *Active Learning Projects*, that integrated information from the class and their textbook. The Mansfield Institute was able to provide a list of local child-serving organizations with previous relationships with Roosevelt University. We allowed students to choose their sites from a list of previously contacted agencies. Because choosing and contacting sites was up to the students, we also gave them a deadline by which they should have made contact and established an agreement with a community partner. Students were given an agreement worksheet to fill out and turn-in. Students completed the 20 hours of service learning we required on their own schedule. This was further structured by having a required check-in after 5 and 10 hours of completed field work.

There are several lessons we have learned through creating and implementing this course that likely apply to other service learning classes.:

- A strong structure for the service learning experience helps to ensure success.
- Starting early is critical: Students need to make contact with and be placed in their service learning locations as soon as possible.
- Setting deadlines and structuring assignments should be based on an ideal timeline.
- Knowing ahead of time what the require-

ments of the community partners are is important. This can be facilitated by being in contact with these partners before the beginning of the course.

- Keeping in touch with students and community partners is critical.
- Incorporating service learning experiences into the classroom environment increases both retention of information and enjoyment of learning. When we taught new concepts in class, we would ask for examples from students.

The inclusion of a teaching assistant funded by an internal grant from the Mansfield Institute was instrumental to our implementation of the service learning component for *Childhood and Adolescence*. The teaching assistant checked in with the sites, monitored the students' accumulation of hours, and helped with grading the *Active Learning Projects*. The selection of an appropriate TA is another lesson we have learned. Teaching assistants for service learning courses should be highly organized and motivated. They should also feel comfortable interacting with undergraduates as well. In conclusion, structure for the course (including graded assignments and a strict timeline), beginning early, contact with community partners, and the selection of a responsible TA are all important for the successful implementation of a service learning course.

Conclusion

When a service learning course is successful, it can have a transformative effect on the students involved in the experience. We have had students come and visit after the course and discuss how their experience encouraged them to change their major to psychology, and decide to work with children in the future. Students have written in their evaluations that the service component helped them learn and remember information they had read about or heard in class. They enjoyed the real life application of knowledge. Also, listening to other students' examples in class helped them learn, and increased their attention and enthusiasm during

class. As one student stated, “the site participation helps out kids and gives us hands-on experience of the material learned.” One of the most beneficial outcomes of the service learning experience is finding a future position. We know of several students who have been hired by the community partner for whom they worked after they graduated. We similarly assume that it is beneficial to have this experience on their resume when looking for a future job.

The Mansfield Institute can be very helpful for faculty members who want to incorporate transformational learning into their own classes. Whether it involves assistance in finding community partners or personalized consultations in

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— A student

developing or revising a class, the staff and faculty associated with the Mansfield Institute are always available. The Institute’s website contains additional information about transformational learning (see [http://www.roosevelt.edu/](http://www.roosevelt.edu/MISJT/TransformationalLearning.aspx)

[MISJT/TransformationalLearning.aspx](http://www.roosevelt.edu/MISJT/TransformationalLearning.aspx)) and their blog features profiles about examples of different implementations at Roosevelt University (see <http://misjt.blogspot.com/>).

Many instructors have similarly benefitted from the annual internal grant programs that provide funds to hire teaching assistants, purchase related materials, or assist with transportation, or provide incentives for community partners for the use of transformational learning.



Carrie Brecke of the Writing Center and student Lucas Barnhill lead a roundtable discussion on transgender awareness.

On being a “trans ally”

Be open to using the pronouns a trans person wants you to use. If you make a mistake, quickly correct yourself. This is the most important step of being an ally: recognition and affirmation of one’s true self.