Northern Essex Community College

Community Service and Oral Communication Across the Curriculum

2008 – 2009 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Project

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A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Project by
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Much has been written about the value of community service participation among college students. Research suggests that the gains of such participation extend beyond the activity itself – even beyond the classroom experience – to benefit the students as members of the broader community. Similarly, improving students' abilities to communicate these advantages to others, in order to encourage broader participation, seems to likewise benefit students and the community in additional ways.

> The creation of an informed and active citizenry has always been a primary goal of America's schools. Given the challenges we face as a Nation, educating our young people to be knowledgeable, skillful, and engaged citizens of a free society has never been more important. By serving something greater than themselves America's young people can help meet vital community needs while learning to become responsible and engaged citizens in our democratic society. (President Bush's Executive Order creating the USA Freedom Corps)

Philosophical Considerations

The underlying principles for including community service across the curriculum are varied. A liberally educated student must learn about life outside the classroom. Getting what is often outside one's comfort zone by interacting with populations with whom one might ordinarily not come into contact (either by choice or otherwise), teaches lessons that cannot be taught in the classroom. "The main argument in favor of community service requirements (or incentives) is that such programs expose people to the joys of giving who would not otherwise

become involved and that, once exposed, these people will continue to volunteer" (Wuthnow 235) .

     While on the surface community service seems like a no-lose venture which benefits both the contributors and the recipients and helps social agencies meet their needs in spite of their strapped budgets, a further investigation reveals there are some philosophical issues to address. In situations where students develop relationships with clients, when they find themselves personally involved, conflicts may arise. There may be a discrepancy between what the student feels is beneficial and what the agency feels is beneficial. There may even be disagreement over what should/should not be viewed as a problem and the appropriateness of suggested solutions. Further, as a student becomes more involved, situations may arise when the student wishes to speak up for a client, become an advocate, and then must consider the ramifications involved in speaking for others. As Bachen notes, "Even as they critique mainstream portrayals, they may find themselves questioning their own voices as well" (30).

     Another problematical philosophical consideration concerns the actual worth of the student's contribution. Many reflection journals studied revealed very positive feelings that the student had "helped." This concept needs further examination. While students may learn about populations alien to them, for example the plight of the homeless, has their weekly contribution really made a difference? Have the students romanticized the experience? Can people who return to their homes, to their safe environments each day, (akin to celebrity involvement in serving Thanksgiving dinners to the needy), really appreciate all that is involved in homelessness? While their contributions have undoubtedly been useful and are appreciated, is there a vacuum when their service ends? Can any significant learning occur in such a short time span as is involved in a limited time commitment? Even if students are incited by the experience

to the point of speaking FOR others, are they the appropriate messengers? Is such action, in effect, enabling those who are affected to stay silent, to <u>not</u> be a part of the solution? Would it be better to talk <u>with</u> the people involved and perhaps guide them to be their own advocates? Who would have a better understanding of the problem than someone who is living it?

When students get personally involved with the population they are helping, when they move on to another course, do the people being assisted suffer feelings of abandonment? Are they negatively impacted due to the hope or positive experience which has now been withdrawn? Is the short time period of intervention more of a tease than a permanent benefit?

"I just left the school, and am sad that my volunteer time is over. I am really considering calling the school and telling them that I would be happy to come in every week to work with this classroom, as long as I can fit it into my schedule…The teachers thanked me for my help, and let me know their great need for volunteers." Julie Gilchrist, November, 2008.

In her report on community service and connecting students with the community, Souza acknowledged student involvement in community service is quite positive because the student is directly involved in the community; however, Souza also offered interesting questions which should be mulled over. Besides objectively determining whether the service provided really did meet the needs of the community, she wonders about the impact of community service on people being served and is troubled about the model that has middle-class students superimposing their world experience and views on those being served. She wonders whether students will be able to grasp the diversity of experience their clients face and have faced, their different world views, their different cultural values. Are students emotionally ready to enter into the clients' sometimes foreign world beset with problems alien to their own lives (87)?

In his discussion of "Communication and Social Change," Crabtree cautions that when getting involved in community service, care should be taken to ensure that the agency or population being serviced is not being exploited, being "used" for the education of perhaps elite

college students. He suggests that this issue be fully explored beforehand by departments, instructors, and students who would be participants (133).

Surely, community service can have as serious an impact on the student as on the population being serviced.

Pedagogical Concerns

Pedagogically speaking, embarking on a new approach to what were tried-and-true methods can be quite intimidating. Faculty must restructure not only the content of their courses but their whole delivery method. Does a lecture format still fit?   Does certain material exist which <u>must</u> be "covered" and are there alternate ways to cover it? Can the community service experience provide that learning? And if it can, that is both positive and negative - the downside being that it calls to question the very core of the instructor's understanding of his/her role in the teaching and learning processes.   This acknowledgement might chip away at what an instructor feels was a well-developed, well-honed and tested course. It would seem to invalidate many of the assumptions about learning that have been comfortable and approaches that have been reasonably successful in the past. It would also force the instructor to leave that secure area and venture into the unknown, the unpredictable, the area over which the instructor has little, if any, control.   Community service does not reinforce a teacher-centric approach to learning. Incorporating community service is a daunting undertaking, indeed. Likewise, faculty who wish to integrate service into their curriculum should do so only when they are willing to model participation.

But if the benefits of community service to students outweigh upsetting an instructor's pedagogical applecart, it would be reasonable to try to remove some of the barriers to its inclusion. Stacey and Foreman suggest several incentives. Some involve money – grants for

using summer or semester break time to adapt courses, conducting workshops explaining why community service should be considered, establishing seminars led by community service-experienced students and faculty speaking frankly of its impact – noting not only its accomplishments, but its shortcomings as well, and setting up faculty internships (57).

Generally, the National Center for Service-Learning has grouped incentives into two categories: technical assistance and financial considerations. The former involves learning about community service, strategies for incorporating it, providing assistance in managing community service initially, and forming support groups for faculty incorporating community service to share their experiences, brainstorm solutions to problems, and borrow ideas. The latter category is a money incentive, a grant or honorarium to compensate for the extra expenditure of time needed to incorporate community service.

One research study Stacey and Foreman sites involved questionnaires sent to 700 full-time tenure-track/tenured faculty members at Eastern Michigan University, including both community service-experienced faculty and those who had never incorporated community service. Respondents were asked to rank incentives by importance. Among the choices were release time, money, an assistant, reduced class size, a summer salary supplement to develop a course, how-to workshops, increased weight given to community service inclusion in promotion decisions, increased recognition of community service-incorporating faculty, having a supportive/encouraging department, assistance in locating agencies, help with course and assignment design and help with evaluating and grading community service assignments. Interestingly, release time to develop a course was cited as the strongest incentive. This and other research results led the authors to conclude that faculty view intrinsic incentives more favorably than extrinsic ones. Complementary research indicates that intrinsic motivation is

more effective and longer-lasting than extrinsic motivation in the successful incorporation of community service into coursework (60).

It would be fair to conclude that many faculty members interested in attempting to incorporate community service in their courses would be more likely to do so were they afforded release time to come up to speed with the concept, the logistics and the understanding of the pedagogy modifications needed. It would be difficult to argue that with a fifteen-credit workload, organizational meetings, advising, and other required college service, faculty time is not already maxed out. Faculty who possess the intrinsic motivation to focus on ways to improve or enhance student learning are held back by the amount of time needed to pursue this approach to learning and the limited amount of time, if any, available to do so. Providing release time would seem to be an avenue to encourage faculty participation in restructuring their courses to incorporate community service.

Potential Pitfalls and Other Professional Considerations

In addition to extolling the virtues of community service, some of the literature on community service also warns of potential pitfalls for participating instructors. Community service is a much more time-consuming approach to teaching than more traditional models, and it may frequently involve an emotional commitment and involvement that can be daunting. Another reflection which might initially appear to be positive is the possibility that the class and instructor become newsworthy and obtain a high profile. But high visibility also has its downside: criticism, or jealousy over said attention by both peers and administrators not sharing the limelight may emerge. Certainly these would not be anticipated – or welcome – outcomes for what was intended to be an altruistic venture.

Crabtree asserts that for community service to be as effective as possible, it is essential that the instructor involved have a personal commitment. Modeling is extolled as a powerful tool for fostering student commitment (133).

Learning Outcomes

Various studies have revealed that volunteers in community service projects report improved skills in writing, listening, speaking, creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, knowing how to learn, self-esteem and self-management. "The findings reported show clearly that participating in service activities during the undergraduate years substantially enhance the student's academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility" (Astin and Sax 262).

The importance of involving students in their community has been discussed in a variety of formats.

> Another important task before us is to strengthen the relationship between campuses and local communities… Healthy town-gown relations are more than just a feather in a college's cap. When the Ivory Tower comes down to the street, both win: the city gets more energy, revenue and support, while the college becomes more attractive to potential students and faculty, and better positioned to tap the wealth of real-world resources for 'hands-on' learning in the community. (<http://www.eagletribune.com/archivesearch/ local_story_218125004>)

In addition, in 1992 McCluskey-Fawcett and Green reported that all of the community service sites served by their fieldwork program demonstrated a desire for more volunteers (Hardy and Schaen 47).

As early as 1989, Hedin suggested that "…evidence from qualitative, anecdotal, observation data is far more consistent in suggesting community service is a useful, enjoyable,

and powerful learning experience…"

(http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.black/personal_insights_and_statements)

"I am very happy that I got to participate in the Rebuilding Together day. It was a great experience to work together with classmates and to do something different than I usually would have done on a Saturday. I feel that the service project is something that should be done in every sociology class, because it is a good experience, and gives you a sense of accomplishment." – Jillian Mansfield, April, 2009

Rationale for Involving Students in Community service

Why should students engage in community service? Actively participating in service activities provides a way to train young people for citizenship by engaging them in active civic participation and helping them to realize the advantages of the same, sensitizing them to community needs and showing them how their time and talents can make a difference in their community.

"It really made me feel like I was making a difference in someone's life."-
Christine Hayes, April, 2009

In addition, students can explore careers and gain practical work skills while addressing or reducing a community's needs.

"…he showed me the basics of how to fill out grant applications. I'm majoring in business and filling out grant applications will more than likely be something I do; whether it's for gaining capital to start a business or acquiring capital to keep a business running. I feel very confident that I could influence others to making a contribution to community service. I really enjoyed the experience and I really doubt it will be my last." Brian Toner, November, 2008

On a personal and academic level, community service participation improves creative-thinking, writing, speaking and listening skills, creative-thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills but particularly enhances communication, while also improving self-esteem and self-management skills. Its impact on teamwork is especially notable.

"Community service was great! I got the opportunity to interact more with the other students in my class and help our community. There was laughing, hard work and teamwork being done." – Bianny Cepeda, April, 2009

"It was overall a pretty great day and I really enjoyed myself, being out in the sun working with people that I had a lot of fun talking to. I just want to thank you, Professor Crivaro, for showing us that we can have a blast working together and doing something good for the community." – Kevin Schoenthaler, April, 2009

"It was nice to be able to work with other people in my class, and have a different kind of experience with them, not just an in-class relationship, but we were able to see how people interact with each other and see how people really are when they are not in class. I enjoyed seeing the end product of all the work we did today. It was nice to see that hard work can accomplish something when you work together." – Nicole Lussier, April, 2009

Instilling Motivation

So how do we get students to *want* to perform community service? What encourages participation? Many students who engage in community service come from families where parents have modeled civic responsibility and where respect for diversity is valued and high interconnectedness exists among family members (Kinney 139). Plus, volunteers differ from non-volunteers in the nature of the relationships that community service students have to their parents and peers (Kinney 149).

Likewise, the data on prior service experience revealed that students who were involved in community service experience in the past, for instance during high school, were more likely to be currently involved in, and less resistant to, community service. Our evidence, as measured anecdotally by participation in four one-day service opportunities, demonstrates that each successive activity included a higher percentage of those who had participated in earlier opportunities.

"I thank Cj for this wonderful experience that I learned so much from. I definitely would like to do it next year because helping the community is a great thing to do." – Jisel Rozon, April, 2009

Objections and resistance to community service has also been addressed in studies.

Perhaps the most common objection to volunteer participation during the undergraduate years is

that volunteering consumes time and energy that the student might otherwise devote to academic

pursuits. This argument has effectively been refuted by the results of longitudinal analyses by

Astin and Sax, which revealed positive effects of service on all ten academic outcomes,

including, among other areas: GPA, retention, aspiration for degrees, increase in general

knowledge, academic self-concept, time devoted to homework/studying, and faculty contact

(256-257).

"I am kind of nervous because I am not much of a carpenter. I don't know what I could do to help in building houses. I have to help my parents at their store on weekends. It is hard because it is difficult to get time off on Saturdays.   I remember when I first received the syllabus for this course and realized that community service was required, I thought it was unnecessary and annoying. But after finishing my service today, I am glad that this was part of the curriculum. Community services are wonderful. I would encourage others to participate because it is an activity that is beneficial to both the giver and the recipient. Although I did not have the best skills preferred, I contributed to the group with good attitude and effort. There will be people living in those houses with some of the nails which I have hammered." Daye Yun, November 2008.

Jones and Hill (2003) conducted a study to uncover the meaning students make of their

participation in and motivations for community service. Likewise, they were interested in

developing an understanding of students' perceptions of their own patterns of participation in

community service (518).

Reflection Journals

When students undertake community service, a lot of information and emotional

reactions will need to be processed. When these ideas are not recorded, they may dissipate and

never be integrated into the student's body of knowledge and understanding. To keep

community service from becoming (from the students' perspective), just another course

requirement which must be satisfied, many authors suggest assigning a reflection journal. In fact, these journals may serve a critical role in helping students process all that they are experiencing and put it into proper perspective. It allows them to record initial expectations and then record the reality of the experience. It is important that journals be written immediately following a community service experience so the details which might initially seem extraneous are not lost. Not only should objective observations be recorded, but personal reactions as well. As much as possible and whenever possible, students should be encouraged to relate their experience and what they observe/do and how they interact with the people involved in the service experience to concepts being covered in their coursework. It is likely students will be interacting with both the agency placements and the community the agency serves. The concerns of each constituency and the type of communication involved, as well as the dynamics between people, are likely to be quite different from each other.   After the project is completed, the students should be able to see the development of their experience, see the areas which had the greatest impact or which raised the most questions or concerns. The journals may be vehicles for deeper philosophical thought regarding the needs of the agency or people being assisted or the impact of the service being provided. The journals also provide the material students will need to assess and evaluate their experience, synthesize it and put it into some sort of written or oral context, providing closure for the experience (Bachen 28-29).

Reflection journals are seen as a critical element in making community service not only meaningful on a personal or emotional level, but also as a way to incorporate the experience into the students' educational base, to connect what's being learned with real-life experiences. The journals may function as a sounding board for the student, a place to air negative thoughts or doubts or to pose questions. It is therefore essential that instructors monitor the journals and

offer support in problem areas. For the student to see the importance of reflection journals, the instructors must value the students' thoughts. Monitoring journals provides a wealth of information to the instructor as well as to determine whether goals are being accomplished, whether students are making/seeing necessary connections with the coursework, whether there is a need for intervention, and whether there are unanticipated needs with which the instructor can be of assistance. If the instructor does not take the reflection journals seriously, if the instructor does not consistently reinforce their importance by both word and action, it is likely the students will treat them in a cursory manner and lose a valuable opportunity for learning (Bergstrom, Bullis 41).

Implementation of Community Service and Oral Communication Requirements

Crivaro has required community service in her sociology courses for over fifteen years. The theory behind community service and the positive results achieved had reinforced the idea that her effort expended to oversee this course requirement was more than worthwhile. One of the questions this SoTL project sought to address was the impact of incorporating both community service and oral communication skills into pilot programs, using the community service experience as a springboard for oral presentations. Research indicated that assigning a reflection journal should accompany this undertaking. In Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, one test section of Public Speaking and one test section of Introduction to Sociology were assigned to perform ten and fifteen hours respectively of community service and to keep a reflection journal. Each professor visited the other's class to instruct in her area of expertise. Crivaro explained the concept of and rationale for community service, her experience and ongoing participation in it, the paperwork that would need to be completed and led students to the forms available online.

She also taught them how to access the community service web pages she had built as an end product of a Spring 2007 sabbatical which list the various community service opportunities in the area sorted by town, type of experience, and pre-service requirements such as CORI checks. She also supplied hand-outs to reinforce the concepts she had covered. Desjardins provided the Introduction to Sociology class a tutorial on giving a presentation, supplied a how-to handout, explained the rationale behind the reflection journal and its component parts, and supplied a handout reinforcing the journal instructions. Because there would be an oral presentation post-experience, it was strongly suggested that students seek out materials which might be used as visual aids for the presentations, and the students were reminded that their reflection journals would be a valuable source of material for speech content.

The Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 results were encouraging. In Introduction to Sociology, students both kept a reflection journal and made brief oral presentations to their class on their service. The level of animation that students exhibited when relaying their experiences to their classmates was both rewarding and exhilarating for the students and instructor alike. Additionally, most students reported that they were continuing their service beyond the course requirement and encouraged others to do the same. Having had the experience of service, which for most was very positive, gave students great confidence in speaking in a class when most had earlier expressed concerns about the "oral presentation." Students prepared PowerPoint presentations, posters and the like to enhance their presentations.

In Public Speaking, the persuasion speech was the final oral assignment. The suggested speech structure was to first inform the audience about the service experience and then supply the persuasive component. The control groups, another two sections of Public Speaking, were assigned persuasion speeches with topics of their own choosing. Though the objective

differences in quality of presentations (eye contact, use of visual aids, speech construction and delivery) could be measured in a rubric and were not significantly different between experimental and control groups, there was a perceivable difference observed in the students' conviction in delivering their presentations. Those speaking of their community service involvement demonstrated a fervor not seen in those selecting persuasive topics more randomly. There was a passion, a fire, a conveyance of pride in accomplishment in the students who spoke of their community service. The handling of visual aids, almost lovingly, was markedly different from the comparatively detached use of visual aids in the control groups. The demeanor of those who advocated for public service was more intense, giving a more convincing dimension to their persuasion speeches. In addition, many students worked together on a Habitat for Humanity project in Fall 2008, arranged and coordinated by Crivaro, and that bonding experienced added an element of subsequent cooperation within the classroom that far exceeded any typical classroom. Whether this outcome could be attributed to the helping attitude community service instills or if it was an anomaly remained to be seen. However, in Spring 2009, when many students used the Peace Poetry project or the Rebuilding Together Greater Haverhill one-day opportunity as their community service, the same bonding and spirit of cooperation was quite evident in both the Introduction to Sociology and Public Speaking classes. The camaraderie a shared community service project provided was an unexpected outcome, one so plainly observable that in Fall 2009, an attempt will be made to have a day-long community service project early on in the semester to establish this incredible sense of community within the classroom.

"Prior to today's project, I only knew two student volunteers at the site. As we began working, I felt connected to everyone. Only one of the volunteers had building experience; but driving

by the job site that day, one never would have known. We looked like a crew that had been working together since the foundation was poured." Michelle Fleming, October 2008.

Pre-Post Community Service Attitude Measurement

During the Spring 2009 semester, a survey was conducted in Sociology and Public Speaking, two classes which had the community service requirement. Based on the 1993 work of Markus, Howard and King, the instrument sought to measure attitudes regarding community service among students performing service at various agencies. Pre- and post-test statistics, while based on a somewhat limited sample, reveal interesting results. In two areas in particular, student attitudes appeared to have been affected by their service. In the item, "Becoming involved in a program to improve my community," student ratings were raised more than a half point, from 2.5 (between "somewhat important" and "important") to 3.1 (see Appendix A). On one other item, "Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country," student ratings went from a 2.2 in the pre-test (between "neutral" and "agree") to a post-test score of 1.6 , again an increase of more than a half point.

Conclusion

Research conducted in the course of this SoTL undertaking and in two sabbatical projects, one concerning the impact on the student of performing community service and the other investigating oral communication across the curriculum, indicates that students benefit greatly from the acquisition of oral communication skills and from involvement in community service. A year-long experiment incorporating community service and oral communication in Introduction to Sociology and Public Speaking yielded such positive results that what was attempted on a trial basis will now become the norm for the instructors involved. The benefits beyond those anticipated, a growth in maturity evidenced in confidence and self-motivated

cooperation, bonding with peers, other volunteers and participating faculty, a pride in

accomplishment, and participating as a contributing member to the larger community, warrant

not only continued implementation, but advocating for other faculty members to consider these

additions to their courses.

Appendix A

COMMUNITY SERVICE ATTITUDINAL SURVEY

Using the following scale --

(1) Not important (2) Somewhat important (3) Important (4) Essential

Please indicate the importance to you personally of the following:
PRE   POST
_3.3___ 3.4___ Working toward equal opportunity for all US citizens
_3.1___ 3.5___ Developing a meaningful philosophy of life
_2.5___ 3.1__ Becoming involved in a program to improve my community
_3.0__ _2.8__ Being very well-off financially
_2.8___ 3.1___ Volunteering my time helping people in need
_2.0___ 2.3__ Giving 3% or more of my income to help those in need
_3.0___ 3.1___ Finding a career that provides the opportunity to be helpful to others or useful to society

Using the following scale --

(1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neutral (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
PRE   POST
_2.2___ 1.6___ Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country.
_2.2___ 2.0___ Having an impact on the world is within the reach of most individuals.
_3.0___ 2.8__ Most misfortunes that occur to people are frequently the result of circumstances beyond their control.
_2.7___ 2.5__ If I could change one thing about society, it would be to achieve greater social justice.
_3.7___ 3.5__ I make quick judgments about homeless people.
_2.3___ 2.2__ People, regardless of whether they have been successful or not, ought to help those in need.
_3.0___ 2.7__ People ought to help those in need as a "payback" for their own opportunities, fortunes and successes.

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__2.2____1.9__ I feel that I can make a difference in the world.

Pre-test = 48 responses   Post-test = 34 responses

Adapted from Markus, Gregory B., Jeffrey P. F. Howard, and David C. King. "Integrating
Community service and Classroom Instruction Enhances Learning: Results from an
Experiment."

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