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Integrating Service Learning into the Online Classroom: The Development of Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Empowerment, and Leadership

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Online teaching and learning has grown exponentially in the past decade which has transformed higher education globally¹. The body of research related to online teaching effectiveness has grown over the past few decades as well. Many faculty understand and use the online format and pedagogy to teach courses centering on knowledge and awareness. The challenge facing faculty new to online teaching and learning is in part maximizing engagement beyond the abstract nature of the online environment. One method of moving beyond the abstract or theoretical is creating applied assignments. However, creating online pedagogy that facilitates the development of applied skills in course content is not easy to envision. Using experiential activities that are within the confines of the virtual environment can be limited in scope and fall short of fully integrating assignments or products that are applicable to practice. Likewise, one-shot exposure does not necessarily result in skills gained and appropriately used in the field. Perhaps characteristic of this dilemma, some faculty may not consider an assignment that occurs over the entire term and uses the community rather than the virtual classroom as the context of learning. However, experiential learning pedagogy such as service learning can be a viable component of the online classroom².

Service learning is an experiential, educational activity that offers credit to student participants and a service to community-based stakeholders. Students learn by reflecting on their process and service. Service learning has the potential for greater depth and breadth of

¹ G. Fletcher, *The future of e-learning*, [in:] „The Journal” 2004, No. 32 (2), p. 2-3.

² A. Daily-Hebert, E. Donnelly-Sallee, L. N. Di Padova-Stocks, *Service-eLearning as integrated pedagogy: An introduction*, [in:] A. Dailey-Hebert, E. Donnelly-Sallee, L. N. DiPadova-Stocks (eds.), *Service-eLearning: Educating for citizenship*, Information Age Publishing, NC 2008.

experience as it often involves social, cultural, and other aspects of the community and has the potential to be used over a period of time³. The community is viewed as integral which allows the learner to take what they learned in the (virtual) classroom and use it in their practice⁴.

Creating a community service learning project that allows students to critically reflect on their process, to collaborate effectively with each other, and to apply newly acquired awareness and knowledge gained in the online classroom to real-life situations in the community is a challenge at least. Addressing this challenge involves the use of multiple online teaching strategies and technologies as well as development of student awareness and knowledge of critical administrative and management competencies. Austin and Kruzich developed the Triangle of Practice Model (TPM) which consisted of leadership, interactional, and analytic roles. The breakdown of these three roles culminated in 12 core competencies of human services management and administration and consisted of boundary spanning, futuring, aligning, teaming, communicating, advocating, supervising, facilitating, leveraging and managing resources, policy practice, and evaluating⁵. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the TPM and each competency in detail, this author focused on four competencies (critical thinking, collaboration, empowerment, and leadership) derived in part from this model to teach in the context of a grant writing service learning project.

The Service Learning Project

For the purposes of this article, students in this class are referred to as respondents and this author. The service learning project was embedded in a grant writing class which this author teaches once per year. Essentially respondents (graduate-level human services students) wrote grants for community-based human services agencies in the context of the grant writing class which was part of the social service administration curricula. Prior to this class, this author contacted human services organizations centered in communities in which at least one course

³ J.A. Burnett, D. Hamel, L. L. Long, *Service learning in graduate counselor education: Developing multicultural competency*, [in:] „Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development” 2004, No. 32, p. 180-191.

⁴ D.K. Sommers, *Using service learning to develop collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership in online human services graduate students*, [in:] J. Hagen, A.T. Kisubi (eds.), *Best practices in human services: A global perspective*, CSHSE Monograph, 2011, p. 90-111.

⁵ M.J. Austin, J.M. Cruzich, *Assessing recent textbooks and casebooks in human service administration: Implications and future directions*, [in:] „Administration in Social Work” 2004, No. 28 (1), p. 115-129.

enrollee lived. Each organization was invited to develop an idea for which respondents would research for and write a grant.

Several technologies and teaching strategies were used to facilitate this project. Respondents were assigned to a grant writing group of three and were given several mediums of communication and collaboration including discussion board on *Blackboard* which allowed respondents to communicate in writing asynchronously, *Skype* or *Pronto* on *Blackboard* which allowed respondents to verbally communicate with each other in real time, and *PBWIKI* which allowed respondents to write and edit a document. Respondents also used the journal function on *Blackboard* to discuss their excitement and frustration, to reflect on and discuss their learning process and the content, and to problem-solve with this author. In addition, this author met with each group via *Skype* twice during the semester to help respondents feel empowered to resolve any intra-group conflicts and to facilitate their progress through this project.

This author assigned one of the human service organizations and their respective grant ideas to each group. Each respondent group chose one of their members located in the community of their respective organization to be the liaison between their group and their agency. This author's approach was to help respondents to perceive and understand that they were learning to think critically in their reflective journals, to collaborate effectively with each other and with the contact person(s) of their assigned organization, to feel empowered in their group work and with their project, and to understand they were learning leadership skills throughout the service learning experience.

Procedure

At the end of the semester, respondents were asked to complete a author-created, mixed measures survey. The survey asked them to rate the extent to which each teaching strategy (group work, reflective journaling, and the service learning project) did or did not contribute to their development of collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership. The five-point Likert Scale ratings ranged from one (not at all) to five (very much). In addition, respondents were asked to comment on the extent to which each strategy did or did not impact collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership. Data was collected from 2009 through 2011.

Results

The calculation and results of the mean, standard deviation, and range for each teaching strategy (groups, reflective journaling, and the service learning project) are delineated below in Tables 1 through 3.

Table 1
Descriptive Data for Groups

Competencies	N	M	SD	Range
Collaboration	41	4.32	0.878	1 - 5
Critical Thinking	40	3.85	1.026	1 - 5
Empowerment	41	3.51	1.164	1 - 5
Leadership	45	3.96	0.999	1 - 5

From Table 1 regarding group work respondents rated collaboration (4.32) as the most highly rated competency that working in a group reinforced. The high ratings for collaboration were evident as respondents indicated how working in a group impacted each competency. One respondent indicated, „Collaboration - Had to work hard to give each group member equal shares of work”. Another respondent noted „Our group experience caused us to work together, support one another's weaknesses, allow for one another's strengths, and graciously offer feedback; constructive criticism [was] beneficial to our project”. One respondent clarified by stating, „We need each other, and we all need to play a critical part of the project”. Another respondent related a raised awareness of collaboration by indicating, „I now see collaboration in a new light; it's worth trying something new!”.

The opportunity to demonstrate leadership within the group was rated close to 4.00 or second highest. The relatively high rating was also reflected in respondent responses when asked how the group impacted the four competencies. One respondent noted that group work reinforced her perspective of leadership. Another respondent wrote, „My leadership skill(s) were impacted...”. One other respondent explained how he or she used leadership: „Leadership - I had to intervene in setting up deadlines at times and also explaining how I thought information”.

Interestingly enough, respondents indicated that working in a group allowed them to use skills that they had learned about in class. For example, one respondent said, „I also had a chance to apply what I had learned in other classes up to this time”. One respondent indicated that, „working an [in] a group allowed me to practice skills I would not utilize working alone or in my current employment position”, and another indicated that „...group work helps develop skills and allow[s] practice dealing with issues that happen in the workplace”. In summarizing his or her experience, one respondent used a metaphor about a flock of birds; explaining that „group is symbolic of birds in flight. Someone has to take the lead (leadership) for awhile, and that is a fluid position where other birds will also lead during the process (collaboration), and during the transitioning there would be the feeling of being elevated by the new position (empowerment), but that would always make you think where the group or flock is currently flying is the only way of making progress (critical thinking)”.

Table 2
Descriptive Data for Reflective Journals

Competencies	N	M	SD	Range
Collaboration	45	3.244	1.246	1 - 5
Critical Thinking	45	3.822	1.050	1 - 5
Empowerment	45	3.800	1.078	1 - 5
Leadership	44	3.340	1.199	1 – 5

Critical thinking (3.822) and empowerment (3.800) were the highest rated competencies in reflective journaling per Table 2. Out of 36 comments, 13 noted that critical thinking was impacted most. Respondents clarified by indicating the reflective journal was a „...self-check tool [that had an] impact on my way of [critical] thinking or how I navigated the group process”, and another indicated that „critical thinking was impacted”. Other respondents indicated that reflective journaling was „most helpful in critical thinking”, and „The reflective journal had the most of the impact in my critical thinking”. The empowerment rating was supported by approximately six comments acknowledging the impact of reflective journaling on empowerment. One respondent commented that „My professor was able to give me positive

feedback to help me deal with issues... [and the] opportunity to review and find ways of dealing with any issues" which was empowering. Comments like, [the reflective journal] „allowed for thoughts to come together and for me to reflect on what had been done in the project" and „[the] journal was a looking glass for me" reinforced how respondents viewed the journals.

Others discussed the opportunity inherent in reflective journaling which allowed them to discuss strong feelings and reactions to other peers in the group. For example, one respondent indicated that reflective journaling „allowed me to 'vent' about issues... just knowing that the professor cares enough about her students to be willing to read our entries was empowering for me as one of your students". Along the same vein, another respondent indicated that the reflective journal allowed her to „express how I was feeling and reflect on my contributions for the reporting period" whereas another respondent spoke of the „opportunity to communicate and reflect on my thoughts, feelings and actions".

Table 3
Descriptive Data for Service Learning Project

Competencies	N	M	SD	Range
Collaboration	44	4.363	0.780	2 - 5
Critical Thinking	44	4.068	1.043	1 - 5
Empowerment	44	4.000	0.777	2 - 5
Leadership	42	4.071	0.972	1 - 5

Respondents rated all four competencies (collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership) at or above 4.00 when asked about the impact of service learning project on them. One participant stated, „The service learning project impacted all areas listed. It was a great way to develop collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership skills". Another respondent indicated, „Collaboration and critical thinking were impacted very much... [the service learning project] impacted empowerment and leadership quite a bit", and „I learned a lot about collaboration on this project: working with the agency director, community partners, and my group members required a lot of coordination and cooperation. Coming up with project

ideas and solutions to problems as they arose helped me improve in this area and in critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership areas as well”.

Others saw collaboration as key to completing the project stating, collaboration was essential to complete the project. Communication and preparedness were keys. Still others spoke about the grant writing and other related skills learned through this project: „I was able to learn the language of grant writing... It's a whole different writing skill”, and „I reviewed and reviewed”. One respondent spoke of being grateful, „I did appreciate the opportunity to feel empowered and provide leadership which is not realized on a regular basis [in my classes]”.

Discussion

In reviewing the results for each teaching strategy, respondents rated collaboration as the primary competency best learned in groups although leadership was also relatively high but not as much so. Students definitely had to collaborate with each other to achieve their goal of completing the grant. The project was large enough to encourage team work particularly in the search of a viable grant to fulfill the needs of the non-profit agency. In addition, the group, and particularly the group liaison to the organization, was key to ensuring the chosen request for proposal (RFP) and a good fit for the organization's idea or program. There were times respondents complained that the organizational contact was moving too slowly or was not as available as the group needed. Likewise, respondents sometimes complained that one of their group members was not as available as the group needed. At times respondents discussed their concerns via their reflective journal entries, and at other times their complaints were registered via email or Skype. This author was tempted to provide a directed solution; however, by doing so respondents would miss an important learning opportunity. As in other classes, this author posed questions which allowed each group to address their concerns and to problem-solve for their solution rather than providing a prescribed solution from this author. During the dialogue or in their reflective journals, some group members realized that scheduling was often difficult in non-profit organizations consisting of very busy people.

Leadership and degrees of leadership were identified as coming from working in a group. Different groups had different methods for choosing leaders – some were chosen by default and others stepped up to the opportunity. Some groups took direction from a member who had some experience writing grants, yet other groups resisted an experienced member if he or she was

being too directive. It was as if each member wanted to have a voice in the process. Despite the challenges, many respondents believed they learned what it truly means to collaborate and to lead from experiencing both the challenges of doing so as well as the joys of producing a quality product that would actually help an organization and its clientele.

One of the crucial tools for learning within the context of a service learning project is the reflective journal. Socratic questions selectively used as fodder for thinking about the project, course content, dynamics, and progress facilitated critical thinking. Respondents answered initial journal questions and discussed their process, this author was able to help each of them move deeper into course content and interpersonal lessons. Respondent comments and dialogue with this author allowed for individually tailored learning. This author met each respondent where he or she was and then facilitated his or her movement forward with the project and with lessons learned. The process of figuring out solutions to questions or challenges resulted in many respondents feeling empowered as they moved forward.

Of the three teaching strategies used in this grant writing class, respondents perceived the actual service learning project as having the most impact on all four competencies (collaboration, critical thinking, empowerment, and leadership). As indicated above, the grant writing service learning project employed respondents as well as community partners to work together in a collaborative fashion due to the expanse of the task at hand. Critical thinking and problem solving were the keys to success, and in the process of thinking critically and problem solving, respondents felt empowered. Throughout the grant writing process, opportunities for leadership arose. Respondents noted that the process of completing the service learning project allowed them to lead in a way that the traditional classroom did not allow. Respondents were able to use the technology made available to each group at varying levels of competency to complete the research for the grant as well as the actual grant.

In conducting this research over the past several years, several lessons were learned by it. The availability of the teacher early in the process helps to quell students' anxiety around their use of unfamiliar technology, their confidence level, and their way clear to begin the process. This author used Skype meetings with each group toward the beginning and three-fourth of the way into the semester. Embedding service learning in online classes has the potential to transform the role of the teacher from authority figure to facilitator. The process of this transformation facilitates empowerment of the student. The carefully constructed use of the

reflective journal has the potential to enhance each student's ability to think critically and to problem solve any barriers to success. Finally, the interaction among the students in each group and with their community partners facilitated each of them learning from each other.

Recommendations

- Continue research related to the effectiveness of service learning projects in the online environment;
- Add a comparison group of the same online class being taught without a service learning project;
- Involve community partners in rating their work with their respective group;
- Follow up with each organization to discern whether the grant was obtained.

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