Routledge
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Fostering Civic Engagement in the Communication Research Methods Course
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Courses: *Communication Research Methods, Senior Capstone.*
Objectives: *After completing this course, students will be able to:*

- *appreciate the role of empirical communication research in solving social and organizational problems;*
- *identify issues and needs in the community that can be addressed with empirical communication research;*
- *choose appropriate research methods for addressing different issues and needs;*
- *use various communication research methods to address community issues and needs;*
- *present research findings and recommendations to community organizations;*
- *demonstrate an increased commitment to active citizenship.*

Rationale

Civic engagement has become an essential learning goal for institutions throughout higher education. The Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership defines civic engagement as "acting upon a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good," and as a term that "encompasses the notion of global citizenship and interdependence" (Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership, 2007, cited in Jacoby, 2009, p. 9). Proponents of civic engagement initiatives in higher education (Butin, 2010; McIlrath & Labhrainn, 2007) argue that such efforts help fulfill higher education's historical role of fostering democracy and citizen participation, strengthen the academic institutions, enrich communities, and transform students into "citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world" and "agents of positive social change for a more democratic world" (Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership, 2007, cited in Jacoby, 2009, p. 9).

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Communication scholars employ various pedagogical tools to foster civic engagement. For instance, service learning has been shown to increase political and community engagement in courses such as family communication (Vaughn, 2009) and public relations (Whitmer, Silverman, & Gaschen, 2009). Teachers of journalism and business communication engage their students in experiential learning activities designed to help students connect their life experiences with classroom learning (Cheney, 2001; Rhodes & Roessner, 2009). This article presents a method of teaching the undergraduate communication research methods course with an emphasis on civic engagement.

Many educators in communication have articulated the need of incorporating civic engagement into students' educational experiences. Huckin (1997) suggests that sending students into the community helps them develop more civic awareness and "broadens the students' civic understanding" (p. 50). This call to help students become educated and engaged citizens transcends academic boundaries.

In addition to fostering civic engagement among communication students, another benefit of the approach presented here is that it provides a "real-life" context for knowledge and skills acquired in the class. A common problem for instructors of research methods is that students often do not see the "real world" connection of what they learn in this class. The method presented here engages students in a semester-long project, for which they use research methods knowledge and skills to solve a problem or address a need in the community. This empowers students to serve their community through empirical communication research, and helps students see how communication research can solve real life organizational and social problems.

The Project

This community research project is suitable as the main assignment for a communication research methods course or a course with a major research component (such as the senior capstone course). In groups or individually, students work with a client organization to identify needs, to conceptualize and agree upon a research plan. The students then work through the stages of a research project, from reviewing relevant literature, forming research questions or hypotheses, identifying existing resources such as survey instruments, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, to synthesizing the results and making recommendations for the client in oral and written reports.

Project Selection

Key to this method's success is the selection of projects, to be completed ideally before the beginning of the semester. The instructor can solicit project ideas by contacting units and organizations both on and off campus with a description of the class and the student assignment. Campus resources for student engagement, leadership, and

community outreach may provide useful community contacts. Given that this is an undergraduate class, the chosen projects need to be appropriate for the course level and the discipline. The following are a few example student projects:

(1) A needs assessment for a graduate program in an academic unit; survey and/or focus groups data to be collected among potential students and employers in the community.
(2) A study of organizational image for an organization as perceived by key stakeholders (clients, volunteers, etc.); survey and/or focus groups data to be collected.

As can be seen in the above examples, student interest and comfort levels are higher with projects that are relatable to the students and use participants similar to them in age or background. If multiple projects are conducted in a class, they need to be comparable to each other in difficulty levels and amount of work required so to be fair to all the students. To achieve this balance, the instructor may work with the clients to limit every project to two to four research questions and/or hypotheses, and establish some general parameters for the class regarding the amount of work to be completed (e.g., 150 survey participants for a group of five). While it is difficult to establish a predetermined parameter for qualitative research, having some general guidelines helps keep the projects comparable.

The projects also need to be accessible to the students in terms of physical location and the difficulty levels. A project that requires many travels/site visits or uses skills that are beyond the scope of the class would not be feasible. In addition, the projects need to be related the discipline of communication and the tracks or emphases the students may be in. The instructor needs to consider all factors while choosing the projects.

Depending on needs and resources in the community, the instructor may choose projects that connect students to various social issues (e.g., poverty, health disparity). Such projects engage students with issues of social justice and social change and can help foster civic engagement and a long-time commitment to community participation. Examples of such projects include a study of youth voting among minority groups in the university (a university student organization as the client) and a survey of diabetes awareness and needs among at-risk families (a community health organization as the client).

A potential problem at this stage may be that the instructor's needs (learning objectives, for instance) and the client's needs are not completely compatible. For instance, an instructor may expect the students to finish the project from beginning to end so they learn all the stages of a research project; however, the client may already have data collected and only needs student assistance in data analysis and synthesis. Clear communication of expectations between the instructor and the client is key in establishing mutually agreed goals and objectives.

Preparation

While introducing the projects to the class, a meet-and-greet with a representative from each organization/client can help generate excitement for the projects, address questions from both sides, and help students best understand the clients' needs. The instructor can then match the students with the projects, for instance, by having students identify their first and second preferred projects and provide a justification including skills and resources they can bring to the projects. This helps students take ownership of their learning.

Early in the term, students will be introduced to the concept of civic engagement. The students should understand the nature of the projects, learning outcomes to be achieved through the experience, and their roles and responsibilities as researchers in the community. To generate student interest for conducting research in the community, the instructor may cite existing literature on the added value of community engagement in higher education institutions (see Butin, 2010; McIlrath & Labhrainn, 2007). In general, students value the opportunity to apply what they learn in real-life situations, to make connections, and to give back to the community, all of which are good arguments while "selling" the assignment to the students. Many universities now have centers that coordinate service, service-learning, and civic engagement efforts on campus, and the instructor may tap into such campus resources to help discuss the concept of civic engagement with the students.

Project Implementation

Early in the term, students study issues of research design, deductive and inductive research processes, data collection, sampling, data analysis, in conjunction with other course topics. Many communication research methods textbooks (e.g., Keyton, 2009) organize the chapters in an order that reflects the procedural order of actual research projects. The instructor needs to introduce students to certain topics (such as conceptualizing research, searching for literature, sampling) and prepare them for each step as they move through the steps. Early on in the semester, the instructor should discuss issues of ethical compliance regarding the use of human participants in research, and help students finish the certification training so they can collect data later. Since class projects will unlikely involve vulnerable populations like children, it should be relatively easy to obtain IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval for the projects.

During the implementation stage, the instructor needs to monitor progress of each project closely and guide the students through the different steps. A collaborative approach is helpful in this stage. Students, the instructor, and the client all bring unique perspectives and resources to the project, and need to work collaboratively throughout the process. The instructor has expertise in teaching research methods and defines the learning objectives of the course and the project. The client has expectations for what needs to be achieved in the project and provides background

information and resources for the project. The students are responsible for carrying out the project, and their networking capacities and creativity can benefit the project. Since each party brings different perspectives and resources, a collaborative approach to implementing the project is ideal. Regular meetings (between three and five meetings a semester) and email exchanges can help keep all parties up-to-date with project progress. While general input is welcome, the clients should be consulted on certain issues (such as the development of survey instrument or focus group protocol, or how to recruit participants).

Student Reflection

The importance of reflection as a core component of service-learning and experiential learning has been highlighted in the literature; educators argue that students benefit the most from community engagement experiences that provide structured opportunities for them to reflect critically upon their service experience (Eyler, 2002). Bowen (2007) argues that reflection provides an opportunity for transformative learning to emerge from experience. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) concluded that critical reflection in service-learning is continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. In other words, student reflection is an ongoing part of the course, provides a link between service and the intellectual and academic interests of students, engages students in social issues in a broader and more critical way, and corresponds in a meaningful way to the topics and/or experiences. The instructor can use assignments like reflection essays or journaling to help students see their experiences in larger contexts of social justice and policy. The following are example questions to guide student reflection throughout the projects:

(1) What did you know/understand/believe about conducting research prior to this project? How has conducting this research project changed your perception?
(2) What did you know/understand/believe about the client organization prior to this project? How has conducting this research project changed your perception?
(3) This course has been taught in the traditional format, where students would conduct a communication research project for the sole purpose of scholarly research. What are the added values, if any, of using this community engagement approach to this class?
(4) In what ways has this research project experience empowered you as a young professional in the field? As a community member? As a citizen?
(5) Do you believe that communication research is value neutral or value laden? Explain your opinion by discussing your community research experience.

Student reflections also provide the instructor valuable input regarding students' learning experience, design of the course and the projects, and the pedagogical benefits as perceived by the students (as compared to benefits intended by the instructor). Such input can help the instructor further improve the assignments.

Assessment

Since a collaborative approach is taken to the conceptualization and implementation of the projects, assessment for the finished work needs to incorporate multiple perspectives as well. Students can be involved in setting goals for the project and in assessing how well the goals are accomplished at the end. Similarly, the client's input should also be incorporated in goal setting and assessment.

The instructor needs to communicate clearly to the students the specific learning objectives s/he has for the course, which ones are accomplished and will be assessed through the research project, and the mechanisms through which students' work for the client will be assessed. Students need to understand that while they conduct the research for the client, the instructor will be conducting the final assessment of their work for the class. For instance, while the client may express strong satisfaction in the students' work (i.e., the number of surveys collected and analyzed), the instructor's assessment of the work will focus more on the quality of their final products, including the written and oral reports. In addition to assessing student learning in areas of course content, the instructor may also assess affective learning outcomes such as confidence in using research skills to solve real-life problems and interest in pursuing further opportunities to conduct research. The instructor may tailor-design survey questions that focus on these areas of learning, and collect quantitative and/or qualitative data for assessment.

An advantage of this approach compared to the traditional approach is added benefit of fostering civic engagement through a community research project. To document that, the instructor should incorporate elements of civic engagement into the course assessment processes. Learning objectives related to civic engagement (learning objectives #a, #b, and #f identified earlier) can be measured through self-report instruments that help to determine perceived change and growth in those areas. Students' commitment to civic engagement can be measured using statements like "being actively involved in social issues is my responsibility" and "college students must be involved in the civic and political life of the county." With Likert-type questions, the instructor can collect pre- and post-data to identify change and growth among students after completion of the projects. In addition, the reflection essays and journals can also be used as data to assess and document student growth in active citizenship. Refer to the work of Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, and Kerrigan (2001) for further information about assessing civic engagement in service learning projects.

Appraisal: Challenges

This approach to teaching communication research methods does present some challenges to the instructor, one of which has to do with roles and expectations. As stated above, each party plays a unique role and their roles evolve throughout the process. At the needs assessment and planning stages, students may take a more passive role, since they are still learning about the client's needs and about research

methods. In the implementation stage, students need to take more initiatives and make more decisions on their own. The instructor's role changes as well, from one of teaching and guiding at the beginning to one of supporting and advising towards the end. The client's input is more important in the beginning stage, and may play an active role in project assessment as well. A shared understanding among all parties about how roles will evolve as projects proceed will help facilitate a smooth collaboration process.

As with any community involvement project where part of students' learning experience occurs outside of the classroom, the instructor and the students lose some control over what happens in the experience. Being able to manage uncertainty and remaining somewhat flexible in expectations is important for both the instructor and the students. A discussion about managing uncertainty and negotiating expectations while working with the client and working with group members can turn into a valuable teaching moment.

Further complicating the success of a semester-long community research project is the fact that time and other resources can be limited. When conceptualizing a research project, the instructor needs to remind students and the clients of the limits of a semester-long undergraduate student project. Goals need to be realistic, and resources need to be identified.

Typical Results

Students taking this course reported being overwhelmed in the middle of the projects, partly due to feelings of uncertainty and a perceived increase of work to be completed. However, student input, both quantitative and qualitative, indicates exceptionally strong to very strong feelings of accomplishment at the end of the project. Their confidence in using their research skills to solve real-life problems also shows a significant increase at the completion of the projects. This approach helps students see that research methods are not just for academics, but can be used to address real problems in the "real world." While students in this course traditionally report being confused about why they are required to take this class, those involved in the community research projects are better able to see how this course will help them in the future. They typically report, "it is really helpful to conduct a real research project for a client and to apply what we learned for a client." Another student commented, "it is really an eye-opening experience to see how what we learn in this program can help make a difference for the client organization" and that she felt empowered she could serve the community in this way. Students also report feeling more confident in applying the skills and knowledge in their future jobs.

Another significant benefit of this approach is that students become more aware of community needs and resources related to research, a benefit commonly associated with innovative pedagogical approaches that involve community engagement (e.g., Ahlfeldt, 2009; Jacoby, 1996).

The community and the client organizations involved benefit from such projects. They receive student assistance for their projects, and get an opportunity to work

closely with students. One client organization reported, "working with the students was beneficial because what we wanted to find out was directly about the students, so they were better positioned to find answers to our questions more than anyone else."

Facilitating and advising such service-learning projects benefit the faculty and the institution as well. More and more universities now value civic engagement through various forms of university–community partnerships (see Soska & Butterfield, 2005). Large national initiatives like the American Democracy Project, through collaboration between the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the New York Times, illustrate a continued commitment across campuses toward fostering civic engagement among students as citizens. Instructors can link their student research projects to such national initiatives. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching now has a Community Engagement Classification, and institutions can apply for the classification using evidence of institutional commitment to curricular engagement, community outreach, and partnerships. Student projects like those described here may be used as evidence of such an institutional commitment.

Engaging students in community research projects can help communication faculty members stay connected with needs and resources in the community and contribute to advancing civic engagement in the university and in the discipline.

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