

Making Community-Based Learning Meaningful: Faculty Efforts to Increase Student Civic Engagement Skills

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Abstract (Abstract):

Just as students struggle to define the concept of civic responsibility and civic engagement in articulating the connections between service and broader civic notions, faculty are also often uncertain about how best to describe and differentiate between service, "doing good," and the enrichment of their own civic capacities through their encounters with community organizations, community issues, and community members. To that end, a representative sample of capstone faculty were invited to meet for a total of ten hours during the academic year to explicate community-based learning in their courses. The group included two men and four women (tenured and untenured) from the fields of education, psychology, women's studies, urban studies, public affairs, and science education. These faculty teach courses that address immigrant education and health issues, domestic violence, homelessness and renter's rights, grant writing, tutoring for at-risk students, and the utilization of technology to map community assets.

In order to assess the impact of course modifications made by CPR faculty on student learning outcomes, nine capstone courses (n=92 students) taught by CPR faculty in the spring of 2001 were compared with the other 28 capstone courses (n=279 students) offered that academic quarter via responses on the Capstone Student Survey (white=75% and female=62%). Consistent with the literature and the institution's civic engagement goals for undergraduates, four categorical areas were analyzed: communication skills, critical thinking skills, appreciation of diversity, and commitment to social responsibility. In addition, we were interested in assessing and comparing specific course design methods between the two groups (i.e., CPR faculty courses vs. other capstone courses).

For instance, a Capstone course on Women's Health Services in the Portland Metropolitan Community now requires a portfolio project that includes the inventory of past experiences of civic engagement and how this background connects students' prior skills and knowledge with their current activities. A Middle School Ecosystems Capstone is utilizing a variety of conceptual framing devices and prompts for students' written reflections. The goal for this faculty member was to move the students from mere description of engagement with the community to an in-depth analysis of educational and environmental issues. One instructor who participated in this project was especially interested in redesigning her course around Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory. She came to realize that most of her students registered for the Capstone course on Homelessness because they were "active experimenters," meaning they wanted to intentionally (through organizational and physical processes) try to create change. However, when it came to "reflecting" on course readings or in thinking "abstractly" about economic models that structurally support homelessness, students were less able to manage these aspects of the course. Thus, the faculty member redesigned all assignments and in-class activities around the "learning cycle."

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While service-learning courses are rich with learning opportunities, students are not always able to identify or articulate the breadth of civic competencies that they have gained as a result of their participation. This paper highlights findings from a faculty development project in which faculty came together in a small learning community in order to share and investigate strategies for deepening the reflective capacities of their students.

Results indicate increased student ability to connect their community service experiences to the development of civic engagement skills, values, and knowledge.

According to previous research, a positive relationship exists between community-based learning courses and an array of student development outcomes such as increased communication skills (Jordan, 1994) and critical thinking skills (Kendrick, 1996). However, other researchers have found that students involved in community-based learning experiences were not aware that civic responsibility was even a goal of the course (Ikeda, 1999; Jessen & Ramette, 1998). Qualitative data determined that students were not able to identify or articulate the breadth of skills, knowledge, and values they gained as a result of their participation. This has led some educational leaders to call into question institutional and faculty efforts to impart social conscience to students through service learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee, 2000).

Thus, we asked ourselves: are developmental outcomes associated with civic engagement capacity being nurtured and facilitated in community-based learning experiences? And, what pedagogical elements in those courses help students to gain an epistemological appreciation for their roles and responsibilities as citizens in their communities? This paper highlights the results of an intentional faculty development project aimed at increasing student civic engagement skills, values, and knowledge.

Project Purpose and Context

At Portland State University (PSU), students participate in a required senior-level service-learning capstone course. This course is the culminating educational experience in students' progression through PSU's University Studies general education program. The capstone courses engage interdisciplinary teams of students in addressing complex community issues. Currently, there are over 2,000 students enrolled in 140 capstone courses offered annually. Given that PSU is committed to developing lifelong learners through civic engagement, we felt it was imperative to further examine the relationship between community interaction and student development. In particular, we wanted to investigate how to integrate reflection on civic learning within the context of these senior-level capstone courses. To accomplish this, a small group of faculty were recruited to participate in a professional development project with the goal of identifying creative pedagogical strategies and to determine whether course modification could enhance student understanding of civic engagement and the development of citizenship.

The Capstone Project on Reflection (CPR) was designed around three priorities: 1) to investigate approaches for encouraging students to reflect on the connection between participation in their capstone course and civic engagement; 2) to assess student development of citizenship skills, values, and knowledge; and 3) to develop reflective and assessment exercises that could be disseminated to other faculty. In essence we examined: why do so few students make the connection between the work they have done in the community to effect change and the redefinition of themselves as effective civic players (Ikeda, 1999)?

Project Design

In agreement with several authors in the field of service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1998; Erlich, 2000; Eyer and Giles, 1999; Driscoll, 2000; Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, & Kerrigan, 1998; Sax & Astin, 1997), we realized the critical leadership role that our faculty play in creating meaningful community-based learning experiences. Ideally, faculty serve as the catalyst for creating the connections between the course content, the service experience, and the broader civic implications of these actions. As Driscoll (2000) asserts, "faculty need support for undertaking service-learning classes (p.37)" because it involves the utilization of an unfamiliar pedagogy. Just as students struggle to define the concept of civic responsibility and civic engagement in articulating the connections between service and broader civic notions, faculty are also often uncertain about how best to describe and differentiate between service, "doing good," and the enrichment of their own civic capacities through their encounters with community organizations, community issues, and community members. To that end, a representative sample of capstone faculty were invited to meet for a total of ten hours during the academic year to explicate community-based learning in their courses. The group included two men and four

women (tenured and untenured) from the fields of education, psychology, women's studies, urban studies, public affairs, and science education. These faculty teach courses that address immigrant education and health issues, domestic violence, homelessness and renter's rights, grant writing, tutoring for at-risk students, and the utilization of technology to map community assets.

Based on writings by Butler (2000), faculty in the Capstone Project on Reflection (CPR) were asked to reflect upon three primary questions as they considered the nature and content of their courses: 1) What are the civic competencies needed to prepare students for active participation -- which goes beyond community service to public engagement -- in a diverse society? 2) How do learning objectives and teaching/learning strategies (pedagogy) create connections for students between their civic experiences and the development of their civic capacities? and 3) How do diverse student ways of knowing (epistemology) get supported and facilitated toward development in community-based courses?

CPR Session Content

Five, two-hour seminars were co-facilitated by the research investigators. The substance of each session is outlined below:

Session I

The first session focused on introductions of the faculty participants and discussion of group purpose. In preparation for the initial meeting, faculty were asked to read a number of articles in order to set the stage for the project and to develop a common language:

- Butler, J. E. (July/August, 2000). Democracy, Diversity and Civic Engagement. *Academe*, 52-55.
- Jones, S. R., & Hill, K. (2001). Crossing High Street: Understanding Diversity Through Community Service-Learning. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42(3), 204-216.
- Fernandez-Balboa, J-M., & Marshall, J. P. (1994). Dialogical Pedagogy in Teacher Education: Toward an Education for Democracy. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(3), 172-182.
- Astin, A. W. (2000). The Civic Challenge of Educating the Underprepared. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.). *Higher Education and Civic Responsibility*. (pp. 124-146). Oryx Press.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T. and others, (2000). Higher Education and the Development of Civic Responsibility. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.). *Higher Education and Civic Responsibility*. (pp. xxi-xliii). Oryx Press.

Faculty were asked to consider the following questions that guided our discussion: 1) What are the differences and similarities between the following terms: civic engagement, civic responsibility, social responsibility, citizenship, civic education, community service, community-based learning, and service learning? 2) How are we currently addressing the above topics/concepts in our capstone courses? 3) What inhibits and what facilitates helping students make learning connections between their capstone experience and the development of civic capacity?

Faculty then had two weeks to develop a plan for integrating reflection and assessment in their Capstone course. Each individual faculty had the freedom to determine which components in their course(s) to revise, add, or delete, but their overall course plan needed to have a coherent approach to helping students process and integrate their civic learning.

Session II

Each faculty member was given 15 minutes in which to present their Capstone revision plan and to receive feedback from the group with respect to course learning objectives, assignments, group projects, and assessment and evaluation processes. The goal was to develop or modify a capstone course to enable students to make the connection between course content, the community experience, and the individual student self via integrated reflection.

To assist faculty in their planning for this session, suggestions from "Guidelines for Reflection" (Williams & Driscoll, 1997) were utilized: 1) Reflection directed to connecting the course content with community experience must be on-going, weekly if possible or in every class session, from the beginning of the course until

the final class; 2) Reflection must respond to the diversity of communication styles of students with opportunities for multiple forms of written reflection, and oral reflection in varied formats -- in pairs, and in large and small groups; 3) Reflection must be included in the assessment components of a course in order to communicate to students that connections between content and community service are valued; 4) Reflection that connects academic content of a course and the community service activities must be modeled by instructors as an aspect of their pedagogy; 5) When asked to reflect on their community service, students must be asked explicitly to connect the service to the course content; and 6) Reflection that connects community service with course content must be supported by a classroom context characterized by high levels of interaction, student participation, and a respectful sharing of teacher and learner roles.

As additional resource material, faculty were each given a copy of *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service Learning* (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996) and *Introduction to Service Learning Toolkit* (Campus Compact, 2000).

Session III

Faculty course plans were finalized for implementation the following quarter. Faculty were also introduced to Kolb's (1984) work on Learning Styles and the implications for creating a wide range of activities and assignments. The group also began discussion and review of assessment processes for evaluating student growth regarding the development of civic capacity.

Session IV

Faculty met to discuss the implementation process. Essentially, we reviewed what each faculty member felt was working or not working. The group served as support with feedback and brainstorming. Also, assessment plans were reviewed in anticipation of evaluating student learning at the end of the quarter.

Session V

Faculty assessed their students' progress as well as the overall project. In addition, identification of specific pedagogical strategies were highlighted. Faculty were each asked to address verbally and to document in writing a number of reflection questions including the changes they made to their courses, how they assessed student learning of civic engagement skills, and their individual insights (personal and professional) as a result of participating in the CPR project.

Project Results

Students in each capstone course at the university were asked to complete a course evaluation during the final week of the quarter. These data allow for overall comparisons of student satisfaction and individual instructional effectiveness that have been part of an ongoing assessment process at the institution. This particular reflection project, however, was defined within more relative evaluation parameters. We were interested in engaging faculty in the process of self-disclosing their own perceived course weaknesses and attempted to create an opportunity for faculty to brainstorm with others strategies for course modification. As such, the CPR project gave participating faculty complete flexibility in designing and assessing the impact of their course modifications on student learning. The result, of course, is that the reliability and validity of any findings must be viewed tentatively. Still, we believe that the results are thought provoking and offer future projects helpful insights and recommendations.

Quantitative Data

In order to assess the impact of course modifications made by CPR faculty on student learning outcomes, nine capstone courses (n=92 students) taught by CPR faculty in the spring of 2001 were compared with the other 28 capstone courses (n=279 students) offered that academic quarter via responses on the Capstone Student Survey (white=75% and female=62%). Consistent with the literature and the institution's civic engagement goals for undergraduates, four categorical areas were analyzed: communication skills, critical thinking skills, appreciation of diversity, and commitment to social responsibility. In addition, we were interested in assessing and comparing specific course design methods between the two groups (i.e., CPR faculty courses vs. other

capstone courses).

Descriptive analyses indicate that the overall percentages for each of the 13 items in the five categorical areas for students in CPR faculty-taught capstone courses are higher than for those students who enrolled in capstone courses taught by other faculty (see Table 1). Also, analyses of variance between the two groups indicated significant differences for four of the five categories: critical thinking skills, appreciation of diversity, commitment to social responsibility, and course design methods.

Of those students who enrolled in capstone courses with CPR faculty, 73% reported enhanced communication skills and 80% reported enhanced ability to connect their learning with real-life situations. Similarly, 83% reported significantly enhanced reflection skills and 63% agreed that their problem-solving skills had increased. With respect to diversity, 65% of the students (as compared to 51% of non-CPR course students) indicated that the course enhanced their awareness of their own biases and prejudices and nearly three-fourths of the CPR course students (74%) affirmed that the course enhanced their understanding of diverse community issues. Congruent with the above findings, students taking courses from the CPR project faculty indicated significantly enhanced awareness of social and ethical responsibility to themselves and others (75%), they felt a significantly greater responsibility to meeting the needs of their community partner (86%), and they believed that overall the service experience benefited the community (80%).

Finally, each of the course design method questions were rated more highly for students participating in CPR courses than the others. Approximately seven out of ten students indicated affirmatively that community work enhanced their understanding of the lectures and readings (69%), course objectives and connection to community work were reflected in the syllabus (74%), and the reflection components of the course significantly increased students' self understanding (78%).

Qualitative Data

The Capstone Student Survey also asked students through openended questions to write down their most important learning experiences. While these data were not coded and analyzed independently for the two groups of students, the quotations from students participating in the CPR faculty courses reinforce the findings of the quantitative data. Enhanced student learning in the areas of communication and critical thinking skills were characterized by students through the following statements:

The experience benefited me in improving my communication skills and leadership abilities. It also helped me to further my conflict resolution skills. Most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to have an experience in a real environment.

[I learned] how to talk effectively with others and how to resolve professional differences without anger.

Students also commented on how the course brought new insights and understanding to their own stereotypes, biases, and prejudices while expanding their appreciation for diverse others:

The most important aspect I learned in this capstone experience was dealing with a sector of the community I might never have worked with otherwise. And gaining some insight into the juvenile justice system and the needs of the Southeast Asian immigrant community.

Learning how to work and communicate effectively within a very diverse group.

I learned to understand myself and to overcome a lot of biases I had toward the homeless community.

Students' commitment to social responsibility and the amount of time and energy needed to create positive social change were also evidenced in the written comments:

The hands on experience [gave me] a sense of accomplishment.

I thought that I truly helped give some of those students a positive perspective on ways to approach their future academic goals, like going to college.

International refugees and students of other cultures have a difficult time finding where they fit in U.S./Western society...how do we help these kids feel positively about themselves and their community and culture.

Effective work in the community is an on-going process which, if done well, will require a substantial amount of

time and energy.

Finally, students noted how the instructor and course design facilitated student learning:

The instructor did a great job of bring the readings, journals, and community partner all together.

The empowerment given to students created a sense of responsibility and commitment.

Reflective journals helped to organize my thoughts and experiences.

Meeting homeless families personally allowed me to realize the reality of statistics.

Discussion

Institutionally we felt that the gains of bringing together a group of faculty to discuss the epistemological and pedagogical implications of community-based learning was well worth the time and effort in serving as a model for larger and more strategic efforts. While the data do not indicate causality as to the overall effects on students, they are highly suggestive. Moreover, we now have excellent examples of course syllabi that integrate reflective practices and exercises and that explicitly facilitate student examination of the connection between civic engagement activities and concepts.

For instance, a Capstone course on Women's Health Services in the Portland Metropolitan Community now requires a portfolio project that includes the inventory of past experiences of civic engagement and how this background connects students' prior skills and knowledge with their current activities. A Middle School Ecosystems Capstone is utilizing a variety of conceptual framing devices and prompts for students' written reflections. The goal for this faculty member was to move the students from mere description of engagement with the community to an in-depth analysis of educational and environmental issues. One instructor who participated in this project was especially interested in redesigning her course around Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory. She came to realize that most of her students registered for the Capstone course on Homelessness because they were "active experimenters," meaning they wanted to intentionally (through organizational and physical processes) try to create change. However, when it came to "reflecting" on course readings or in thinking "abstractly" about economic models that structurally support homelessness, students were less able to manage these aspects of the course. Thus, the faculty member redesigned all assignments and in-class activities around the "learning cycle."

One challenge a faculty member faced who teaches a Capstone course on Immigrant and Refugee Public Health Needs was the nature of her learners. The majority of her students were immigrants themselves and did not speak or write English as their native language. For these students, writing about their concepts of democracy and citizenship within an American context was quite a foreign experience. Instead, she designed a variety of questions and exercises to get students to consider and share, for example, how community service was valued in their home when they were growing up and what kinds of responsibilities individuals were expected to have to their communities.

In our final gathering as a group, faculty brought samples of student writings and projects to share how their learners had successfully engaged in the notion of civic participation on a personal level and developed the ability to empathize with community members who may be different from themselves in some way. Certainly, the faculty participants felt that they were unable to be successful with all students in developing students' insights and civic capacity. But on the whole, faculty felt that by explicitly addressing the concepts of citizenship and civic responsibility through such activities as class discussions, reading analysis, written reflections, and group activities that their own as well as their students' interest in and enjoyment of the class were heightened.

Conclusion

Benjamin Barber (1992) states that "the fundamental task of education in a democracy is the apprenticeship of liberty -- learning to be free...[T]he literacy required to live in a civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to act deliberately in a pluralistic world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others, all involve skills that must be acquired" (p. 4).

While this project was just one attempt with a small group of faculty at one institution, the possibilities of

intentionally improving student learning in community-based learning courses seems quite powerful. The greatest shift in faculty thinking about course design was making civic engagement explicit rather than an implicit learning goal. Faculty on most campuses have few opportunities to openly discuss class processes and to collaboratively generate instructional strategies. Within the context of this project, the faculty work group itself developed a cohesive collegial bond where individuals were both affirmed as teachers and supported to creatively attempt new teaching and learning methodologies. In terms of the impact on students, the numbers point provocatively in the positive direction of increased student learning and development which are reaffirmed by students' own statements.

The goal for this next academic year is to conduct two additional faculty groups as well as to package some of the faculty's best practices for reflection on civic engagement that can be disseminated on the institutional website and via specialized one-time training sessions for faculty across departments. Our institution's motto is to "let knowledge serve the city," and it is our hope through these projects that we can, in fact, enhance the students' "serving experience" by expanding the richness of their learning and their future commitment to civic engagement.

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Table I: Percentage Responding Positively to Each Outcome Measure. Measure(*) Regular Capstone Course
CPR Faculty Capstone

(n=279) (n=92) Communication Skills Course enhanced ability to communicate more effectively

70 73 with multiple audiences. Course enhanced ability to connect learning with 78

80 real-life situations. Critical Thinking Skills Course enhanced problem- solving skills. 62 63 Course enhanced reflection skills between readings and 74

83(**) community work. Course helped clarify individual career goals. 45 53 Appreciation of Diversity Course enhanced awareness of own biases and prejudices. 51 65(**) Course enhanced diverse understanding of community issues. 72 74 Commitment to Social Responsibility Course enhanced awareness of social and ethical responsibility

71 75(**) to myself and others. Felt responsibility to meet the needs of community panner. 81

86(**) Feel service work benefited the community.

79 80 Course Design Methods Community work enhanced understanding of lectures and readings. 64

69 Course objectives and connection to community work reflected in syllabus. 73 74 Course reflection component enhanced self understanding. 70 78(**)

(*) percentage indicating agreement (agree or agree strongly) on a five point Likert-type scale

(**) p<.05

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Table (Percentage Responding POSitively to Each Outcome Measure)

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