

A Labor of Love: Constructing a Service-Learning Syllabus

Sharon M. Ballard¹, Barry Elmore
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858

Abstract

Service-Learning has become a popular pedagogical strategy; yet, little attention has been given to the construction of a syllabus that includes a service-learning component. The purpose of this paper is to help instructors identify essential components of high-quality service-learning, to learn ways to incorporate these components into appropriate courses, and to effectively communicate the service-learning requirements through their syllabus. Specifically, the process of developing a service-learning syllabus is discussed in relation to course goals and objectives, service-learning activities, and reflection activities.

Keywords: Service-learning, syllabus construction, pedagogical strategies.

Service-learning is a type of experiential learning that engages students in service opportunities within the community as an integral part of a course. Service-learning enhances a “traditional learning” course by allowing students the opportunity to link theory with practice, apply classroom learning to real-life situations, and provide students with a deeper understanding of course content.

Service-learning can be beneficial to all those participating, particularly the students who engage in service-learning activities. Students sometimes report that service-learning experiences enhance their learning of course material more than a traditional lecture course and they are more enthusiastic toward course material (Roodin, 2002). Service-learning may strengthen students’ sense of civic responsibility as well as aiding them in dispelling any stereotypes they may hold regarding the population in which they are interacting (Butin, 2003; Hamon & Way, 2001). Other researchers have found an increased awareness of career options among students (Fenzel & Leary, 1997) or a reinforcement of their career choices (Blieszner & Artale, 2001), greater civic responsibility and commitment to service (Eyler & Giles, 1999), enhanced critical thinking, communication skills, leadership, awareness of social responsibility, and respect for cultural diversity (Roos et al., 2005).

Although there is increasing evidence that suggests positive outcomes of service-learning, the quality of the service-learning experience is paramount to these positive outcomes. Instructors may feel increasing pressure to incorporate service-learning into their own courses and may not follow best practices in doing so. Others who are interested in trying service-learning may not know where to go for information on developing

¹ Corresponding author's email: ballards@ecu.edu

their service-learning course component and then incorporating the component into their syllabus. Still other instructors may develop a high quality service-learning experience but not adequately convey the service-learning component in their syllabus. The purpose of this paper is to help instructors identify essential components of effective service-learning, to learn ways to incorporate these components into appropriate courses that they may teach, and to effectively communicate the service-learning requirements through their syllabus.

Elements of an Effective Service-Learning Syllabus

Course syllabi do more than provide basic information regarding a course (e.g., required text, course policies). In a review of course syllabi and the corresponding presentation of these syllabi, Thompson (2007) found that many instructors use the syllabus as a chance to sell their course (e.g., explain what they will gain from the course), and to welcome students into the learning experience by using positive and encouraging language. The syllabus provides a first impression of both the instructor and the course and it sets the tone for the course (Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Wolfe, 2004). Course syllabi that are detailed, show connection between course goals and course requirements, and have a warm tone have been found to be most effective in achieving positive student outcomes (Slattery & Carlson; Thompson). Additionally, students should be able to easily navigate the syllabus; therefore, good organization and a user-friendly feel are important points to consider in syllabus construction for any course (Slattery & Carlson).

Consistency between course goals and course requirements and an enthusiastic welcome to the course may be particularly important when the course includes a service-learning component. Students may feel overwhelmed by something new or the prospect of putting in hours in the community in addition to the classroom. The syllabus can provide an opportunity to address students' fears and temper the challenge of service-learning with words of encouragement (Thompson, 2007).

These elements of warmth and clarity along with elements of quality service-learning need to be considered when developing a service-learning syllabus. In the following sections, we break down the process of developing a service-learning syllabus into the following components: (a) Goals and Objectives (b) Service-Learning Activities and (c) Reflection Activities.

Goals and Objectives

Service-learning is a pedagogical strategy used to help students achieve learning goals and objectives. It is not appropriate for all courses or as a strategy to meet all course objectives. It is critical to identify appropriate courses and to establish the link between service-learning and the desired goals of the course.

Appropriate Courses. One of the first steps in incorporating service-learning into your teaching is to think about the courses you teach and determine which ones would be appropriate for service-learning. You may already have a course in mind or you may simply

be exploring the possible fit of service-learning with one or more of your courses. When thinking about which courses might be a good fit with service-learning, consider the level of maturity and experience of the students, (Karasik, Maddox, & Wallingford, 2004) because the types of service activities you include might be dependent on the level of the students. Students in an introductory class might need more help getting started with a service-learning project. More advanced students might benefit from experiences that are directly related to their discipline. For example, in the first author's experience, simple exposure to older adults was the key for an introduction to gerontology class. Yet, planning an in depth needs assessment for a local church was a better fit for a graduate level program planning class.

Making Connections. As you are thinking about the courses you teach, reflect on the goals of each course. Think about how a service-learning component might contribute to achieving those goals. Not only do you want to think about how service-learning will help you achieve the overall goals for the course, but you may want to develop specific goals or objectives for the service-learning component of the course. However, service-learning is a pedagogical tool that will help your students achieve the course learning objectives rather than a separate add-on to a course, so be sure that objectives specific to the service-learning component are congruent with the overall course objectives.

After you have thought through the connections between the service-learning activities and the course goals and objectives, this must be communicated clearly to the students. The course syllabus helps to clarify this relationship between goals and objectives and course requirements (Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Clearly articulating the integration of service-learning with course content within the syllabus allows students to see service-learning as an integral part of the course right from the beginning. In turn, this clarity may help students see the relevance of course requirements to the overall goals of the course.

Service-Learning Activities

As you are thinking about the goals of the course, look for ways in which the service-learning will help you achieve those goals. One of the criteria for meaningful service-learning is the clear and useful connection between course substance and the service-learning experience (Ethridge, 2006). The specific service-learning activities are crucial in establishing this clear connection. Think about what kinds of community projects, placements, or research would be appropriate to achieving outcomes for the course. What adjustments will you have to make to course requirements (readings, writing assignments, etc.) to accommodate and integrate the service-learning component of the course? Do not compromise academic rigor!

Community Partners. Needs of community partners must also be considered when thinking about service-learning activities. Cleary (1998) emphasized the importance of defining the needs of the community with the community partners themselves rather than assuming that you know the needs of the community partner. Yet, this community need must be balanced with the needs of your course. In addition, be sure that your students

will get a good experience at the service-learning site – you want them engaged in meaningful activities – activities that are truly connected with your course content. This reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship is the result of careful planning and good communication. Howard (1993) identified three criteria for establishing the service-learning activities: a) community partners should reflect content of the course; b) duration of service must be enough to fulfill learning goals, and c) service activities and placements must be able to facilitate relevant learning.

Establishing and maintaining good communication with the agencies involved is also important (Huckin, 1997). Instructors using service-learning have noted the value of providing community site supervisors with copies of service-learning syllabi and guides. Gaining continual feedback from site supervisors and from students is helpful in continually updating and refining service-learning course materials (Rowls & Swick, 2000).

If you have a volunteer and service-learning office on your campus, the staff of this office will be able to help you establish community partnerships that are right for your course. It is important to give clear guidelines regarding community partners and in many instances, it may be important to let students choose the community partner with whom they want to work (Huckin, 1997). In addition, students should be the ones to contact the agency and arrange a schedule, not the instructors.

Clear Guidelines and Expectations. Rowls and Swick (2000) noted that the exact service-learning activities in which students were expected to participate were not described on many of the syllabi that they reviewed. This lack of clear guidelines on the nature of the service-learning activity can lead to confusion not only for students but for community partners. Clarity regarding types of activities that are acceptable also is likely to lead to good matches between student and community partner. As you think about the types of activities in which you want your students to engage, be sure they are consistent with your course goals and objectives. Another benefit of including a clear description of service-learning expectations on the syllabus is to maximize the opportunity for students to receive liability protection from the university (Cleary, 1998).

Time consideration is another important step in planning your service-learning activities. The amount of time spent in service-learning and the manner in which that time is organized appear to influence the value of SL as a learning experience. What will be the parameters of the project, e.g., number of hours? Students must put in enough time to meet the goals and objectives. In terms of the service-learning being optional or required, it usually depends on the nature of the course and what you hope the students will gain from the service-learning experience. Think about the established objectives – are there other ways for students to meet these objectives? Can you require the service-learning but give different options within that requirement? What are the consequences of forcing students? Remember, instructors don't usually make other requirements, such as writing a paper, optional. Service-learning, like a writing assignment, is a pedagogical strategy designed to help students reach certain learning objectives.

Rowls and Swick (2000) found that many of the service-learning syllabi they reviewed, particularly those for introductory or general courses, were vague concerning the number of hours required. This lack of detail may cause unnecessary stress for students. Effective syllabi provide structure for the course and can assist students with successful time management (Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Many students work and are involved in a variety of clubs or other extra-curricular activities in addition to their coursework. The thought of completing service-learning hours can cause panic for students who lead busy lives. Students' anxiety can be exacerbated by not knowing the details of the assignment such as how many hours they are required to do and how the service-learning figures into their course grade.

Becker and Calhoun (1999) examined the ways in which students use syllabi and found that students paid the most attention to things like grading policies and assignment details. Providing sufficient detail about the service-learning component as well as other course requirements can help ease students' anxiety and provide them the needed information to efficiently schedule their time. Resource information such as a volunteer and service-learning center and disability support service is important information to include on a syllabus as this might help reduce student anxiety and increase their confidence in being able to handle the course requirements.

Reflection Activities

The next step is to determine how your students will reflect on their service-learning experience. One of the most critical attributes of meaningful service-learning is the reflective process (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Roos et al., 2005; Ethridge, 2006). After reviewing several case studies, Ethridge found that it was through the reflection process that students were able to learn about themselves, including their strengths and weaknesses. Through reflections, these students also voiced their fears and learned to be somewhat comfortable in their own discomfort.

Along with increasing self awareness, Hatcher and Bringle (1997) see reflection as the process that helps learners to link service to their course goals. Experience by itself is not learning; connections between the experiences and course concepts must be made. Students may have difficulty making these connections so you may find it helpful to provide examples or demonstrate the process of connecting experiences with course content. The role of the reflective activities and related learning expectations increase the potential for students to have successful service-learning (Rowls & Swick, 2000).

Reflection activities often include journals, directed writings and structured class discussions. Directed writings might prompt students to analyze the service experience in relation to a section from the text or to a class lecture. Short written assignments can lead students to critically review the text and synthesize it with their service experience (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Reflection can be uncomfortable for students so consider this when you decide the method(s) of reflection and regardless of the method that you choose, make your expectations clear.

The grade value given to the SL part of a course is likely to influence student motivation and performance (Rowls & Swick, 2000). When assigning grades, remember that it is important to evaluate the learning rather than the service (Howard, 1993). In other words, students should not receive points or a grade for each hour they complete. The grade should be given based on the amount of learning that occurred as a result of the service. Student learning is best documented through the reflection activities. Therefore, meaningful reflection activities and a clear description of these activities are particularly crucial to a student's success.

Conclusion

Remember, your students may feel overwhelmed, yet a clear syllabus might help them to feel more positive and more confident in your course. You may want your syllabus to include: service-learning as an expressed goal; a clear description of how service-learning will be measured; a description of service-learning placements and/or projects; student responsibilities; a definition of needs the service meets; how students will be expected to demonstrate what they have learned; course assignments that link the service and course content; and a description of the reflective process. Use the checklist (see Appendix A) as a guide in reviewing your syllabus to be sure that you have included all the necessary components. A clear syllabus can make the difference between a service-learning experience that is a source of frustration and confusion for the students or a successful service-learning experience that contributes to student learning.

Appendix A Syllabus Construction Checklist

As you prepare your syllabus to include a service-learning component, be sure that you think through each of these elements.

- _____ Service-learning as an expressed goal.
- _____ A clear description of how service-learning will be measured.
- _____ A description of service-learning placements and/or projects.
- _____ Student responsibilities (e.g., # of hours; timeline; due dates)
- _____ A match between needs of the community and the needs of your course.
- _____ Course assignments that link the service and course content.
- _____ A description of the reflective process (e.g., journals, discussion, presentations)

Remember, clear descriptions and expectations will help alleviate student anxiety about this component of the course and will facilitate the effective integration of service-learning into your teaching!

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