BEST PRACTICES

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# Integrating Service-Learning in the Public Speaking Course

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**Abstract:** This best practices article endorses incorporating service-learning into the foundational public speaking course. The article explains connections between service-learning and the rhetorical tradition, highlights pedagogical approaches that would benefit from a service-learning component, and discusses the benefits of service-learning for community partners and students. The remainder of the article focuses on how to implement service-learning in a public speaking course, including reflection and assessment recommendations.

Service-learning—broadly defined as the integration of community-based experiential service with a course's learning outcomes—has become a central component of higher education's longstanding mission to cultivate more engaged citizens (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). In Communication Studies, the foundational public speaking course provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate service-learning because of its unique relationship with civic engagement. From its earliest iterations, public speaking has been connected to community service and citizen building. The sophists, particularly Isocrates, grounded their training in service to the community (Clark, 1996; Jarratt, 1991), and Aristotle understood speech as a means of striving for social change. This connection between public speaking and the speaker's obligation to the community is no better exemplified than by connecting public speaking courses with community service. In what follows, we offer 10 best practices identifying student benefits and logistical considerations for instructors when implementing a service-learning component in the public speaking course.

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## Best Practice #1: Embrace Service-Learning as a High Impact Practice

Service-learning has been identified as a "life changing," high impact practice that prepares students to actively engage in their community (Kuh, 2008, p. 17), and it has become an increasingly popular pedagogical approach in higher education, with one study reporting service rates of over 80% among seniors on some university campuses (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009; see also Finley, 2011). Indeed, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U's) National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) argued that service-learning is a central component of educational practices that can "open up opportunities to develop each person's full talents, equip graduates to contribute to economic recovery and innovation, and cultivate responsibility to a larger common good" (p. 14). Although employing service-learning in public speaking courses can be challenging and requires an active commitment from instructors, embracing this pedagogy can lead to significant benefits for both students and their community partners (Steimel, 2013). Moreover, integrating service-learning in the public speaking course helps students achieve learning outcomes, including increased student learning (Warren, 2012) and interpersonal development, the ability to understand and later apply knowledge, and an enhanced sense of citizenship (McIntyre & Sellnow, 2014).

Service-learning also can be used to fulfill learning outcomes identified by the National Communication Association's Learning Outcomes in Communication Project (2015), such as utilizing communication to embrace difference and influence public discourse. A servicelearning component of a public speaking course may help connect speeches and other assignments to the mission and vision of instructors' and students' home institutions. Instructors and students are encouraged to identify links between their unique speech assignments and the specific learning outcomes that can be achieved through service-learning.

## Best Practice #2: Select a Pedagogical Approach to Service-Learning

Choosing a pedagogical approach for the service-learning component in a public speaking class is crucial for guiding students through their service, speeches, and reflection. Britt (2012) suggests three approaches to service-learning pedagogy (i.e., skill-set practice and reflexivity, civic values and critical citizenship, and social justice activism), any of which can be utilized productively in the public speaking course. Service to the community can refine specific skills such as constructing persuasive messages, analyzing audiences in meaningful contexts, or grounding conceptual conversations about citizenship in local communities. By inviting engagement with marginalized populations, service-learning can be used to address inequalities as a project in critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Regardless of which approach instructors choose, each approach is appropriate for the typical public speaking classroom. Nevertheless, given the significance of public life, service, and civic engagement in the rhetorical tradition, a pedagogy committed to civic values and critical citizenship seems particularly relevant when integrating service-learning.

Drawn from the "Aristotelian notion of educating citizens for participation in the *demos*," a service-learning pedagogy centered on civic values treats "service as a way to consider values and commitments not in the abstract but in real interactions in communities and in focused reflection on the negotiation of self, society, and values" (Britt, 2012, p. 84). Adding service-learning to the public speaking course underscores the longstanding relationship between the rhetorical tradition and democracy while providing an opportunity for instructors to encourage the kind of "critical service" envisioned by the earliest practitioners of the oratorical arts (Clark, 1996).

## Best Practice #3: Locate Community Partners and Utilize Campus Resources

Finding community partners with whom students can volunteer may seem daunting, but utilizing campus resources can make this endeavor manageable. If an on-campus service-learning office exists, this office may assist in recommending community partners, providing templates for designing service-learning courses, offering a network of faculty within and across disciplines who have experience with service-learning, teaching best practices, and running service-learning trainings and workshops. This office may advise instructors on how to respond to student conflict; it can also provide documentation, such as liability release forms, if such forms are required at a particular institution. Some institutions sponsor programs that offer financial support and training to students who then assist with service-learning courses. In the absence of a formalized program, instructors can appeal to Chairs, Deans, or related offices to seek support for this valuable leadership experience for undergraduate students or graduate assistants.

Additionally, many campuses organize volunteer fairs where students can connect with community partners. These fairs also provide platforms for students to discuss logistical concerns such as transportation, scheduling hours, background checks, and other obstacles that could prevent them from completing service hours later in the term. In smaller communities with a limited number of potential community partners, instructors and students may struggle to locate enough organizations that are able to work with their service-learning course. Instructors can overcome this challenge by grouping students into teams who complete their service together at a single organization, an approach that works especially well when paired with group speech assignments. Team-based service also can benefit community partners by reducing the number of students inquiring about volunteer opportunities. Finally, it is particularly useful to maintain a list of locations where students have successfully volunteered as this list can be shared with students or withheld for those emergencies when a student cannot identify an organization in need of assistance.

## Best Practice #4: Utilize External Service-Learning Resources

Some institutions do not have dedicated service-learning offices. In such cases, there are three ways to access resources to support service-learning in the public speaking classroom. First, instructors can contact the teaching and learning center or any similar campus office that supports faculty. Those centers, which are common at many institutions, are dedicated to supporting faculty on a wide range of pedagogical initiatives, and they can be particularly helpful in the absence of a designated service-learning or volunteer office. Second, instructors can utilize Campus Compact, a national coalition of all types of colleges and universities with resources designed to support students, staff, and faculty in community-based learning. Although Campus Compact requires a membership, instructors at non-member institutions can still use some of the resources available on the Campus Compact website, such as how-to blogs, civic action plans from other institutions, and web links (see https://compact.org). Third, instructors can search for community partners through websites such as volunteermatch.org, which provides a breakdown of service opportunities by cause, enables users to filter results by the population being served (e.g., young children, teens, or seniors), and lists organizations by proximity to zip code. Other helpful websites include www.createthegood.org, www.pointsoflight.org, and www.idealist.org.

## Best Practice #5: Explain the Value and Benefits of Service-Learning to Students

Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, and Pearson (2007) suggest the quality and effectiveness of any service-learning experience is influenced by how well students are oriented to service-learning before they complete their service, making it essential to foster buy-in early. In the first week of the term, instructors should define service-learning, explain its role in assignments, and discuss how students' volunteering contributes to the community. Furthermore, instructors should address the four benefits associated with service-learning. First, service-learning better prepares students for active participation in democratic life and reinforces the focus on civic engagement that is common in many public speaking courses (Britt, 2012; McIntyre & Sellnow, 2014; Soukup, 2006).

Second, service-learning courses improve students' academic performance (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011) and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012). Third, numerous studies suggest that volunteering positively affects physical and psychological health, from increasing life satisfaction and combatting depression, to reducing hypertension and extending life expectancy (Konrath, Fuhrel-Forbis, Lou, & Brown, 2012; Sneed & Cohen, 2013; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Fourth, service-learning helps students build their résumés, secure internships, and develop leadership and other skills that will help them achieve their career goals (Chang, Chen, Wang, Chen, & Liao, 2014; Moely & Ilustre, 2016). Studies have shown that employers are more likely to hire and promote candidates who have demonstrated a commitment to volunteering, especially in those organizations that value social responsibility (Deloitte, 2016; Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker, & Kickul, 2005).

## Best Practice #6: Introduce the Active Citizen Continuum

Many institutions' mission and vision statements include themes of community engagement. One tool to help students see the connections between their service-learning experiences in the public speaking course and the institution's mission or vision statement is by introducing them to the active citizen continuum (Break Away, 2017). In the active citizen continuum, individuals engaging in service are categorized as members, volunteers, conscientious citizens, or active citizens. *Members* participate in service but ignore their role in social problems, *volunteers* are well-intentioned but still unaware of social concerns, *conscientious citizens* are concerned with finding the root causes of social issues, and *active citizens* are individuals whose priorities and values align with fulfilling community needs (Break Away, 2017).

Introducing the active citizen continuum enables students to position themselves on the continuum as they begin their service, reflect on their position after serving, and create goals for future service as a student and even after graduation. Discussion surrounding the continuum also helps students understand how completing a service-learning project can fulfill institutional goals surrounding civic engagement and reinforce the connection between oratory and democratic citizenship. When discussing the continuum, it must be emphasized that not everyone can or should be an active citizen in every context. Instead, discussion should foster an appreciation for the importance of having individuals in each category to foster robust civic engagement.

## Best Practice #7: Integrate Service-Learning Into Course Assignments

Public speaking courses vary greatly from institution to institution and may draw from any number of assignments, including informative, persuasive, and special occasion speeches, as well as speeches to entertain, tribute speeches, and autobiographical presentations. Many instructors also incorporate team debates, small group presentations, and impromptu speeches in their courses. Regardless of the assignment, instructors can encourage meaningful service experiences for students, especially when that service arcs across two or more assignments during the term. For example, in an informative speech assignment, students might develop presentations on topics that address their community partner's mission and outreach efforts, history, upcoming events, or the broader cause or issue to which it is devoted, whereas for persuasive speech assignments, topics might focus on policy proposals regarding the organization's mission or students' personal experiences working with organizations and the communities they serve. Martinez (2004) offered a helpful model for incorporating service experience in an informative speech.

Assignments that require students to present to other audiences outside the immediate classroom setting, while ambitious, also can be invaluable. Informal assignments can be easily incorporated as in-class discussions, small group activities, or "think-pair-share" sessions. Smaller assignments related to the service-learning component of the class help keep students on task and may include (a) asking students to identify potential community partners with whom they might volunteer (e.g., organization name, mission statement, volunteer policy, contact information), (b) verifying when students have established relationships with an organization, (c) requiring a regular service journal where students log and reflect on their experiences, or (d) documenting the completion of volunteer hours with a signed form.

## Best Practice #8: Reflect on Service-Learning

One essential component of service-learning is critical reflection, which is "the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one's experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 26). Ideally, critical reflection should take place before, during, and after the completion of service hours and can be accomplished in a three ways. First, after selecting a site and before volunteering, students should write about their expectations in an informal journal or writing assignment. Prompts for reflection might include: (1) Describe your previous experiences with community service; (2) What challenges might you face on your way to completing your service hours this semester, and how will you address them? (3) What do you expect or hope to do during your service? or (4) Discuss your initial impressions of your organization and its clients.

Second, during the service experience, students should continue writing journal entries that record observations and draw connections between their experiences and relevant course content. For example, students can reflect on how successfully the organization is meeting community needs or how their experience at the organization reflects its mission and vision statements. Third, at the end of the service experience, students can combine reflections with personal assessments of any course assignment that incorporated their service. For example, we often ask students to offer a self-critique of their last major speech assignment (in our courses, this is typically a persuasive speech) and identify specific course

learning outcomes that were achieved through their service experience. At a minimum, instructors should assign writing assignments or speeches requiring students to reflect on how their service-learning has helped them meet learning outcomes and align with their institution's mission and vision. As Jacoby (2015) notes,

> when we engage students in reflection related to their experiences, they can see the relevance of course content to real-world issues, the interdisciplinary nature of problems and solutions, the complexity of the social fabric, and how they can choose to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. (p. 11)

The importance of reflection cannot be understated. Although it is not recommended that instructors award points for the simple completion of service hours, it may help encourage students to engage in meaningful reflection if such assignments comprise a modest percentage of their overall course grade (e.g., 5%).

## Best Practice #9: Integrate Service-Learning Into the Course Calendar

Given the volume of content and number of presentation days required in a typical public speaking course, fitting service-learning into the course calendar may be a difficult task. Mabry (1998) proposed that service-learning courses aim for a goal of 15 service hours for a typical three-credit course. This goal, though reasonable in some contexts, may be challenging for instructors teaching accelerated public speaking courses or at institutions operating on a quarter system. McIntyre and Sellnow (2014) found that students can achieve a number of beneficial learning outcomes with a service obligation as low as two hours, including "personal and interpersonal development, an understanding of basic communication course concept relevance, and a sense of citizenship" (p. 71). Martinez (2004) suggests a slightly larger commitment of five hours; instructors, therefore, are afforded some flexibility depending on their individual course needs.

Given the unique time constraints of the public speaking course, we endorse Jacoby's emphasis (2015) on the importance of integrating service-learning into the course design and assignments rather than focusing exclusively on the amount of service hours. We typically ask students to complete five to six service hours for courses offered during a 15-week semester. In courses where instructors have not already identified specific community partners with whom students must volunteer, it is prudent to encourage students to be proactive and establish a relationship with an organization early in the semester, perhaps as early as the third week of the course. Deadlines by which students must have completed their service hours should be placed strategically in the schedule to allow time for proper reflection and integration with course assignments. For example, we encourage our students to fulfill their volunteer hours no later than the midway point of the course as this allows them to better incorporate the experience into their speech assignments that fall in the final half of the semester.

## Best Practice #10: Assess Service-Learning in Public Speaking

Assessing service-learning in the public speaking course requires considering the extent to which outcomes are met for students, communities, faculty, and institutions (Jacoby, 2015). Student outcomes include meeting course objectives, program learning objectives, and personal goals and can be assessed through a combination of students' reflections and more standardized student evaluations that take place at the conclusion of each course. Through reflection and assessment, students may realize how they benefited from the service-learning experience whether it be professional development, a deeper appreciation for their role as civil servant, or a greater sense of connection to the larger community. Community outcomes should be assessed by community partners. Site supervisors may answer questions designed to assess if students serving in that organization helped meet community partner needs; they also should have the opportunity to discuss shifting needs of their organization now and in the future while reporting if they think future student volunteers could help meet those needs. If the community partners had a positive experience with student volunteers and want volunteers in the future, this assessment procedure allows them to provide that feedback. If student volunteers are not helping meet community partner needs, however, it is important to have a platform for them to offer constructive criticism.

Faculty are encouraged to reflect on their experience facilitating a service-learning course. Instructors should keep detailed notes throughout the semester with suggestions about how to improve the course for community partners, students, and the faculty members themselves in subsequent semesters. As aforementioned in Best Practice #6, utilizing service-learning in the public speaking course may help fulfill the university's mission and vision statements. Depending on the institution's mission, community partner and student assessment questions might include inquiries about civic engagement, personal responsibility, retention, the desire to take another service-learning course, an awareness of personal biases and prejudices, problem-solving skills, communication skills, clarification of career goals, and active citizenship. Several assessment materials are available through the AAC&U which has a number of Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics available to all instructors including an assessment rubric focused on Civic Engagement (see https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics).

## Conclusion

As Oster-Aaland et al. (2007) argued, "Communication studies is a disciplinary leader in service learning" (p. 349), with more recent pedagogical scholarship demonstrating how it can be meaningfully integrated into myriad communication courses (De La Mare, 2014; Hinck & Scheffels, 2015). The 10 best practices in this article offer concrete suggestions for how to incorporate service-learning into the foundational public speaking course in such a way as to emphasize the civic inclinations of the rhetorical tradition. McIntyre and Sellnow (2014) suggest that public speaking "is an ideal place to infuse service-learning" (p. 59) because it enables students to meet learning outcomes that promote more engaged and competitive graduates, which then "can invigorate the curriculum and those who teach it" (Weintraub, 2006, p. 123). By following these best practices, instructors can promote civic engagement while helping students' professional, physical, and mental well-being.

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