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Using Service-Learning to Teach Threshold Concepts

Helen Morgan Parmett
Western Washington University, helen.morganparmett@wwu.edu

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Backwards by Design: Assessment Project Write-Up
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1 June 2013

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a) Describe the course/context of your study

The course I chose to focus on for the Backwards by Design retreat and for this particular study is Communication 244: Advocacy through Media. This course enjoins students to critically consider how media can be used as a tool to advocate for social and political change, and, especially for social justice. Students engage with scholarly and activist literature on theories of media, social change, and advocacy as well as case studies of media makers who intervene in the process of social change. Students' critical acumen is sharpened through participating in a service-learning project, where students learn how to apply theories of media advocacy in the practice of working with non-profits invested in social justice issues.

The Fall 2012 quarter was the first time I taught this class, and it was also the first time that I used service-learning as a tool for student learning and engagement. The course is not one that is commonly taught in the United States in the area of Communication Studies and Media Studies, and therefore, students do not come into class clearly knowing what to expect. Students, in general, have little experience and understanding of *critical* media studies, and often assume that media studies courses will be primarily based on working in the media industry and on media production. This is a particular hurdle to overcome, because students came into the class expecting a public relations or social marketing oriented class, rather than a class on *media advocacy*, which stems from a distinct scholarly literature and activist practice.

b) Describe the focus of your study and why you chose that focus

The focus of this study is on the effectiveness of using service-learning as a tool for teaching threshold concepts. In particular, I analyze the extent to which the group-based service-learning project of composing a Media Plan for a partnering non-profit organization helped students in my Advocacy through Media class to fully integrate the threshold concept of media advocacy into their understanding in the transformative and holistic way in which threshold concepts are discussed in the literature.

Threshold concepts was by far the most intriguing concept I took away from the Backwards by Design retreat. As Glynis Cousin (2006) notes, the idea of threshold concepts arose in response to what often become overly stuffed curriculums. Teachers excited about teaching a large amount of content try to incorporate as much as possible to enhance student learning. Threshold concepts instead encourage instructors to incorporate a "less is more" approach, focusing on a

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fundamental concept that is "transformative because it involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift" (Cousin, 2006, p. 4). In short, I learned during the retreat that one way to approach designing courses through this "backwards" method was to organize the class around a set of core disciplinary concepts that serve as a foundational understanding for students to be able to think critically about a broader and more in depth range of issues, applicative examples, and other concepts at higher levels. Because I am exactly the type of professor who often tends to "overstuff" my syllabus with a range of theories, case studies, and interesting readings, I felt that this concept could help me to design a course that would be more focused and, potentially, transformative rather than overwhelming and overly broad.

I therefore went into design of the syllabus, assignments, and assessment and evaluation materials with the goal of helping students to understand a set of key threshold concepts. The most significant threshold concept that I wanted students to come away from the class understanding was the concept of media advocacy itself. In particular, I wanted students to understand how media advocacy differed from public relations, the latter of which uses media for promotional purposes. Media advocacy, in contrast, strategically uses media as a tool or platform for advancing particular arguments, persuasions, and mobilizations of audiences around a specific social justice and social change issue. Although public relations aims to persuade audiences as well, the focus is on persuading audiences to endorse the actions of or mission of a particular organization. Media advocacy is not tied to any particular organization or entity and instead uses media itself as a means of getting audiences to think, believe, or behave differently.

Although I incorporated a range of methods of teaching threshold concepts,[1] the most significant design element was a service-learning project that unfolded in several stages[2] as the core assignment through which students were encouraged to master the threshold concept. As a major component of the retreat was focused on service-learning, I found that this teaching technique was particularly well suited to teaching a threshold concept. Cousin (2006) suggests that threshold concepts often emerge from "troublesome knowledge," or that which challenges students' taken for granted, common sense notions of how the world works. Because service-learning

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[1] For example, I assigned readings early on that defined the concept theoretically, followed by readings that taught the skill of media advocacy, and then followed those up with case studies in media advocacy. The idea in this design was that the threshold concept would be introduced and then it would be more fully integrated into the students conceptual understanding as the course material deepened.
[2] The stages included a project proposal, a background report on the organization they were partnering with and their mission, a paper evaluating the use of media by the organization at an event they attended, a first draft of a Media Plan for the organization, and a final draft of a Media Plan.

requires students to immerse themselves in the day to day and real world complexities of non-profit work, it is in some ways an ideal training ground for students to encounter the complexities and troubled nature of theoretical and conceptual knowledge. This is particularly the case in terms of teaching media advocacy, as the needs and desires of partners, the pressures of funding, and the contingency of available media tools provide a context for enriching students engagement with the theory and practice of media advocacy. Further, it is my contention that through the hands-on and real-world application of knowledge gained through service-learning, the kind of transformative understanding that Cousins refers to—in terms of epistemological and ontological shifts—becomes more possible, as it integrates into the students whole being, rather than as just some ideas and concepts that are discussed in a class.

For their service-learning project, students created a media plan for an organization that outlined different forms of media that the organization could use to persuade audiences about its cause (i.e. to engage in media advocacy). The aims of the assignment in relation to teaching the threshold concept of media advocacy were a) to give students a real-world example to seeing media advocacy in action, i.e. in relation to a specific cause and a specific organization; b) to clearly distinguish between uses of media to promote that organization as opposed to uses of media to advocate for a cause; and c) to enable students to apply theories of how to engage in media advocacy to create a more fully integrated and holistic understanding of the concept.

c. Results

To assess the effectiveness of role of service-learning as a method for teaching the threshold concept of media advocacy, I used multiple evaluation and assessment techniques, which serve as the basis of the results for this study. These techniques of are as follows:
1. *Service-learning Media Plan assignment*—Groups composed a media plan as the main component of their service learning project
2. *Essay*—Students individually composed an essay at the end of the quarter where they reflected on how they would define media advocacy, explaining how their service learning project contributed to their understanding of the concept
3. *Student evaluations of the service-learning experience*—Each student completed an evaluation of their service learning experience as a whole, and specifically on the extent to which their service-learning helped them to better understand course content

In looking at these results, I asked:

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1. To what extent do these results suggest students are able to distinguish media advocacy from public relations, social marketing, and other forms of the uses of media in non-profit organizations?
2. To what extent do these results suggests students have fully integrated a holistic understanding of media advocacy in such that they are able to move beyond definitions to higher levels of applied and evaluative learning, critical thinking, and concepts that build upon the threshold concept?

Service-Learning Media Plan
Each group composed a media plan as the final project for their service-learning group assignments. I analyzed each plan qualitatively, looking for a) their discussion of the organization, its mission, and its use of media; and b) each component of the media plan (i.e. each suggestion the group made for what type of media to use for what purpose).

From these results, only one of the four groups demonstrated mastery of the threshold concept of media advocacy. Each of the other groups' plans were much more clearly driven by an understanding of advocacy through media in terms of public relations rather than media advocacy. Some examples of this understanding from student work are as follows:

> "Engaging the media will be essential for promoting events and sending messages. Our group has developed a plan that will detail useful strategies to help gain community exposure and reach the WWU college community" (Group 1)

> "With the fine tuning and potential alteration of some of their methods they could use their existing media to further boost their membership and get their name out there for everybody to hear" (Group 2)

Each of these examples suggests that the overall aim of the media plan was to help the organization reach to promote the organization, rather than to use media to advocate for the cause itself.

To some extent, part of the disconnect here was not only on the part of the students, but also on the part of the partnering organization. Two of the four groups noted that what the organization wanted was to promote their organization. For example,

> "The current goals of the Parent Coalition are to get their mission received by a larger audience, to receive more volunteer and internship inquires, and to promote the message of inclusion. The Parent Coalition is a small staffed nonprofit that needs all the help from media that they can. They view media as an integral part of promoting their mission and gaining great community support" (Group 3)

Thus, even if students had a sense of what media advocacy was as a theoretical concept, the service-learning experience was not necessarily helpful in bringing about a deeper, transformative understanding of the concept because doing so would have created a disconnect between the project and the needs and desires of the organization.

However, one group did clearly demonstrate this kind of transformative understanding of media advocacy, as suggested by the following excerpt from their Media Plan,

> "The short-term goal of the YSA is to increase membership in the group. They would also like to increase interest in volunteering too, but more volunteers are not needed until there are more members in YSA. The long-term goal of the YSA is to increase awareness of what their organization does. The YSA would like to use media to accomplish these goals, but are unsure how to do this…To achieve these goals, we will recommend the YSA focus on taking control of framing their story" (Group 4)

These statements suggest that the group members could clearly distinguish between public relations' use of media—i.e. "they would also like to increase interest in volunteering"—but that the overall aim of the media plan and the organization was rather focused on media advocacy—i.e. "the long term goal…is to increase awareness" (where it becomes clear later on that the kind of awareness they would like to increase is not about the organization per se but rather about the issues that peoples with disabilities face) and that in order to do so they needed to take "control of framing their story."

Reflections
Students were asked to write a reflection on their service-learning project at the end of the quarter, stating specifically how the project related to their understanding of media advocacy in theory and practice. Overall, students showed little understanding of how the work with the service-learning partners related to media advocacy. The overarching theme in the students' reflection papers was that students did not see a clear connection between the theories and case studies regarding media advocacy we were studying in class and what they were doing in their service-learning projects.

For example, one student stated that she felt as though her partnering organization had "nothing to advocate for." Another student suggested that the organization they were working for also did not have a media advocacy aim, such that "the Parent Coalition's main goal wasn't poking policy makers their not for profit organization seemed so different than the ones we discussed in class." Another student suggested that what the organization "requested foremost from my group was for help

advertising their museum." These results therefore suggested that students did in fact have a cursory understanding of media advocacy, but the service-learning project did not provide an experience that allowed them to deepen that understanding of the threshold concept through application, and, therefore, the threshold concept was not fully integrated into their understanding.

Service-Learning Evaluations
These findings, however, were not overwhelmingly confirmed in quantitative results of the student evaluations of their service-learning experience, which suggested that the majority of students did find the service-learning component of the class enhanced their learning of course concepts.

I looked at student responses to the following prompts in the evaluation:
1. My service-learning experience helped me better understand the course content.
2. The service-learning experience in this course helped me see how the subject matter I learned in class can be applied.

Seventeen students responded to these questions. Of the seventeen, nine (53%) stated they "agree" their service-learning experience helped them better understand the course content. Thirteen (76%) stated the service-learning experience in this course helped me see how the subject matter I learned in class can be applied. Complete data on student responses can be found in the table below.

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My service-learning experience helped me better understand the course content.	1 (.06%)	9 (53%)	4 (23%)	2 (12%)	1 (.06%)
The service-learning experience in this course helped me see how the subject matter I learned in class can be applied	0	13 (76%)	2 (12%)	1 (.06%)	0

Figure 1: Student responses to service-learning evaluation questions. Total student responses=17

Despite the relatively high percentage of those who seemed to agree that the service-learning experience helped them to understand the course concepts (68% combining total responses to both questions from agree/strongly agree), a still significant portion were neutral or disagreed with these statements (29%

combining total responses for both questions from neutral/disagree/strongly disagree).

Moreover, the qualitative data suggests that the understanding students stated they had in the quantitative component cannot be equated to the integration of a threshold concept. Rather, the qualitative data supports the conclusion that those who agreed that service-learning had helped them understand the concepts and to apply those concepts were getting something more of an introduction to the concept or a familiarity with the concept and its application. This conclusion is further confirmed by the open-ended questions on the evaluation that asked students "which course concepts did you learn most about through your service-learning experience." Most of the students left this open-ended question blank (13 students (76%) left it blank). Those that did answer the question responded with "storytelling strategy" (2 responses) and "alternative vs. mainstream media differences" (2 responses). These are indeed components of media advocacy, so it is possible that the students did integrate a more full understanding. However, given that a substantial majority of the students did not respond at all, the extent to which the service-learning experience helped to teach the threshold concept is rather questionable.

Based on these results, I conclude that this particular service-learning project was not effective in teaching media advocacy as a threshold concept.

d. Plans for future use of concept

Despite the results of this study, I still believe that the use of threshold concepts as a way of organizing class content is still a highly beneficial way for students to learn. Moreover, I remain committed to the idea that service-learning can be used as a key method for teaching threshold concepts, and for teaching media advocacy as a threshold concept in particular.

However, what I have learned from this study is that there needs to be a clearer connection between service-learning projects and the threshold concept itself. Additional assignments and activities need to be staged around the service-learning assignment to ensure that students can make connections between their service-learning experience and the threshold concept. Moreover, I plan to change the service-learning project. Rather than writing a media plan, which seems open to integrating elements that go beyond media advocacy (into the realm of public relations, e.g.), I will have the students complete a project that more clearly calls upon them to advocate. For example, this quarter (spring), I have tasked the students with creating an advocacy video project. This is a less open-ended project and calls upon students not just to write about how organizations can use media for advocacy purposes, but, rather, to actually engage in that media advocacy

themselves. It is my hope that this project will help to build more of a fundamental integration of the threshold concept.

Further, the results of this study suggest that it is not necessarily that service-learning failed as a strategy for teaching the threshold concept, but, rather there was a lack of a clear communication between myself and the partner about media advocacy. Therefore, there was a lack of consistency between the end project and media advocacy, causing confusion amongst students and an inability for them to deeper their learning of media advocacy through the service-learning project. In the future, I will work on more clearly communicating with partners to be sure that they understand the type of project that students will need to produce. Additionally, I will choose partners more carefully and selectively to be sure that their mission and their need for media will align with the ideals of media advocacy.

I therefore still plan to continue to use the idea of threshold concepts and service-learning as a way of teaching media advocacy as a threshold concept, but I will make several changes to the course in order address the problems that this study highlighted. It is my hope that these changes will help students to more fully integrate the threshold concept of media advocacy into their learning experiences. Again, I remain committed to the idea that service-learning can be an effective tool for teaching threshold concepts, but I am still working on how best to translate this into the practical elements of teaching, working with partners, and aligning their needs with the needs of the student and the class.

Works Cited

Cousin, G. (2006). An introduction to threshold concepts. *Planet* 17(December), pp. 4-5.