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Jean L. Bush-Bacelis
Eastern Michigan University

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Innovative Pedagogy: Academic Service-Learning for Business Communication

Jean L. Bush-Bacelis
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti

Academic Service-Learning (AS-L) is an innovative business communication pedagogy. Like community service, AS-L involves students volunteering in the community; however, AS-L requires the infusion of the classroom content into the community service experience. This article describes AS-L, the assignment for a business communication class, and students' reactions as well as benefits and challenges to its use. The greatest strength of using AS-L is students' tying theory into actual application of principles, student passion for the work, faculty enthusiasm for the results, and community satisfaction.

Key words: Academic Service-Learning, business communication pedagogy, student volunteering, community service, innovative pedagogy.

ACADEMIC SERVICE-LEARNING (AS-L) is a method by which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated with the academic and local communities (Perkins, 1994). Like community service, AS-L involves students volunteering in the community; however, AS-L requires the *infusion* of the classroom content into the community service experience. The students and professor work together to connect content with the students' active involvement in the community. Effective learning modules include three main criteria: meaningful service, connection to course content, and active reflection on the service-related learning (Rice, 1994.)

Academic Service-Learning supports Kolb's 1984 Experiential Learning model (Rice, 1994), as it provides a concrete experience that, paired with reflection on how the service relates to key course ideas, can stimulate conceptual growth and learning in college students. Stu-

dents learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is

- conducted in and meets the needs of a community
- coordinated with a school or community service program
- conducive to fostering civic responsibility.

Academic Service-Learning must integrate with and enhance the academic curriculum of student participants and must provide structured time to reflect on the service experience. Just as business communication classes enhance student communication skills, AS-L further prepares business communication students for tomorrow's workplace.

An AS-L Approach to Teaching Business Communication

All business communication educators want to prepare students to be effective managers. Students need to be flexible, work well on teams, solve problems, and think creatively. Students have to learn that, unlike exams and other typical university assignments, problems at work have no single correct answer. The demands of tomorrow's workplace will require them to thrive in an ever-increasingly diverse workplace and to adapt rapidly and frequently to re-organization, downsizing, re-engineering, and other types of change. Change is only one of the many complex topics of business communication.

For students, one of the most challenging aspects of business communication is to connect classroom material with the work world. Students usually admit that they will write memoranda, letters, and reports no matter what kind of career they pursue. However, some concepts are especially difficult for students to think about in a critical fashion. For example, students struggle to apply abstractions like multicultural communication concepts or solutions to ambiguous problems. If constructed and carried out in a thoughtful way, AS-L helps students to understand abstract concepts and apply their learning in a real organization.

With AS-L, students learn to be creative and flexible. In organizations, projects often bring surprises, so students learn how to adapt to the needed changes. The following section details the successful design of an AS-L project for the business communication classroom.

Assigning an AS-L Project

One way to apply AS-L is to use an already required assignment. In a typical business communication class, students write memoranda, letters, proposals, and progress and final reports and make accompanying oral presentations. Following is a description of a successful AS-L project in which these typical assignments are modified, including the proposal (written and oral), the progress report (written and oral), and the final report (written and oral.) Students first form teams, look at past projects for ideas, and then contact area non-profit organizations. They discuss what kinds of projects the organization needs to have done. Once they agree, students must put their understanding in writing: the proposal.

Written Proposal

The proposal for this project is a simple letter addressed to the contact person from the non-profit organization. In the proposal, students must clearly delineate: the precise nature of the activity they plan to accomplish, team members' duties, timelines, and resources needed to accomplish their tasks. The instructor receives a copy, but the true audience is the non-profit organization.

The proposal serves several functions. It gives students real-world, hands-on experience writing a proposal. Not only is this a valid pedagogical exercise, it defines and limits their project. Since many of today's not-for-profit organizations suffer from a lack of volunteers, organizations may be tempted to ask students to increase their involvement. By writing a clear proposal, students may protect themselves by specifying their involvement. It clarifies exactly what they will do for the organization, as well as how and when it will be accomplished. The students' writing in the proposal reflects a higher-than-usual level of interest and care, since they will actually have to complete what the proposal states; it is not merely an exercise in imagination.

Oral Proposal

Students also give the class (not the organization) a brief oral presentation of the proposal, sharing their reasons for selecting the organization and their experience contacting various organizations as well as describing their tasks. They also ask the class for input in predicting

any unforeseen problems or in suggesting strategies to use in their project. The class often provides ideas and resources (such as technical help) to the presenters.

The oral presentation is informal and allows students to gain confidence in their oral presentation skills. A lively class discussion about the project usually follows; the students display attentive listening behaviors and ask pertinent questions following the presentations.

Both the written and oral portions of the proposal are graded. In fact, the written proposal must be graded before it can be sent to the target organization. It is wise for the professor to keep a photocopy of the proposal to retain the non-profit organization's contact name and also to measure student progress. The written and oral components of the proposal are completed very early in the semester, usually within the first three weeks of a fifteen-week semester or with the first three class periods of a seven-week semester.

Written Progress Report

About halfway through the term, students update their progress. The written progress report is submitted as a memo to the professor but is sent to the non-profit organization only if they require one. Usually the non-profit organization does not want an update.

The progress report expands upon the contents of the proposal with additional details and lists accomplishments. In the progress report, students remind the audience of the identity of their target organization (and its mission) as well as the scope of their tasks. They then inform what they have done thus far, what surprises they have encountered, what adaptations they have made (and a rationale for those changes), and they explain what tasks remain to be completed along with a revised timeline and a list of resources needed.

Oral Progress Report

The oral portion of the progress report is more formal than the proposal but less formal than the final report. Students are required to use visual aids and more than one group member must speak to the class. All group members are required to stand with the presenters to get them used to being in front of the class. Again, the class typically offers solutions as well as other kinds of feedback. Normally, the class listens attentively and asks pertinent questions.

Written Final Report

The final written report has two main parts: (1) a summary of the project, including documentation that students have completed their tasks; and (2) reflection on how the project ties into the class concepts. In part one, the documenting of their work enables students to feel proud of their accomplishments as they assemble their tangible output. The second part, the reflection on the project, presents different challenges for students. They have to write about feelings and impressions as well as identifying how the project relates to the application of business communication. They identify such topics as persuasion, audience analysis, communication complexity, and richness and then discuss how their participation in the project furthered their understanding of these concepts.

Oral Final Report

The oral portion of the final report is a formal presentation in which students discuss their entire project. They briefly revisit the project's beginning, discuss the process, and then display their final product. Since the product must be tangible, they have something to show the class. Invariably, the students display not only the progress they have made in practicing their oral communication skills, but they also display great pride in the product. All group members must speak for roughly an equal amount of time and all must use visual aids.

Selecting Non-profit Agencies

Some faculty choose to locate agencies themselves and to specify the students' projects; other faculty require students to locate the agency. Requiring students to locate and communicate with their own agencies has several benefits. Students are empowered; they learn to apply audience analysis, and they demonstrate full investment and ensuing enthusiasm in making their own selections. They often locate organizations near where they live or work, including organizations that deserve help but have had little previous publicity in the community. Naturally, empowering the students may also save the faculty member's time.

The non-traditional students (for example, those who are older than a typical university student, are married, have families and jobs) often provide contacts for organizations, such as working with a reli-

gious organization, their children's school, their workplace's pet non-profit organization, or even a non-profit group for whom they have already volunteered. They often have experience with non-profit organizations and can help the traditional students to appreciate the value of the tasks to the organization. Frequently, the projects AS-L students complete would not even be attempted by the understaffed non-profits. For example, a recent team completed a verbal and pictorial history of a local humane society; the humane society had wanted to give it to its major donors for six years but could not find the time to write it.

Students are required to put in at least two hours of volunteer time per person on the actual site of the agency so they have a true sense of the agency's mission. When students contact agencies, they ask the agency to identify needs; there is no diagnostic requirement for the students for this project. Examples of recently completed projects include working for two branches of the humane society (rewriting parts of their instructions to workers) and surveying university students and (based upon the survey) designing a brochure for the local public radio station (to gain more student listeners). The projects are completed in self-selected groups of two to four members.

The non-profit organization becomes the context in which students apply business communication principles. Their thinking goes beyond the textbook and classroom as soon as they become involved with the organization. They think more globally and they apply principles. When challenges arise, they seek a variety of resources for solutions including each other, the rest of the class, the organization, the business communication professor, and even other faculty. They stretch their thinking and perspectives.

Orienting Students to AS-L

The single most important variable for the success of this project is the approach the professor uses to present the idea to the students. In class, students are often suspicious of any kind of project whose scope is not quickly absorbed. The concept of the AS-L project is not immediately easy for them to understand. They rarely have questions in the first class; in subsequent classes, comments often indicate confusion. To enhance the project's chance to succeed, the professor must present it in a positive, well-organized manner. It is important to

clearly explain the benefits to everyone and to also stress the level of autonomy students have in this project. They often worry that the project will take too much time, but once students meet the minimum time requirement, they can then decide if they wish to contribute more time. They are protected by having written the proposal.

Reaping the Benefits of AS-L

In completing their AS-L projects for the business communication class, students create intriguing products for the non-profit agencies' use. For example, the students have created Websites, volunteer recruiting brochures, volunteer recruitment letters, funding solicitation letters for various audiences, follow-up letters to donors and to volunteers, thank you letters, database files for mailing newsletters, and informational brochures. They have revised operations manuals and written job descriptions, public service announcements, and short articles for newspapers. In all cases, the student groups have provided a tangible product that is of lasting value to the non-profit organization.

That product is a major benefit of this approach. Students, faculty, the university, the non-profit organizations, and the community all benefit.

Individual Students

While there may be initial resistance and puzzlement, the majority of students have enjoyed their AS-L experience. They have followed through on their assignments with more dedication than with typical projects. They seem to realize that not only do their team members depend on them, but so do some very needy people (the clients of the non-profit organizations) as well. They complete the AS-L assignment with much more time investment (although it is not required), energy, enthusiasm, and passion as compared to traditional assignments.

Students also gain hands-on organizational experience that is unique as compared to previous school and work projects. Even students who have previous experience with non-profit organizations gain a new perspective. Because of the nature of the assignment, they also enjoy the experience of working in successful teams.

The best advantage for students is that, in spite of initial resistance, they are able to connect the readings, class discussions, and other

assignments with the real world, full of real people, with real problems that students try to help solve. One semester in an evening class, students grouped themselves quite quickly. Two students were "leftovers" and decided by default to work together. Both worked more than 40 hours per week and were enrolled in more than one class. One student, especially, stated quite firmly that she did not have time for this project. When she was told it was mandatory, she was very resentful.

Along with her partner, she contacted an organization that she had heard of that had intrigued her in the past. It serves HIV positive and AIDS clients. For the project, she and her partner designed wonderful information sheets that explain differing nutritional needs for clients. In the final classroom presentation, this formerly resentful student told the whole class she intended to find the time to continue to volunteer for the organization after the semester ended; she also said the project was the best she had ever completed for any class. Her attitude toward the project and volunteerism changed completely once she worked with human beings and realized the value of the assignment to multiple audiences.

Class

In a recent class, a pair of students approached a nonprofit organization as part of their project. They asked for the office manager to see if they could display a poster for a fund-raiser for a different organization. They spoke with a receptionist, and when they asked to see the office manager, the receptionist told them they did not need to see a manager to accomplish what they wanted.

The students had reached a barrier. They needed an office manager's permission to display a poster, yet they could not talk to one. They shared their experience with the class, and at first the class was unsure how to help. Together, the class decided the barrier arose because the two students were dressed very casually and, because they are African-American students, the receptionist assumed they sought the services the agency provided and did not actually listen to their request to display a poster. An ensuing discussion led to the whole class having a better understanding of the barriers that dress and race may present. They identified barriers and discussed solutions (i.e., dressing more formally when contacting the agencies). Racial

prejudice suddenly had faces and names; the class seemed indignant that this should happen to their own classmates. Because real people were involved, the students will remember the content of this poignant class discussion for a long time.

Faculty

Evaluating written and oral reports, especially when students put forth minimal effort, may grow tiresome for faculty. Many universities are struggling to serve the needs of students who work enormous numbers of hours, take a large academic load, and try to meet family responsibilities as well. Mediocre projects may result from the multiple roles the students fill; all are demanding and important roles. Students may not be lethargic and lazy as much as they are battling role conflict.

The use of AS-L has enabled students to feel they are spending time wisely. They are not simply meeting the assignment for the class; they are genuinely accomplishing needed tasks while meeting class requirements. Many of the students include their families while working on their projects, or they find a project involving the family (such as working with a child's school). Other students receive recognition at work for spending extra time serving the community. Still others indicate that they have received positive feedback from job interviewers when they discuss the AS-L project.

The end of the semester in which AS-L is used brings an important improvement for the faculty member: the students are still tired, but they are extremely proud and enthusiastic about their final projects. There are no longer *any* mediocre final oral presentations. Students are able to show the tangible product they created, and they do so with great pride. It is a pleasure for the faculty member to evaluate the presentation plus appreciate the accomplishments of individuals and of the class together. The projects the students undertake are always sorely needed by the non-profit organizations and would not be accomplished without the students' efforts.

University

A recent newsletter from an animal shelter showed a picture of a student group that had written a summary of its 100-year history as their AS-L project. The students' names were listed, as was the instructor's

name. The university's name was prominently displayed for excellent public relations. As more faculty use AS-L and as time goes along, the university's image as a good community supporter can be enhanced.

Currently, our university has a small Office of Academic Service-Learning. Via grant money, they offer faculty resources for learning about and implementing AS-L. For example, there are seminars in which faculty discuss and explore AS-L. The office also has a small library for faculty use. They also alert faculty to calls for papers for conferences and journals.

Sponsoring Non-Profit Organizations

Today's non-profit organizations are often so short on volunteers that they have to reduce their services. Student projects provide volunteers with fresh ideas and enthusiasm. In addition, from the written proposal, the non-profit organizations have a clear idea what the students will do it and exactly when it will be accomplished.

Deciding to Use AS-L

There are many reasons to consider using Academic Service-Learning in the business communication classroom:

- engaging students in critical thinking and theory application
- applying writing, speaking, and other communication skills
- explaining a career in the non-profit sector
- making a difference in the community.

Engaging Students in Critical Thinking and Theory Application

Students are often only marginally *involved* in their learning. They are pressured by work, other classes, relationships, and other factors. Students are not willing or able to connect their class content with deep thinking and questioning. They may see classes as a means to an end: the degree. In the reflection part of the final AS-L report, students often write that they re-read parts of the text and even indicate that, following the AS-L project, they participated in class discussions with new eyes and ears. They quickly realize that the content of the business communication class is relevant to the business world as well as to the non-profit world.

Applying Communication Skills

Students realize that the concepts they study are not only useful in the classroom. When they write a real proposal that delineates their duties and limitations (and they have to abide by them), they put extra care and time into the project; the products are superior to proposals in non AS-L classes. The assignments are evaluated not only by the professor but they are read and questioned by an actual organization and sometimes by the organization's clients. Students use many important managerial and communication skills including planning, organizing, evaluating and selecting different channels, and evaluating communication climate.

Students plan their own time on the project and coordinate it not only with the other team members but with the target organization and its clients. Students organize the project from start to finish. They establish the project, narrow it down, predict the resources needed to complete it, create a timeline, and carry through the plans. Unlike most classroom projects, nearly all AS-L projects require a reassessment and involve changes in timelines, in meeting times, and sometimes in the whole focus of the project. Clearly, this more closely approximates today's workplace with its constant change as the norm.

Early in the semester, one-third or more of the class may report a concern with being able to locate and work with a non-profit organization. After the first few class periods, near the time when the proposal is due, students complain that some non-profits do not return repeated phone calls. This always affords an opportunity to discuss why phone calls may not be returned, for example: 1) the students' approach is self-centered instead of audience-centered; 2) non-profits are so understaffed they simply cannot return the call; 3) the telephone, while convenient for students, is low in communication richness, and an in-person visit will be much more likely to produce results. Students learn a long-lasting lesson about channel selection.

In addition, they learn about different communication climates at different non-profit organizations and compare them to profit organizations. Based on their own experience, they explore the effect of communication climate. They learn a deeper lesson about working with clients who are usually far less fortunate than average (for example, after serving hungry people at a soup kitchen, a student was sur-

prised to learn that clients did not act grateful; instead, she came to understand what it is like to be hungry and dependent).

Explaining a Career in the Non-profit Sector

Most business students want to secure a job that earns them a more than a minimum wage. They want to feel they are contributing to the organization, and they want to feel important. Students who have completed an AS-L project have indicated that working with the non-profit agency had opened their eyes to what is really important in life. They have often indicated that, while they will continue to seek a high-paying job (or a promotion in their present organization), they will also continue to find opportunities for community service and for their companies to serve the community. Several have indicated they may aim for a career in the non-profit sector, usually influenced by the AS-L project.

Making a Difference in the Community

Common sense and studies show that many non-profit agencies are desperate for volunteers. As more women enter the workplace and their jobs are higher-level ones, there are fewer women volunteers. Usually, people would like to volunteer, but have no time. They are busy climbing the corporate ladder, hanging on to their current positions, trying to manage organizational uncertainty and change, as well as family obligations. This all spells a need for volunteers. The volunteer projects for an AS-L class are usually welcomed with great enthusiasm by non-profit agencies. In one recent proposal, students indicated that the organization they selected was ecstatic about their involvement; a major fundraiser was just weeks away and several volunteer leaders had just quit. The students came along at an opportune time for the organization and for themselves. The non-profit knew that the students would complete the project they proposed, both because of the need, but also because it was a requirement for the class.

All AACSB schools care very much about helping students to realize the ethical responsibilities of today's business organizations. AS-L projects have served to help them realize in day-to-day terms how important it is to be a strong corporate and community citizen. Com-

panies not only receive excellent publicity about it; real human beings benefit in tangible and important ways.

Summary and Conclusion

AS-L is a method by which students learn and develop via active participation in thoughtfully organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated with the academic and local communities (Perkins, 1994). AS-L has demonstrated benefits to students, to universities and colleges, to the community, to the non-profit sector, and to the non-profit's clients.

Is it a panacea? Of course not. Do some students resist the idea? Certainly. Initial resistance can be managed with examples from past classes, examples of possible projects, and with previous students coming to class to discuss their experiences. A clear description of the project to reduce uncertainty will help allay fears about time commitments. It is wise for the professor to compensate some of the volunteer time with class time and by allowing group meeting time during several class periods and even by giving entire class periods to compensate the time. Students appreciate help in figuring out how to accomplish their goals without overly frequent meetings.

Students have learned that they can accomplish tasks and exchange information via fax, phone, e-mail, and postal mail, as well as in-person updates before and after class. They need not meet excessively outside of class. When they realize this, they often relax their worries. For the AS-L classes described in this article, students do not have to put in their required two hours of volunteer on-site time at the same time; they can do it whenever their schedules permit it. Sometimes spouses, significant others, children, and other family members accompany students on their volunteer tasks. At a recent final presentation given by students who created a Website for a surplus food-gathering organization, one student showed pictures of herself and her team members loading food to be transported to organizations that feed the hungry. She also identified her husband and children in the picture, and all seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Does AS-L have problems? Problems with AS-L projects sometimes emerge. Occasionally, it is difficult to lessen the students' initial negative reactions. Occasionally, students resent being required to work with non-profits, stating that they would have liked to volunteer

when they choose it instead of it being a requirement. Any resentment rarely lasts through the end of the semester. The potential problems with group projects may emerge: differing levels of commitment to the project, one or two individuals carrying the whole group, the group failing to accomplish what they agree to do, and so forth. However, because the stakes are higher (clients and non-profits depend on the completion of the task), fewer students demonstrate social loafing. In one semester, two students completed the AS-L project even though they had to drop the class! They wanted to see its completion. Is AS-L worth any hassles it may bring? Resoundingly, yes.

The AS-L project, as described for business communication classes, is not an additional project, but is a modification of an existing project. It does not require more work, but it does require different work. Little time (if any) is spent in the library researching the project. Instead, time is spent interviewing non-profit workers and clients. It is spent differently than in a traditional research project. The teams display synergy, unlike a traditional group project that may elicit groans in the classroom and where students divide the tasks and then compile the results. They actually work together, and the results have been exciting and rewarding for all. One recent MBA graduate student stated, "This class was my last class before graduating; I have done many group projects, but this one is one I will always remember. I learned more in this project than in many of the others combined. Thanks for making us do it."

Author's note:
   If you are interested in further information, I will be happy to send you a copy of my syllabus, other AS-L materials, and a list of Websites and listservs.

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Address correspondence to the author, Department of Management, 466 Owen Building, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti MI 48197 (e-mail: Jean.Bush-Bacelis@emich.edu).