

PROMOTING SERVICE LEARNING VIA ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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Service learning and online instruction are both important and much debated topics in higher education. Many professors and colleges are attempting to use service learning and online instruction as effective learning tools for their student clientele. Both topics are being written about extensively in professional journals, as educators grapple with how to implement these two effective means of learning into class content. The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss service learning and online instruction in a symbiotic educational relationship. The authors discuss the efficacy and benefits of service learning and online instruction, and suggest ways to incorporate these techniques into the classroom. A case example is presented to illustrate the application of these two techniques as they are combined to produce an effective online course that provides students with a hands-on learning experience.

Online instruction is the latest in a number of technological initiatives reflecting the trend toward increased use of distance education (St. Pierre, 1998). Online instruction ranges from course supplemental models such as integrating electronic mail (e-mail) exercises or bulletin board conferences all the way to the virtual classroom, where the course is entirely online (Cyr, 1997). The advent of this type of instruction has evoked considerable scholarly debate regarding the effectiveness of Internet-based instruction as a learning tool.

Nationally, many academic programs are offering a growing number and range of courses via distance education. Online

courses are currently being offered by the following entities: Motorola University, National Technological University, Jones International, Penn State's World Campus, Western Governor's University, and the University of Phoenix (Boettcher, 1999). Of course, numerous colleges offer an varying array of online courses. Emporia State University even offers its entire Masters degree in physical education program online. While offering online courses is not a new idea, it is still quite fresh and in its infancy of development, especially involving physical education classes.

According to Johnson (1995), service learning is "a process of integrating volunteer community service combined with

active guided reflection into the curriculum to enhance and enrich student learning of course material" (p.1). In other words, students are guided through a volunteer experience that allows them to observe, practice and/or deliver skills and services that are taught in a classroom. The experience assists the students in making the transition from theoretical understanding to practical application of course concepts. Conversely, service learning presents students the opportunity to first learn by doing, and then develop a critical understanding of course content through classroom discussions.

The benefits of service learning are multi-faceted. A well-designed service learning component of a course can benefit the students, participating agencies, and class instructor (Jackowski & Gullion, 1998). Students benefit primarily through the opportunity to practice newly learned skills in a functional environment (Johnson, 1995). Secondary benefits for students may be of greater importance and include improved social interaction skills, enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills, increased awareness of career choices, enhanced awareness of the real world, opportunities for growth through interaction with people from diverse cultures, and additional opportunities to "pad" a resume with necessary applicable work experiences so desired by employers (Johnson, 1995; Mattson & Shea, 1997; Sutton, 1989).

The advantages to the community and participating agencies are equally important. Community agencies collaborating with universities in service learning projects often receive free support and

consultation from the universities, as faculty members strive to develop the best learning environment for their students (Johnson, 1995). Agencies that employ a service learning program can also use their contact with students to promote future recruitment efforts. In many disciplines where openings exceed applicants, attempts to recruit new employees can be competitive. Agencies participating in service learning projects may have an advantage over agencies without prior contact with students. Finally, on the surface it may appear as if the agencies will have access to free help. However, agencies should be reminded that, while service learning can provide increased person power, the nature of service learning demands that students are nurtured through the experience, a somewhat time consuming procedure.

Experienced faculty are aware of the benefits of service learning for the course instructor as well as the university. These faculty members recognize that new approaches to service delivery often originate in the field, as opposed to the university lab or classroom (Johnson, 1995). Instructors who coordinate with agencies to provide service learning will often have an opportunity to learn these new service techniques before they reach the textbooks. This infusion of new information helps to keep the instructor up-to-date with innovative programming, resulting in an improved professional preparation program. Service learning also provides the university a forum for creating a positive public image by fulfilling a sense of moral obligation to the community (Jackowski & Gullion, 1998).

Selecting the Appropriate Class

Though many college courses can benefit from service learning, instructors may want to carefully match the service learning experience with the intent of the course and the students' current levels of competency. Introductory courses and courses that present theoretical models can employ service learning experiences that allow students to observe the profession in action. Observations allow students to make the connection between theory (classroom information) and practice (service learning experience) without subjecting the students to the anxiety-producing experience of actually performing. The performance-based service learning experiences can be reserved for the more advanced classes that build on students' theoretical base of knowledge. As students take senior level courses that teach specific skills, service learning experiences can be selected and designed to allow students to practice and develop these skills.

Designing the Service Learning Experience

The success of the service learning experience may rest on the preparation by and collaboration of the course instructor (and maybe the entire department) and the participating agency. Both the agency and the instructor should have pre-determined expectations of each other, as well as pre-determined objectives for evaluating student growth. One of the more functional tools may be a two-part series of contracts and agreements. The first contract is an agreement between the agency and the instructor (or instructor's department). In this agreement, specific responsibilities of each party are spelled

out. For example, agreements could address the minimum and maximum number of students allowable/expected, the background knowledge and experiences expected of students as they enter the learning experience, and the specific service learning activities that students will perform (e.g., observing, leading, coordinating, administering). Specific responsibilities of the instructor and the agency supervisor can also be spelled out, like the procedures for referring, accepting, and evaluating students, and the amount of time the course instructor will be on-site to observe. These pre-determined agreements can prolong a happy relationship between agencies and universities.

A second contract between the agency and the student can spell out the pre-determined expectations of each party. This agreement becomes especially helpful in the event that students performance and/or behavior becomes counterproductive to agencies mission. We have found it helpful to require students to "apply" for a service learning position. This component of the service learning experience not only requires students to practice the skills necessary for acquiring a position (i.e., writing a letter of application, presenting a resume, and interviewing), but also allows agencies to elect not to accept students who present themselves poorly, lack motivation or the prerequisite skills, or have schedules that do not meet the needs of the agency. Additional performance criteria that can be addressed in the contract includes dress codes, attendance requirements, specific job responsibilities, methods of evaluations, and agency procedures.

Applying Service Learning to Online Instruction

Can Service learning become a functional component of an online course? Actually, it is likely easier to administer than most people perceive. In fact, it is our belief that this may be the best and most practical avenue for such an assignment. The characteristics of both entities lends themselves to benefiting from such a combination. A description of online learning is needed to understand the hardness of online learning for housing service learning.

While delivering course content online may currently be extraordinary, it seems that delivering course content in this fashion is well on its way to becoming commonplace (Carter, 1999). Some have even struggled with the concept of the traditional university being displaced by these types of institutions. While complete upheaval of the traditional university is unlikely to happen, there is little doubt that more and more college classes will be placed online in the future, and we are fast approaching the point when it will be the norm to have several courses online at universities throughout the nation. In fact, our university is a case example as at least 50 courses were offered online as of the Fall of 1999. With this rapid advent of offering online instruction at our institution, the primary author of this paper decided to take the plunge into online instruction.

There were many reasons for the eventual decision to design and develop an online course. First, there was increased exposure to and recognition of online courses being offered in other departmental units across campus. In fact, within the

first year of introducing online courses, our university enjoyed an increase from one to over 50 classes being offered on the Internet. Incentives, both financially and politically, were offered to faculty members willing to design and develop online courses. In an attempt to increase the number of classes offered online, the university established an administrative unit and staff to train and assist faculty in the design and development of online courses. This arrangement made the leap into distance learning much easier as this unit provided the necessary encouragement and support.

Once one is convinced that placing a course online is both something that they want to do, and feel that there is support on-campus, several additional issues surrounding this medium of learning must be explored. A major question that must be answered is, "which course is a fit for this type of instruction?" Frankly, we feel this is one question that must be answered before one can begin to design or develop any online course. It is also our opinion that some courses are much more adaptable for online instruction than others, and some courses do much better in the traditional setting. The course of choice was the Introduction to Sport Management. While the description of the course choice is not really relevant, the rationale behind the decision is quite important. This rationale is best explained by detailing the description of the class. The Introduction to Sport Management provides an excellent case study for the adaptability of a college course to online instruction, and individual instructors can generalize their own courses accordingly.

Course Description

This course is designed to expose incoming freshman and/or transfer students to the field of sport management. More important, it was assessed that the content of the course made it quite appropriate for placement online. This course is designed to provide an overview of the history, foundation, and career opportunities in the sport industry. Focus is on the development of job placement skills, career research, resume building, practicum/internship preparation, and increasing knowledge concerning the various aspects of the sport management. Students are, in effect, introduced to the field of sport management through this course.

The learning objectives of the course were for the students to: 1) gain an understanding of the role of the sports manager in a variety of career tracks within the sport industry, 2) learn how to write a basic letter of application for practicum/internships with sport management entities, 3) know how to develop and create a high quality resume, 4) learn research methods and techniques about job opportunities in sport management, 5) gain an appreciation of the history and evolution of sport management and the history of sport management academic programs, and 6) learn the importance of professional development and membership in regional, national, and international sport management organizations. In summary, the course was quite adaptable to online instruction, a trait that must be considered and emphasized.

Prior to the design and development of an online course, one must resolve sever-

al issues surrounding this medium of learning. Each of these issues requires some intense introspection. For example, the pedagogical issues related to Internet-based course design and instruction; logistical issues often present in the design and development of online courses (i.e., funding, resources, and administrative and collegial support); ways to maintain the integrity of the curriculum while moving forward with advancing technology; and methods to measure the comparability of learning via the traditional classroom and the virtual classroom are some of the issues that have to be settled.

Another issue that has to be addressed involves the assignments and activities for the students. Much of the outside work assigned to students in the class, as it turned out, was similar to traditional assignments in that the students were asked to complete homework. However, one of the homework assignments, like the design and development of the course itself, was new for the primary author. This assignment was to require the students to complete a service learning project.

Service Learning Component

Service learning is not the typical homework assignment, as homework is traditionally designed for the educational benefit of the student. It can be argued that service learning not only benefits the student, but also the community and faculty involved.

While there are numerous benefits to this type of learning, several issues must be dealt with before jumping into the service learning game. First, which class experience would service learning be most

adept? In this particular case, the Introduction to Sport Management was a good choice to implement a service learning component, like it was for online instruction, since most of the content introduces students to the discipline of sport management. We can think of no better way to introduce students to a particular discipline than having them volunteer for service learning opportunities in an area of the field.

Applying service learning to any course requires some adjustment. However, it was fairly simple in this particular case. We wanted the students to see the inner world of the profession by volunteering for jobs in the field. The goal of the assignment was to provide the students with a real world understanding of the sport management field that could only come from experience. Our desire was to provide the students with a warm up to their practicum experience which takes place later in their academic careers.

Since this was a maiden voyage for both the instructor and students, only 5 hours of service learning were required for each student. The students were required to select from several opportunities that the instructor had garnered from local and regional constituents. These constituents were recreation directors, athletic directors, university officials, and area schools. In a couple of instances, students wanted to provide service in their hometown and this request was granted.

The students were required to sign up for the hours with a contact person whom the instructor identified on the first day of classes. Obviously, the instructor made preemptive inquiries into the type of work

experience the individual constituents could provide, a contract was developed and agreed upon. Once the service was provided the instructor contacted the constituent, either electronically or by phone, to check on the work effort of the students. A paper was also required of the students describing their service learning experience, and the progress they made toward their predetermined experiential objectives. Of course, this paper, and almost all of the correspondence took place online.

The purpose of this paper was not to describe the experiences of our students. Rather, it was our intent to suggest that online instruction and service learning cannot only co-exist as teaching methods, but may actually combine to form a symbiotic relationship that strengthens a course to an exponential degree. Online instruction may be the wave of the future. It will expand the opportunity for continued education to well beyond the traditional classroom student. This convenience will make it possible for many individuals, who for one reason or another are unable to break from their lifestyle routines, to "attend" class. The perceived weakness of online instruction includes the lack of opportunity to practice and demonstrate knowledge and skills, lack of opportunities to process these practical experiences with course instructors, and access to evaluate feedback as course material is transferred to practical application.

These perceived weaknesses may actually become course strengths when online instruction is combined with service learning. Service learning provides students the opportunity to practice newly learned skills in a functional environment. Online

instruction offers opportunities for nearly immediate feedback which allows for effective processing of the experience. Finally, written pre-agreements allow the course instructor to control the content of the practical experience regardless of the distance, and pre-determine, with input from current practitioner, the level of skills to be learned.

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