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Community Service Learning Increases Communication Skills Across the Business Curriculum

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Community service learning offers a unique and rewarding way for business students to reinforce communication capabilities while developing lifelong career and social skills. This article defines community service learning, discusses its importance to business as well as higher education, and describes three community service learning projects. Students in these projects taught elementary students, designed a computer system for a community nonprofit, and developed accounting systems for university divisions. In doing so, they enhanced their understanding of classroom theories and communication skills through service-learning.

Key words: Community service, volunteerism, experiential learning, project-based assignments, communication across the curriculum.

“DO, DO, DO” is the method that John Dewey advocated as the most successful for learning (Dewey, 1938). Communication professors are not strangers to this concept—we know that the best way for our students to learn writing and speaking skills is through practice. Unfortunately, within the timespan of one brief semester, we are pressed to present all the material that students will need in their careers and hope that students acquire critical skills from a few assignments that provide practice for key writing and speaking skills.

How can communication skills be continually practiced so that our business students are well-qualified communicators as they graduate and enter their different professions? One technique is a communication across the curriculum (CAC) program that commits the entire

college faculty to continued reinforcement of the written and oral skills that are introduced in the business communication class. An effective method for implementing a CAC program is the utilization of community service learning projects throughout the business program.

This article defines community service learning, discusses its benefits for business as well as for students, and details the implementation of community service learning for theory enhancement as well as for the refinement of communication skills. Three college of business community service learning projects are detailed with insights into how students' communication skills benefit from this type of experiential learning.

Community Service Learning Defined

Community service learning takes the form of community service projects integrated into a course as a required component. Community service projects involve having students perform a service for a nonprofit organization. In communities with few nonprofit organizations, students can work with university divisions, such as disability services or student services. Community service learning projects are developed in a variety of ways: Some are determined by the organization, some by the professor with the input of the organization, and some by the student—working with the professor and/or organization. A critical element of a community service learning project is the expectation on the part of the professor that the students actively reflect on their learning of course content in light of the service experience. It is a particular form of experiential education, one that emphasizes for students the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth (Luce, 1988, p. 1)

The organization benefits from the students' work and the students benefit by applying what they are learning in class. For example, in an entrepreneurship or strategy class, students can develop business plans for projects to benefit low-income communities (Collins, 1996). Indeed, community service learning is becoming increasingly popular in business schools because of the many benefits these projects provide to both business (Wild, 1993) and students (Berson, 1994).

Benefits of Community Service Learning

Community service learning brings benefits to both business and students. Large and small organizations are becoming more involved in their communities (Spragins, 1993). Interest in social involvement leads organizations to value applicants who have similar interests and experience.

Benefits to Business

Incorporating community service learning into the business classroom reflects the increasing importance of community service to businesses (McCarthy & Tucker, 1997). Volunteerism is viewed by many managers as an avenue to enhance corporate social responsibility while building employee skills (Caudron, 1994). Such firms as Hewlett Packard, Ben & Jerry's, The Body Shop, and General Electric are incorporating community service into corporate strategy and culture. Volunteer programs supplement human resource initiatives by attracting and retaining good employees (Wild, 1993), building morale (Lewin, 1991), and developing team skills (Caudron, 1994).

Community service can also engender corporate citizenship and social responsibility. Kanungo and Conger (1993) suggest that altruistic behaviors are motivated by a disposition to help others. The first step is to create an awareness of the importance of altruistic behaviors either through mission statements or through role modeling by top management. Employees can be assigned specific responsibilities for helping others both within and outside the organization as is the case for employees of The Body Shop who are given time off with pay to work on community or environmental service projects.

By using service-learning projects, the professor imitates innovative business practices by promoting altruistic behaviors within the context of course activities. The more students are prepared for and know about business practices, the greater their competitive advantage will be in the workplace.

A Competitive Advantage for Students

Business schools are increasingly being asked to provide students with diverse experiences outside the classroom. Community service learning provides students with more than is accomplished by internships and routine class projects—it instills in students a profound

understanding of community responsibility as well as provides a medium for reinforcing skills learned in the classroom.

Participating in a community service learning project benefits students in multiple ways by:

- enriching students' skill base. They benefit from learning the same skills that corporate volunteers are learning (Berson, 1994; Wild, 1993).
- reinforcing classroom content, which improves student learning (Boss, 1994; Markus, Howard & King, 1993).
- expanding students' attention to the world beyond school. Students develop new contacts and experiences by working with different types of stakeholders.
- putting students in touch with the needs of the community. They come away from the experience with a better understanding of social needs and how one person can make a difference (Boss, 1994).
- giving students a competitive advantage in the interview process over other interviewees with no community service background. These students have service experience that most organizations are likely to value.
- providing students with the opportunity to participate in the university's outreach mission.

Finally, it is a unique learning opportunity that offers a service to the community and, at the same time, increases students' leadership, human relations, time management, and presentation skills. As faculty, our goal is to school students in business practices that provide them with a competitive advantage. This can be reinforced by communication across the curriculum programs that integrate community service learning.

Communicating Across the Curriculum Through Integration of Community Service Learning

Examples of how community service learning can be integrated across the college business curriculum will demonstrate how communication benefits are derived. This section details learning initiatives across three departments—management, computer information systems, and accounting. Although each of these programs was uniquely structured, they all utilized communication skills.

Partnering Among Public Schools, Junior Achievement, and Management Classes

In spring 1997, three management classes with a combined enrollment of 105 students participated in a community service project that partnered the college of business, Junior Achievement (JA), and the local school district. In teams of two or three, students delivered five, one-hour modules to over 400 kindergarten through sixth grade students in 20 classrooms.

JA program directors provided one class period of training as well as a briefcase of materials for each student team. Student teams were responsible for contacting the elementary teacher and scheduling a visit to meet the teacher—to discuss the teacher's goals and to observe the class. In total, students spent approximately 15 hours outside of class in preparing and delivering these modules.

In addition to preparing and teaching economic lessons, students increased communications skills by videotaping one presentation, composing a news release, writing a reflection paper, and sending a thank-you letter to their assigned elementary teacher.

When writing the reflection paper, students were encouraged to be honest and were assured that they would not be judged on their opinions. The majority of students noted initial apprehension at participating in this project, but ended the semester with a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. They also learned in a meaningful way that communicating intergenerationally requires finesse:

I was originally very apprehensive about this project because I had never had very much exposure to small children . . . it was inspirational to see these kids and how smart they are.

In the beginning, my CSL experience was approximately 50 percent fun and 50 percent sheer terror! By the end I was more confident in my ability to communicate with the students in a way that was not condescending nor childish.

Participation in this community project also increased students' confidence in a setting that could not have been reproduced in a university classroom. Further, they reported an increased mastery of communication and other managerial skills:

The skills learned through this experience are nearly impossible to teach in the classroom. They could be useful for a career in sales, management, or training.

I learned that each presentation I give gets a little easier than the one before.

I learned time management as well as valuable communication skills.

Most students summarized their experience in overwhelmingly positive terms and saw it as an integrative project requiring utilization of a wide variety of skills. This experience caused them to grow in ways not possible in standard classroom settings:

The benefits to integrating service and academic learning were evident. It takes students out of the traditional classroom setting into a setting that deals with people outside their major. It helps students relearn and apply what they have been taught in the classroom. It allows students to network with people whom they may have never met otherwise.

This program gave me a different perspective about community service. I thought community service consisted of helping people who could not help themselves or of cleaning up the environment. I did not include sharing knowledge with children as part of a community service project. I have had success working with children before, but this experience gave me a different perception of myself. I felt like the students looked up to me and it made me feel respected. This project [required] presenting a particular topic to a group of young people—this will be helpful in my career. A benefit of integrating community service and academic learning is putting useful skills to practice to help others as well as yourself.

Several students attended job interviews while engaged in this project and reported that interviewers showed a special interest in their community service learning experience. One graduate student was offered a job outside his concentration area when the company discovered that he was a Junior Achievement participant. The hiring company was a strong supporter of JA and believed that it was more important that he fit into their culture than have needed technical skills because they could train him in the knowledge needed for the position.

This community service learning project is one example of how students can broaden their communication skills while providing a necessary service for a school district in partnership with another nonprofit organization—in this case, Junior Achievement. However, service-learning projects can take many different forms resulting in communication benefits. The next project details how a computer information systems class worked on solving one particular problem for a nonprofit organization while improving communication and interaction skills.

Partnering Between Nonprofit Organizations and Computer Information System Classes

Two computer information systems classes with approximately 120 students applied their computer skills within a service context. Many publicly funded agencies either totally lack computer-based information systems or use inadequately designed software on outdated hardware. Therefore, there exists a real need to develop and/or improve their information management. However, most publicly funded agencies cannot afford the consultation required to develop these systems.

At the same time, there is extremely high demand for skilled and experienced computer systems analysts and database developers who have good written and oral communication skills. Yet, most computer information systems undergraduate students do not have a significant amount of experience when they enter the job market. While class projects and internships help supplement the undergraduate academic experience, students are not exposed to enough situations where they can practice and refine their computer information systems analysis, design, implementation, and communication skills under real-life conditions. Further, it is important that the students leave the classroom with a firm grasp and appreciation of the complexities and dynamics of database management and application development. A community service learning project offers the perfect opportunity to address all these learning needs.

For this project, several nonprofit agencies needing a computer-based information system were identified and interviewed by the class. The class selected the Education and Life Training Center (ELTC), whose mission is to help low-income, disenfranchised, and culturally diverse populations improve their educational, social, and economic skills. The ELTC program seeks to help its clients achieve economic self-sufficiency through improved job skills, employment, or enrollment in post-secondary education. ELTC tracks information on several programs, as well as hundreds of participants and volunteers. Thus, it had a need for computer-based information systems in three distinct areas:

- Students, classes, and teachers
- Volunteers and the time they spend on projects
- Back-to-school supply distribution for low-income families

The students were divided into competitive teams to design and implement solutions to these applications. The groups dealt with all aspects of systems integration including the acquisition and installation of hardware. The project consisted of the following stages:

- Definition of the problem
- Analysis of the user requirements
- Design of a prototype
- Acquisition of hardware and software
- Implementation of the design
- Development of the system including menus, screens, and reports
- Testing of the system using test data provided by ELTC
- Development of system documentation and training materials
- Installation of the system and training

Classroom instruction included a combination of traditional lecture, work product review, and demonstrations. The students learned about relational database theory, specific system features, application design, and team product reviews. In addition to improving their computer system skills, students increased communications skills by:

- listening carefully to client needs
- negotiating with classmates in determining which organization to serve
- developing documentation and training materials
- presenting a technical solution in a language that the non-technical clients could understand

ELTC management was involved during the entire process and helped review the projects during classroom presentations toward the end of the semester. The best overall project was selected for implementation, and the winning student team assisted in its implementation, application refinement, training, and support.

This effort emphasizes the value of service integration to all parties involved. The students appreciated the opportunity to gain real experience and improve their communication skills on a real project. Students evaluated this service-learning project with a score of 4.5 out of 5.0 in terms of its contribution to overall course curriculum and content.

The third service-learning implementation took the form of many different projects in undergraduate accounting classes.

Partnering Between Local Businesses, Nonprofit Organizations, University Administration and Accounting Information Systems Classes

Approximately 150 accounting information systems students performed a variety of service-learning projects within the community and the university. The majority of the projects documented and analyzed a set of operational procedures (purchasing, accounts payable, payroll, and the like) for the participating organizations. The partnering organizations had either never documented those procedures or had recently undergone an operational change and, therefore, needed new system documentation and analysis.

Some projects involved sending all student teams to one large organization, where each team was assigned to work in a different department or to work on a set of operational procedures. This structure created interesting classroom discussions that illustrated how different departments within an organization work together and demonstrated the interconnectedness of an entire system. Students learned how a small change in one department's procedures may dramatically impact another department's performance and how the changes needed to be communicated to the other departments if the organization were to adapt and function effectively.

Other projects involved sending each student team to different organizations, with all teams working on the same operational procedures, e.g., payroll. This structure created rich classroom discussions concerning the different ways that the same operational procedures may be organized and performed. The students left the course with examples of a variety of effective options for a particular operation.

All projects consisted of several stages: making the initial contact, creating a procedural manual, drafting a flowchart, assessing internal control procedures, and presenting findings. Classroom instruction was tailored to each stage. In the first stage, the students role-played telephone calls and initial meetings to practice explaining their purpose, process, goals and time frame in a professional manner. Next, the students were trained in interview and observation skills in order to document the assigned procedures in manuals. Rough drafts of their procedure manuals were reviewed by other student teams and the professor prior to the presentation of the manual to the organization, which had the opportunity to request further edits before signing an acceptance form.

In the flowcharting stage, students were trained in the flowcharting software, both in terms of content and presentation. The flowcharts were edited by the other teams and the professor, and a flowchart completion form was signed by the professor when the flowchart appeared to be correct, complete, and professionally presented. Next the students analyzed the internal control of the documented procedures for asset security, operational effectiveness and efficiency, and financial record completeness and accuracy. Classroom instruction and discussions refined their analyses, and formal reports were written for the organization. These reports were also reviewed by their classmates and the professor for suggestions. In the final stage, students presented their findings and recommendations to the organization's management team.

In addition to reinforcing their accounting knowledge and problem-solving skills, students increased their communications skills by:

- building team cohesion
- developing interview and meeting management skills
- writing a technical report
- presenting findings of research

The community service projects benefited all of the parties involved. The students' communication skills were strengthened on a variety of dimensions and their accounting systems textbook knowledge was enhanced. The partnering organizations received documentation and input valuable to their operations. Moreover, many of the students were subsequently hired by their organizations, either on a part-time or full-time basis, as a direct result of the community service projects.

Conclusion

From these different class activities, it is easy to see how communication skills can be enhanced across the business curriculum through implementation of various forms of community service learning. All of these different projects have similar characteristics:

- Communicating with diverse populations occurs when students work with constituencies outside of the university who may be younger, older, or not from the same background. This interaction provides students with the opportunity to put theories of intercultural communication into practice.

- Producing a written report reinforces the basic research paper required in the business communication class and allows students to receive additional feedback for increasing professional writing standards. Presenting professionally draws on academic content and allows students to enhance the presentation skills they were taught in the business communication class. Feedback on both assignments is heightened when it comes from peers, professional managers, and the professor.
- Building team cohesion is an increasingly important skill needed in business that is simulated many times in the classroom. The added benefit of community service learning is that it brings the students into the workplace where they must team with professionals from different organizations and backgrounds to achieve a goal.
- Increasing networking skills has long been touted as an important, yet subtle, skill that is difficult to teach. Students learn the importance of networking by dealing with team and community members. Further, they begin to build their own networks with the contacts they make through these projects.

While all of the above benefits are worthy in and of themselves, perhaps the best benefit is the skill we don't necessarily see. As Dewey reminds us,

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (1900, p. 44)

Note

Community service learning projects are versatile tools that are unique because they can be adjusted to fit the needs of each classroom. Projects can be generated by professors, students, universities, or organizations. Time requirements may vary. Each of our projects required approximately 15 hours of service outside the classroom. Evaluations generally involve input from the outside agency, student reflection papers, and peer evaluations. For more information on developing a campus community service learning office, contact the Corporation for National Service, Learn and Serve America: Higher Education, 1201 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20525, (202) 606-5000 Ext. 117.

For a list of universities which maintain service-integrated courses within their business programs, contact Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service, Brown University, Providence RI 02912.

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