Accepting the Challenge: A Case Study in Pedagogical Inquiry

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Higher education has been criticized for not fulfilling its democratic purpose—that is, to prepare students for citizenship, not just careers. Longo and Gibson (2016) argue that "as access to higher education has increased, many colleges and universities ironically have become more detached from their public missions," leading to the increasing separation between learning and social purpose (p. 61). Many schools and departments have already begun the hard work of reevaluation and critical reflection in response to such criticism and are helping to reinvent American higher education (Hartley & Hollander, 2005). Three such examples are communication programs featured as case studies by AAC&U in *Civic Learning in the Major by Design* because they have incorporated civic and social responsibility requirements into their major (Carey, 2017).

A number of mechanisms have been implemented by schools and professors toward the effort of reclaiming their democratic purpose, including service-learning and other models of community-engaged learning where community partnerships, built on mutual benefit and reciprocity, are central to achieving learning objectives. The pedagogy of service-learning is well established in some fields, but a qualitative analysis of scholarship published in three of the major peer reviewed scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) journals "uncovered a meager body of literature on service learning embedded in SoTL projects" (Bowen, 2010, p. 4). Through a qualitative content analysis, Bowen identified four underlying themes that speak to the nature, experiences, and outcomes of service learning based SoTL projects: real-world application, collaboration and interaction, meaning making through reflection, and enhancement of course content (2010, p. 5).

These themes are consistent with my use of the service-learning pedagogy in the specific case of my Group Communication course. As evidence that service-learning is a sound pedagogical practice in the case of a Group Communication course, Minei argues that "by bridging the gap between theoretical concepts articulated during lecture and real world application of those concepts in practice, students can focus their skills through the lens of social awareness" (Minei, 2016, p. 74). Furthermore, in their meta-analysis of nine studies comparing courses with a service-learning component to those without, Novak, Markey and Allen found that "the addition of a service learning component increases learning outcomes" by 53% (Novak, Markey and Allen, 2007, p. 149).

Thanks to a SoTL grant from my institution, I performed an evaluation of my service-learning practice. With the goal of better understanding the service-learning experience from the students' perspective so as to determine whether learning objectives where being achieved, I analyzed two semesters of data, including students' reflective journal entries, as well as their comments in course evaluations.

Documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques in order to identify patterns, themes and anomalies by coding the samples based on technical and stylistic elements of the text, including both manifest and latent content. The goal of the study was to better understand events and experiences, as described and reported by students in the context of this specific implementation of service-learning, and to use those findings to improve my own service-learning practice, as well as to establish a case study in

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the application of the practice that may help to inform the broader SoTL literature on the service-learning pedagogy.

Reflection is a hallmark of service-learning and is widely believed to be the necessary link that places equal emphasis on the service and the learning, thus helping to foster social awareness, and develop connections between course content and experience (Sigmon, 1994). As is considered best practice in service-learning, I integrate the service and the learning through various forms of reflection, including the use of guided journals to stimulate critical reflection, for which students are asked to answer a specific prompt rather than an open-ended, diary-style journal. The quality of the written reflection is assessed and used as a measure of student learning, both in terms of their ability to apply the concepts, as well as make references to the course readings to explain their own experiences and observations. This type of assignment also makes it possible to look for evidence of impact on students' personal and social development (Simons and Cleary, 2010). James Bradley's (1995) three levels of critical reflection provided a useful framework through which to assess the complexity and depth of the students' reflective writing. Bradley characterizes reflection as either surface, emerging or deep, and offers criteria on which to judge the level of reflection a student has reached (Jacoby, 2015, p. 41). This framework is also useful as a tool for providing students feedback on their assignments providing the basis for a rubric and an assessment strategy for grading reflection assignments. The analysis of student writing and comments yielded useful results, affirming that, in general, most students experienced both conceptual and personal outcomes consistent with the learning objectives outlined in the syllabus. However, it also revealed areas for potential improvement in the implementation of the service-learning pedagogy. These findings validate Bowen's contention that "how SoTL practitioners study their own service learning practice and analyze attendant outcomes can yield valuable insight and provide guidelines for future pedagogical inquiry" (2010, p. 3).

Despite the fact that the "very structure and culture of the system of higher education are often as cross-purposes with civic engagement," the movement to reclaim higher education's civic purpose has gained momentum (Hartley & Hollander, 2005, p. 252). The movement calls for administrators and faculty to re-evaluate both institutional, programmatic, and course learning outcomes. Communication programs and faculty are particularly well situated to answer AAC&U's challenge to "harness the power of [our] discipline for public purposes and democratic ends of justice, equity, and social responsibility" (Carey, 2017). However, being successful in this work requires that the faculty and departments who take up this challenge receive support from provosts, deans and department chairs, as doing so will challenge the well-established norms and traditions of higher education. Moreover, faculty who are doing this work already should be encouraged and incentivized to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practices in order to help establish best practices and standards by which efforts to encourage civic and community engagement can be effectively evaluated and implemented across disciplines and higher education.

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