A service learning student-community project

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Abstract

A collaborative project is described. In this project, students in a web design class were asked to contact local non-profit organizations and create websites (collections of web pages) to benefit these non-profits. Two phases of the project, planning and implementation, are described. The project, suitable for both online and face-to-face instruction, required that students keep a journal. The instructor did a follow-up investigation to assure that the websites that students created were indeed what the non-profit asked for.

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1. Introduction

Many non-profit organizations lack the knowledge and resources to create a website that could effectively attract the public. Web developers can be found and can certainly help, but at a price.

In my introductory web page design class students learn early in the semester that the overall process of developing a website is more than creating the web pages. Before they are assigned the project, they have already been through about two thirds of the course and they have learned that a useful website is attainable only after the planning phase has successfully been completed. The planning phase consists of defining the website’s purpose and its target audience.

The steps that a student had to go through to complete the project included: create a list of local non-profits to contact and ways to contact them; identify one local non-profit that is interested and willing to work with the student; collect all needed data (logos, images, etc.); sketch the navigation structure; determine the content and links for each page; sketch the page layout for each page; and finally create the website with its web pages. Besides these steps, each student had to keep a journal and after the website was created the instructor had to make sure that it was what the non-profit really wanted.

The importance of training our students properly in web design is of outmost importance. The overall process of developing a website is not just creating the web pages and linking them together. Good planning includes sketching the navigation structure of the website and determining the content and navigation of each web page. In addition, keeping a journal of meetings with the non-profit and interactions is equally important.

2. Steps in developing a website

In my Web Design class, I spend about three thirds of a semester covering the basics of Adobe Dreamweaver with a brief introduction to HTML. A major topic during the first two thirds of the semester is website development with the emphasis being on defining the purpose and target audience. This is the first step in the planning of a website. If one does not know why this website is needed or what the intent (purpose) for the website is then the website will not be successful to accomplish anything of value. Just as important, if no thought is put into who will look at the website (audience), it will not be of interest to the ones who need the information. A simple example is that if one is to create a website to attract potential customers for a restaurant, the website creator needs to pay attention that the website should be designed as a tool whereby people learn about the restaurant and what makes it to be a good restaurant. An attractive menu advertising specials of the day with clear and attractive pictures of the dishes is essential in this case. If the restaurant caters to adults as well as to children, then the designer should take this into consideration when designing the website. At the end, the planning phase should include a navigation structure (fig. 1) that, in the case of a restaurant, might look something like this (Marrelli, 2009):

![Fig. 1. Navigation Structure for the Restaurant website](image-url)
Note that at this stage, the navigation structure could only be a sketch drawn by hand, although the designer could use simple and readily available software such as Microsoft Word or Microsoft PowerPoint to create it. This sketch, as it’s evident in the example, should show the arrangement of the pages from general to specific. The next phase is the implementation phase where the designer needs to use the software of choice (in my class, Dreamweaver) and create the website. In our restaurant example, this should include the needed navigation bars and the content for each page such as the one in this example that shows only one of the web pages, the Lunch Menu page (fig. 2) (Marrelli, 2009).

![Fig. 2. Lunch Menu web page of the Restaurant website](image)

While creating the website, the designer should carefully follow four basic design concepts. The first design concept is that an effective website should be appropriate for the intended audience by matching purpose and target audience. The second is that there should be a meaningful arrangement of the web pages that follows principles based on user expectations. The third is that the website should be consistent by using consistent cues. Finally, the fourth design concept is that it should make it easy on the user to traverse through it. These four design concepts might seem obvious but it is easy to overlook them. Once the students are introduced to these basics of website design, and after they have already created at least two websites with a few web pages each, then they are ready to work on the project.

3. Service learning

The following paragraphs briefly explain service learning (Western Kentucky University Service-Learning Faculty Handbook, 2014).
Service-learning can be described as “learning by doing while helping others.” It is considered a form of experiential learning in which students participate in an organized activity that meets learning objectives and identified community needs at the same time. Course content improves the quality of student service projects. The service experience enhances student learning.

The three integral components of service learning are: meaningful service, applied learning, and reflection. Meaningful service means that faculty and students work together with the community to identify a project. Applied learning means that the project is related to the course and helps students practice what they have learned in the course. Reflection is when students can use the project for meaningful learning.

The types of service learning include Problem-solving or community-based research projects, placements at community organizations, faculty-led programs (assignments or options, student-led programs, direct-service projects, indirect-service projects, and interdisciplinary and international service-learning projects).

4. The project

The steps that a student had to go through to complete the project included:

- Research local non-profits
- Make a list of local non-profits
- Choose an interested non-profit
- Meet non-profit representatives to discuss
- Plan the website
- Implement the plan
- Revise as needed
- Complete project to the non-profit’s satisfaction

In the process, students would need to collect all needed data (logos, images, etc.); sketch the navigation structure; determine the content and links for each page; sketch the page layout for each page; and finally create the website with its web pages. Besides these steps, each student had to keep a journal and after the web site was created the instructor had to make sure that it was what the non-profit really wanted. To enhance the project’s effectiveness, assessment should be conducted on any level and not just the end-product itself (the website); students should journal throughout the course of the project and document what they have learned going through the entire process. Directions for preparing the journal should include questions that the students must answer such as: How did you search for non-profits that might be interested in you developing a web page for them? Did you use the phone book or did you get your contacts by using the phone, email, or the Internet? What is the name and other contact info of the one non-profit that you actually selected? What is the date that you made the initial contact with this non-profit?

In addition, in the journal, students should write a brief summary of what was discussed at each of the meetings that they had with this non-profit, including date for each meeting and whether the meetings were conducted by phone, email, etc. Other info such as what they learned while working with this non-profit in general and describe the non-profits’ needs for having the website that the student created for them. Finally, students should comment on what experience they might have gained while working on the project.

After the project was completed, there was feedback that the instructor requested from the non-profit. Here are some examples of such feedback:

Feedback #1:

Everything went wonderfully well in working with Jessica. She made and kept appointments and was prompt in replying to my e-mail and phone messages. She was always business-like and pleasant to work with. Jessica worked
with your outline and that helped us both to be very clear and specific about what needed to be on the website. She made good suggestions and took direction very well and was a pleasure to work with.

Feedback #2:

Melna was very easy to work with and created a great site for our office. We have needed a useful and user-friendly website for quite some time so I am very pleased that she created this for us.

Feedback #3:

It has been a pleasure working with Annette on this project. I appreciate having had the opportunity for this website to have been part of the learning process in one of your classes. We worked on an ongoing basis to come up with what the website would look like. I then gave her additional ideas to help with development. She seems to have a very creative mind when developing the website and an understanding of what the end user would want to see. We formally met 6 to 8 times to formally review and work on the project. I am very happy with the work she has done. It looks great and will be a very useful website.

5. Benefits

Some of the benefits for students include that students make new contacts with potential future employers, they apply class knowledge to real life, and they boost their resumes. Benefits for the non-profits include that they get help to complete unfinished projects and/or create the website that they could never have created without help. Non-profits need this help because they may lack the knowledge to create an effective website, they may lack the resources needed to create it. They may also lack the funds to finance creating the website or they may lack the time to devote in its design and implementation.

6. Problems and replications of the study

One of the problems in implementing the project was that I did not make it an absolute requirement in this class that students find a non-profit and not just a local business. As a result, some of my students selected a local business rather than a non-profit to complete their project. This did not diminish the usefulness of the project as some local businesses received a lot of needed help from my students and at the same time my students learned from working on their projects. In future implementations I can request that only non-profits are to be used by all students. However, this may prove to be too restrictive for some students who have to complete a major project in a limited amount of time, especially if the class is large and is taught in a rather small community.

References