Quick Sheet: Preparing Students for a Service-Learning Course

This Quick Sheet explores the subject of **PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING** and provides you with an essay which is written for the student audience. Please click on one of the blue topic headings to skip to that section. Or, scroll and read the email in its entirety. If you would like more information on any of the topics, please contact Lina Dostilio, Service-Learning Coordinator, 412-396-5893 or servicelearning@duq.edu.

If you ask your students to raise their hands if they have had prior volunteer experience, you might find the overwhelming majority will respond. If you ask them to raise their hands if their volunteerism was a result of a school-based requirement, again, you might be surprised at the frequency with which our middle and high schools require community service.

It is important, however, to note that few… if any… of your students will have taken a class that utilized service-learning. In order to properly prepare your students for this unique learning experience, you will need to:

- distinguish service-learning from volunteerism
- legitimize service-learning as a method by which your students will learn academic concepts and meet learning outcomes
- introduce and describe reflection and explain how reflective assignments will be graded
- explore the behaviors and mindset expected of our students when they enter community settings
- relay the resources available to assist students in this work

Many of these topics are addressed in the piece, “Service-Learning: A Course Text” which is attached to this email. This essay is currently in draft form, however, it may be used for class purposes. In addition to providing your students with this short reading assignment, it is advisable to have a few in-class discussions on the following topics.

**HOW DOES SERVICE-LEARNING DIFFER FROM VOLUNTEERISM**

Service-learning is defined as “a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” (Bringle/Hatcher)

Service-learning differs from volunteerism in two important ways:

1. **Reciprocal benefit to students and community**: as a student you will learn as much from this experience as you will serve the community. In volunteerism, the benefit to community it emphasized over benefit to learner. A visual representation might be helpful. *The Falbo/Santilli Diagram is attached to this email.*

2. **Guided and structured reflection embedded in your coursework**: in service-learning, we use our experiences to test the theories and knowledge learned in class. In order to articulate this application, we complete assignments that ask us to reflect on what we have learned. These assignments are part of the course plan and are usually graded. They may take the form of journaling, essays, presentations, portfolios, etc. In volunteerism, we may discuss how we feel about the experience, but we do not complete extensive assignments that connect learning goals with the service experience.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES AND SERVICE-LEARNING**
Students who have not experienced service-learning may not understand how service work helps them to meet course learning outcomes. Perhaps they think their grade is based on whether or not they complete their service work or put in the required hours. Faculty need to make it clear from the outset that students are graded on the extent to which they meet course learning outcomes. The service provides the students with contextualized learning experiences as a unique way to help them meet the course outcomes.

This, of course, begins with a discussion of those outcomes which are met in part through service-learning. Course readings, lectures, discussions, and journaling might also promote these same outcomes. Service-learning is integrated into the overall course as a unique and complementary resource for learning.

An example from “Social Issues in Business”

Out of several course learning outcomes, four have been selected as relating to the service-learning component:

- Students will apply the principles and concepts of moral reasoning
- Students will identify the tasks of the “ideal” manager
- Students will work effectively in groups
- Students will exhibit professional oral communication

Then, the service work and the accompanying reflection assignments are reviewed in relation to these learning outcomes.

Service Work: Students will be placed in groups. Each group is to implement a social change project within one of the community organizations which has agreed to work with this class.

Reflective Assignments:

- Upon completion of the social change project, students will apply the concepts of moral reasoning to at least one decision which was made during the implementation. This will be documented via reflective essay.
- Students will prepare a comprehensive list of tasks as they relate to the effective management of this project. This list will be compiled from events included in students’ service journals.
- Students will collaborate with their group in preparing and delivering a professional presentation to the board of the community organization. During this presentation groups will describe their social change project, provide evidence of its impact, and propose ways to sustain the project once the class is completed.

**REFLECTION – WHAT IS IT AND WILL IT BE GRADED?**

If we do not fully explain reflection, it is often misconstrued as “fluff” rather than an important course feature. On the other hand, students may labor over reflective assignments, describing, in detail, each and every occurrence throughout the service experience. This, too, is inappropriate.

You must help students to understand the role reflective assignments will play in the course structure and how they will be evaluated.

The following talking points may be helpful in this discussion:

- List reflective assignments and briefly describe – for example, from the “Social Issues In Business” class described above, students will be asked to keep a journal so that they can later gather information related to their decisions and tasks.
If asking students to keep a journal, distinguish “journal” from “diary.” A diary lists the events and happenings on a given day. A reflective journal describes the relationship between important incidents and course concepts.

- Provide rubrics or grading guides for journals, presentations, papers, or electronic discussions.
- Provide examples of high-quality journal entries, presentations, electronic discussion threads, etc.

**LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY-BASED EXPERIENCES**

When we expand the walls of our classrooms to include community settings, we expect our students to negotiate two cultures fluently: the University culture and the community organization culture. The two cultures may differ greatly. If we do not take the time to prepare our students to work respectfully and carry with them a sense of cultural sensitivity, they will not perform their service work effectively.

Rather than belabor this point in narrative, allow me to list some of the difficulties that may arise:

- Students may perceive the community as not having “legitimate expertise” on an issue and dismiss their opinions or work plans as not being informed. This misperception can lead to students imposing their ideas/agendas on a community rather than responding to the needs and wants pre-determined by the agency.
- Students might assume that through their service work they will “save the day/organization/community.” In reality, they may be learning more than they are serving. Students may become frustrated if they do not feel they are making a difference.
- Students might expect that agency staff members do not have college educations, important work experience, or knowledge of empirical study. When students underestimate the people with whom they work, they can breed mistrust.
- Students may underestimate their own potential contribution to the organization. Rather than having the “superman complex,” some students doubt their ability to do important work at this stage in their education.
- Students might not be taught the hallmark of service-learning: reciprocity. They may cling to rigid descriptions of the project to be completed, when in reality the project needs to evolve to meet the most pressing needs of the organization/community. So long as instructor, site contact, and students agree that they are still able to meet learning outcomes it is possible to change the scope of a service project to better fit with the agency’s needs.
- Students might not understand the differences in the academic calendar and work day compared to those of the community. Often our community agencies are juggling many projects and initiatives. Their partnership with your class may be only a small part of their daily duties. If the organization is unable to return a phone call within one day, or does not open the office during the school day, students may not understand the need to be flexible.

The bottom line is this: discuss with your students the need to enter into this project not as an expert or savior, but as a student who is open to learning from community members and agency staff while willing to make the best contribution they can with their talents and skills.

**RESOURCES**

The following resources may be helpful to your students:

**Office of Service-Learning** – assistance finding appropriate service placements, mediating difficulties between students and organizations, accessing information sources for projects and presentations
Lina Dostilio, Coordinator
412-396-5893
Port Authority of Allegheny County – bus schedules, “T” schedules, trip planners, fare info
412-442-2000
www.portauthority.org

United Way of Allegheny County – alternative source for service placements, community impact information, social services available to help residents of the county, social issue resource guides
412-261-6010
www.unitedwaypittsburgh.org

Idealist on Campus – advocacy, activism, civic engagement, social responsibility resources and guides
www.idealistoncampus.org

Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning – peer-reviewed scholarly journal
Gumberg current holdings – Summer 2001; Vol. 10 – 12.
www.umich.edu/~mjcsl/

Other Quick Sheets in this series include “Reflection” and “Crafting Community Partnerships.”
This series was developed by the Duquesne University Office of Service-Learning, 2006.