

Chapter 9

Service Learning in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Service learning exists as one method to foster interaction and engagement in face-to-face classes, but often presents a challenge when instructors try to incorporate these opportunities in their online courses. Online students are most often geographically dispersed, therefore making project management more difficult for the instructor. Additionally, it is more difficult for instructors to form long-term community partnerships, as their distance learners are not members of one, local community. Although a challenge, incorporating service learning in an online course can be an effective way to increase opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and interaction. Service learning can also help online students feel connected to their own communities and, additionally, provide a unique opportunity to reflect on ways to apply their course learning experientially. This chapter discusses the unique benefits and challenges of incorporating service learning in online courses, and also presents ideas and examples for e-service learning.

INTRODUCTION

Depending on definitions for what qualifies as an online course and variances in data collection methods, in 2013 an estimated five to seven million postsecondary students were learning online, and over 70% of public, higher education institutions have online offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The online classroom is also an environment yearning for active learning opportunities that engage students, and allow them to feel part of an online learning community. Experiential learning, or learning through experience and reflection, stands in contrast to traditional passive learning models. The active-learning emphasis of experiential learning experiences fit well within an effective, high-quality online course, which makes robust use of interaction and presence opportunities to foster dialogue, a sense of community, and self-directed learning. As a form of experiential education combined with community service, service-learning engages students "... in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Furco, 2000).

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Participating in service-learning projects allows students to provide community service as part of their course activities, learn more about the community in which they are providing the service-learning, reflect on both their service and the community context, and also understand the connection between the service they are providing and the academic context (Gelmon et al, 2001). Conventional service learning experiences embed students in their local community, which usually coincides with geographical areas near their academic institution (Strait and Sauer, 2004). Faculty who integrate service learning into coursework traditionally form long-standing partnerships with area organizations and, as such, are able to help students create and foster relationships with appropriate community partners. Service-learning in particular allows students to engage with community partners and address community needs through structured activities designed to promote learning, as well as individual and social development (Jacoby, 1996). However, many faculty under-use or fail to consider using service-learning in an online environment, presuming that service-learning is not conducive to being used in online courses (Daily-Hebert, Donnelly-Sallee, & DiPadova-Stocks, 2008).

Approaches to creating quality online instruction have increasingly focused on collaborative activities that increase opportunities for student interaction (Barab, Thomas, & Merrill, 2000). Service learning has been one method to foster these interactions while simultaneously engaging distance learning students in their local communities (Strait & Sauer, 2004). Service-eLearning is defined as, "...an integrative pedagogy that engages learners through technology in civic inquiry, service, reflection, and action." (Daily-Hebert, Donnelly-Sallee, & DiPadova-Stocks, 2008, pg. 1). Service-eLearning can provide a meaningful way to reach out to community organizations, for students to gain valuable work experience and form lasting partnerships, and to provide hands-on, authentic learning and straining as students work to apply their academic experience and knowledge to complex issues in nearby communities (Strait, 2008).

The experiential learning experiences facilitated through service-eLearning projects not only reinforce the learning objectives of the course, but also provide critical opportunities for reflection through the use of online course technology and tools, such as journals (Giles, Porter Honnet, & Migliore, 1991). Tools such as journals provide avenues for online students to engage in the self-reflection that is often critical to successful service-learning (Bringle & Hathcer, 1999). Many of the technological components of an online course, in fact, serve to facilitate communication between learners engaging in service-learning, including online discussion boards and blogs (Bennet & Green, 2001; Johnston, 1999).

TRANSFORMING SERVICE-LEARNING FOR THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In their book, *Service-eLearning as Integrated Pedagogy*, the authors put forth "four pedagogical values" of service-eLearning including: 1. Nonlinear paths to learning, peer learning, global connectedness, and application (Daily-Hebert, Donnelly-Sallee, & DiPadova-Stocks, 2008; see Table 1). The first value, *non-linear paths to learning*, describes the self-directed path that service learning most often takes, including taking in new information, merging new information with their own experience, constructed integrated new knowledge, and reflecting on that learning. This path, which is often cyclical and rarely linear, mirrors Kolb's Learning Cycle. The second value, *peer learning*, most often takes place in eLearning via online discussion groups that can promote collaborative and individual knowledge construction, as well as reflective public blogs and journals. Additionally, this structured dialogue can help to promote both social and cognitive presence, two of the three components in the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).

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