

Chapter 11

Building a Foundation for a Philanthropic Future: Community–Engagement in an Online College Class

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will outline an instructor's attempts to incorporate service-learning into an online college course in the fall of 2014, utilizing a well-respected institutional philanthropic program. The chapter will describe the pedagogical challenges faced by the instructor as she attempted to integrate the service-learning components into an already established curriculum and will share the tools and strategies that she employed with her students. The chapter will address the benefits and challenges as identified by the instructor and the students in the class and will also share several unanticipated rewards that occurred as a result of the philanthropic partnership. The chapter will also offer some practical application ideas for others wishing to incorporate service-learning component into their online classes.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, I applied and was accepted to be involved with an established service learning program (the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project) at my university. Participation in the project required me to incorporate service-learning into my online library informatics college class, LIN 300: Information in Our Society, that following fall. The library informatics program is a fully online bachelor's degree with a heavy distribution of non-traditional aged students who reside in fourteen different states. I had previously taught the Information in Our Society course, and had established a solid curriculum for the class. While I was satisfied with the course, I was intrigued by recent faculty testimonials related to the student philanthropy project on campus. My library informatics 300 course required junior/senior status, and I believed that the upperclassmen in my academic program could benefit from a service- learning experience. With the exception of the senior capstone course, the fully online library informatics cur-

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riculum did not involve any opportunities for community-engagement. Since the Information in Our Society class covered global issues regarding information disparities such as the Digital Divide and addressed how technology or lack thereof has impacted society, the course seemed to be an appropriate candidate for the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project. I also had a heightened personal interest in philanthropic causes, and was eager for the opportunity to incorporate this passion into my teaching.

The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project is an established program at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) that has been in existence since 1999. The program was established by the Mayerson Foundation in order to help NKU students learn about student philanthropy and non-profit organizations. Courses that participate in the project are given a specific amount of funding, usually up to \$2,000, which they then distribute to local nonprofit organizations. The selection of the nonprofit organizations is incorporated into the work for the course and the organizations that are chosen are usually related in some way to the topic of the course. Since the inception of the Mayerson program, more than one hundred and seventy classes have participated and they have given away more than \$800,000 to over three hundred non-profit agencies. While service-learning in the online environment does occur at NKU, it is less prevalent in online classes than in those that meet face-to-face. In fact, that first time that I was involved in the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project, I was the only one (out of eight Mayerson instructors) teaching in the online format. I also learned that only a few online Mayerson classes had preceded mine in the fifteen years that the program had been in existence. While I was initially apprehensive about how to integrate the service-learning components into my online course and faced some pedagogical challenges, I was ultimately able to modify my class in a way that successfully integrated the components. During the fall semester when the course was offered, I experienced both positive and negative outcomes associated with the endeavor and will share some of these observations as well as the insights from students involved in the class.

BACKGROUND

The idea of service-learning in college classes is certainly not a new phenomenon. In the past few decades, many have studied and extolled the benefits of incorporating service-learning aspects into college coursework. Some of the benefits that have been identified include long-term volunteerism, strengthened leadership skills, and life satisfaction in adulthood (Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, & Quaranto, 2010 ; Newman & Hernandez, 2011); increased student learning and success (Moore & Mendez, 2014); empathy, enhanced critical thinking skills, and contributions to societal change and social justice initiatives (Bureau, Cole, & McCormick, 2014); “brain-based learning” (Nwokah & Leafblad, 2013); future civic engagement (O’Leary, 2014); and increased participation in the democratic process in adulthood (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011). Certainly the number of classes that incorporate service-learning has grown rapidly in recent years. Mirabella noted that “between 1996 and 2006, philanthropy courses grew in number by 206% and represent 13% of all nonprofit management education coursework” (as cited in Campbell, 2014, p. 221). Undoubtedly as research continues to surface evidencing the pedagogical and long-term benefits of community-engagement, these numbers will continue to grow.

While service-learning has been demonstrated to enhance the learning experiences of students, these opportunities for community-engagement are far less prevalent and somewhat more challenging in an online environment. However, as the popularity of the online learning environment continues to sky-

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