

Chapter 14

Unconventional Delivery: Developing and Implementing Service- Learning in an Online Course

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ABSTRACT

As university programs compete to retain and increase enrollment, online courses are being created to meet the demands of a rising population of students with preferences for self-paced learning. The 2015 Babson Survey Research Group report tracking online education in the United States shows 70.7% of active degree-granting institutions open to the public have some distance-learning options. In the same report, two- and four-year public institutions offering distance learning course were reported to have “very high” rates of offerings for distance learning, with both showing over 90% of enrolled students taking at least one online course. This chapter examines the need to gap between content and application in online learning through service-learning and outlines a process for implementing service-learning projects with emphasis on e-service-learning. As distance learning continues to grow, the need for innovative pedagogical methods will also grow, which makes service-learning an attractive strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Implementation of service-learning comes with challenges that may seem daunting upon initial consideration. Knowing where to begin is essential in creating a program that will result in rigorous instruction, authentic and relevant learning, and a mutually beneficial relationship between the institution and service partners. In the case of implementation in an online graduate program, the challenge is increased due to the asynchronous, self-paced nature of most online programs and the students’ desire for the flexibility (Bossaller, 2016). Add in logistical issues such as choosing a partner agency, requiring groups, coordination of course goals with project goals, and timely review and critique of preliminary products, and the process can become nightmarish without exhaustive pre-planning (Helms, Rutti, Hervani, LaBonte, & Sarkarat, 2015). Although service-learning is typically performed on site and allows for hands-on “real time” engagement, it can also take place online. The use of Course Management Systems (CMS) such

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as Blackboard, Google Classroom, Moodle, or Edmodo can make the process easier if the instructor effectively uses the embedded program tools effectively. This chapter explores the process for developing a service-learning project and integrating the project into a 100% online course by creating an online community with a singular purpose beneficial to the participating students as well as the partner organization.

E-SERVICE-LEARNING AND ADULT LEARNERS

Service-learning provides students with experiential learning opportunities to engage in authentic experiences, active observation, reflection, and practice through community and civic involvement (Bossaller, 2016). E-service-learning is a pedagogical model that facilitates instruction and service online (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012). Waldner, McGorry, and Widener state that, E-service-learning benefits students because the limitations of service-learning, such as place-based access or geographical constraints, and online learning can be overcome by the marriage of the two pedagogies. In one study (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Lee, 2000) of 22,236 students at the University of California, Los Angeles, researchers found students who participated in service-learning showed varying degrees of positive effects in eleven outcome measures including academic performance, self-efficacy, and leadership. Students who participate in service-learning reported feeling more prepared to practically apply knowledge (as cited in Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012), better informed, more connected to the community, and more self-aware upon completion of their projects. Moreover, students participating in courses that included service-learning reported changes in how they viewed the population they served and planned to make service a permanent part of their lives (McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, & Fudge, 2008). Campus Compact, a result of collaborations between Brown, Georgetown and Stanford universities and the Education Commissions of the states, is a supporting organization that specializes in promoting and advocating for service-learning in colleges and universities across the country to increase service and civic engagement within undergraduate and graduate course offerings through community partnerships for the purpose of preparing students to be informed and engaged citizens (Campus Compact, 2015).

Traditionally, when one evokes images of service-learning, the image of a traditional undergraduate student involved in pre-scheduled and determined field placements in the community may come to mind. Synchronous classes that meet weekly benefit from the convenience of field placements or more access to community organizations or agencies that have relationships with the institution. Andragogy among graduate students enrolled in online classes is different in that establishing the relevancy and purpose of assignments is made difficult by the omission of facetime. Adult learners, especially those who are not traditional college entrants, are working professionals, parents, caregivers, and may serve other roles otherwise not stated (Kelly, 2013), thus making the concept of service-learning in an online graduate program ever more challenging due to the fact that the class will never meet synchronously for any part of the course. These adult learners need the certainty and efficiency of an online class.

Use of Course Management Tools and E-Service-Learning

In traditional, asynchronous online learning environment, a common observation from students in regard to their online learning experience is that they often long for the community of a synchronous, face-to-face course. The opportunities for discourse and collaboration were not presented in the same way online. Use of CMS tools such as discussion boards, blogs, or chat or messaging features did not always alleviate

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