Implementing Community Engagement Projects in Classrooms

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Community engagement is a key component to successful town-gown relationships for universities and colleges. The most effective way to teach students the importance of community engagement is through academic based service learning projects. Benefits of creating community engagement opportunities lead to financial benefits, enhance the prestige and visibility of the institution, and strengthens democratic values by reinforcing civic responsibility in students. Additionally, these relationships expand job opportunities for graduates. Despite the benefits from creating academic projects designed to engage students in the community as a part of the educational experience, the practice is not universally implemented. This paper explains the benefits of expanding the collaborative to include the community (town) and the local college or university (gown), analyzes the impact of community engagement on students, educators and community members, and provides real solutions on how to implement community engagement projects in a classroom.

Communication between institutions of higher learning and the communities in which they reside is a common topic in higher education settings. In fact "town-gown" relationships are crucial for economic development and sustainability. Various educational institutions and their community leaders today are more often working together both on and off campus in the coordination of sharing of limited resources. Case studies have found that initiating a dialogue and opening up the lines of communication between the campus and its neighbors can foster a positive relationship based on a common understanding of the role that each plays—or can play—to promote a healthy and thriving community. Research has overwhelmingly shown that these town-gown relationships contribute to a higher overall quality of life for everyone involved. The most effective way to teach students the importance of community engagement is through academic based service learning projects.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to entice educators to commit their expertise, energy, idealism, and their students' passion and intelligence into bettering the community they live in. Specifically, this paper explains the benefits of expanding the collaborative relationship between the community (town) and the local college or university (gown) to include the creation of curricular and co-curricular activities in the form of service learning. The impact community engagement has on the student, educator and community is analyzed, and concrete suggestions are provided regarding how to begin implementing community engagement into teaching plans.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of community engagement has been a buzzword in university circles for many years. In the past, common issues typically involved off-campus student conduct, student housing concerns, code

enforcement, and campus expansion. Many of these issues are, and will continue to be, at the forefront of town-gown relations, but with modern economical woes effecting cities and universities like never before, the areas of focus are expanding.

Today, town-gown relationships are more concerned with the coordination of efforts and sharing of limited resources. Representatives from diverse sectors of the community and academia are coming to the table, knowing they will have to compromise and collaborate. Communication is key in expanding town-gown relationships, as is the willingness to share scarce resources. Universities have an opportunity to coordinate efforts by sharing limited resources in areas such as economic development, sustainability, public health, and tourism, to name a few. Cities should not have to wait to be asked by the university to get involved on a project. In fact, "the best town-gown relationships are where you see the president" and city officials "side by side at welcome events for students, state of the university or state of the community" (Griffo, para. 11). However, it is time for academia to expand this cooperative mindset, and create new positive interactions and developments from the classroom. University and town officials often do work together on joint projects such as: the formation of joint neighborhood advisory committees, elected or appointed positions on government bodies, or inviting the community to on-campus events for a free/discounted rate. However, these relationships are missing a crucial factor: students. Students are a great resource for cities to connect with, and an easy tool for universities to leverage. The best town-gown relationships have students that are very much engaged with city leadership, internships, project coordination, research, think tanks and more.

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

Involving students in the creation of strong, functional, long-term relationships within a community or government directly and immediately provides visible and tangible benefits to the citizens who live in cities and regionally. Going forward from the twenty-first century, a college or university professor cannot ignore the positive economic development impact, both directly and indirectly that the institution has on the community and the residents who live within. A university professor with a cooperative mindset can leverage the economic and social impact the university innately has on the community with the creation of curricular and co-curricular activities. To this end, colleges and university professors need to begin considering various teaching and learning strategies that integrate meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. These academic approaches enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Project based learning (PBL) is a pedagogy that ties into the experiential learning theory (ELT). This theory has been widely used for many years and is in fact, a key component in program design. However, using this theory as a basis to create community engagement projects is not widely done. With Project-Based Learning (PBL), students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge. In this type of learning environment, according to the Buck Institute for Higher Learning, "Students ask questions, search for answers, and arrive at conclusions, leading them to construct something new: an idea, an interpretation, or a product" (Buck Institute for Education, 2013). Project-based learning focuses students' work and deepens their learning by framing important issues, debates, challenges or problems.

Creating courses that allow for participation or involvement in education is not new. In 1963, Dewey's "progressive education" noted that participatory, active learning was essential for individuals to gain knowledge and develop as citizens (p. 67). Today, learning through involvement reflects a commitment to a pedagogy that is "engaged" (Hooks, 1994), "trans- formative" or "critical" (Shor, 1992, pp. 189 –190; Wink, 2000, p. 123). Experiential learning is most often defined as an intentionally designed experience that facilitates learning through a combination of action and reflective critical thinking. Thus, the experience of the learner occupies the central place in all considerations of teaching and learning.

In one sense, the term 'experiential learning' is used to describe the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and experiences in an immediate

and relevant setting. This sort of institutional-sponsored learning manifests as training programs for professions. Experiential learning thus involves a "direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it" (Borzak 1981, pg. 9, quoted in Brookfield 1983).

A second view of experiential learning involves education occurring as a direct participation in the events of life (Houle 1980). Here, learning is not sponsored by some formal educational institution but undertaken by people on their own. This is the way most learning occurs, and is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience. Antidotal evidence finds that students report being surprised at how much they learn because they are not putting conscience effort into learning when in this situation. Put another way, students report that they don't feel that there is any process going on as they are learning. Instead, students come away from these learning situations surprised at how much information they gained, and how easily they are able to make links between previous ideas and thoughts. Using projects to underscore the learning process in classrooms, therefore, strengthens the overall learning happening in classrooms. Community partnerships broaden and deepen the academic experiences of students by allowing them to work on real-world projects, through curriculum-based and service learning opportunities, collaborating with nonprofit and community leaders as they seek to achieve their missions. This combination of learning methods provides the necessary two-way communication that leads to greater mutual understanding. Perhaps easier to understand is that the combination of learning methods provides a communication loop. This communication loop between the student, the educator, the overall experience, and the professional is therefore the strongest example of "Integrative Learning" available.

IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

Creating academic projects designed to engage students in the community as a part of the educational experience provides valued benefits to both academic and business sectors. Benefits of creating such relationships leads to financial benefits, enhances the prestige and visibility of the institution, and strengthens democratic values by reinforcing civic responsibility in students. Additionally, these relationships expand job opportunities for graduates.

Community partnerships broaden and deepen the academic experiences for students by allowing them to work on real-world projects, through curriculum-based service learning opportunities. These opportunities allow students to collaborate with nonprofit and community leaders as they seek to achieve their organizational missions. The services provided by this partnership would normally not be available to these organizations due to their cost and/or diverse needs (Kerns, Shelton, Puglisi, 2014).

Impact on Students
- Provide well organized and educationally valid real world experience for students during the appropriate phases of their academic careers
- Provide trans-disciplinary opportunities for faculty/student collaboration on project-based activities, and linking the classroom with the community.
- Enhance student learning by joining theory with experience and thought with action
- Provides an opportunity for a community to shape students' values and to prepare students for community participation after college.

Impact on Faculty
- Affords the faculty member serving as the service-learning coordinator a high level of community involvement, which in turn provides necessary insight into the community.
- Can provide an opportunity "service" for the faculty member within their workload agreement for promotion.
- Projects can provide data and case studies for research, which adds to the faculties promotion file.

- Provides an outlet for faculty to reinforce curriculum taught, and provides a base to make necessary curriculum changes.
- Creates a network of academics and professionals that provides collaboration opportunities, the ability to share resources, gain new knowledge, and enhance the collective impact of the academic field.
- Provides opportunities to apply for a variety of grants through the collaborative nature of service learning

Impact on Community
- Businesses benefit from this partnership by gaining valuable insight from young professionals with an advisor mentoring the students through the specific project.
- The services provided by the service-learning project could normally be cost prohibitive to service sponsors/community members.
- Provide multi-disciplinary assistance to communities and organizations on real projects that improve the economic, social and physical environments.
- Helps meet unmet community needs
- Exposes and teaches communities about emerging generations of students
- Helps establish access and connections to other resources available at the college or university

The benefits of service learning for students, faculty, and community partners, explained above, should put to rest any hesitation that one may have toward the need to implement service learning into all curriculums, across all fields of study, around the world.

Statistics show that those citizens who participate in such service programs often transform into lifelong volunteers and civic leaders. Service can act as a training program for idealists, many of whom go on to take leading roles in nonprofit and government agencies (Brown, 2008). Service learning can strengthen the ties that bind us together and can lead to a lifetime of civic engagement (Bee & Guerrina, 2014). Civic Engagement is "acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good" (Jacoby, 2009.)

Viewing service as a bridge to genuine political and civic responsibility can strengthen democratic government and foster the republican virtues (Dionne, 2002). Service connects groups of people that have little to do with each other otherwise. The concepts of civic responsibility are tools for young students to build "active participation in an expanding, pluralistic society in which citizenship, social responsibility, human rights, community and mutual respect are inseparable" (Rendall, 2006). This awareness can only come from an education where integration occurs between civic learning and normal pedagogic tools, where civic learning is peripheral to curricula, but as a vital component in a comprehensive education. Service learning helps to provide a heightened sense of civic responsibility. Therefore, it is important to provide service-learning opportunities to both undergraduate and graduate students. Young people are eager to participate in activities that improve their communities and their own lives while enhancing their resumes. What is missing is not motivation and interest from young citizens, but rather, the structured opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary to "build strong communities and democratic and participatory cultures" (Alessi, 2005).

Classes with community engagement opportunities imbedded emphasize critical thinking and personal reflection and encourage a sense of community participation in civic engagement. Students appreciate the engagement opportunities after the fact. Reflection questions often yield responses such as "When working with the community we are able to make a difference and see our work in affect." Students also note feeling a sense of personal responsibility (Cress, 2013), and report "Feeling great to be at a university that produces professionals who will go out to the world and use their knowledge and skills to help treat people" (Kerns & Shelton 2014).

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Early completion of a plan regarding the community engagement process is important, as the community engagement project should be implemented within an instructor's syllabus. The instructor should create very specific student learning outcomes and assessment plans. When working on the learning outcomes specific for a course with a community engagement component, identifying a gap between the students' current level and the desired level of attitude, knowledge, or skills is key. "An educational need is something individuals should learn for their own good, for the good of their organization or profession, or for the good of society" (Knowles, 1970). To this end, four areas are prudent to consider when creating learning objectives (Shelton & Rotnudo, 2015): Academic Disciplinary Integration, Skills Development, Personal Development, and Professionalism. These objectives encourage students to communicate, analyze critically, and assimilate theoretical concepts with practical experiences. However, instructors should keep in mind that the ultimate test concerning learning outcomes is whether the instructor can assess the learning undertaken by the student participants. Therefore, the specified action undertaken by the student participant must be observable, and measurable (Shelton & Rotondo, 2015). The goal in the Academic Disciplinary Integration category is the integration of academic disciplinary knowledge with experiential experience. Within this category students utilize higher-level reasoning skills by discovering principles from current and previous coursework to solve a problem during the experiential experience. The Skills Development category encourages students to develop creative problem solving and decision-making skills, generate alternative solutions, evaluate risk, and implement specific action plans. Personal Development relates to the activities that improve students' awareness and identity. This category also focuses on talent development, building human capital and facilitating employability. Personal development also considers enhancement or quality of life and the course's contribution to the realization of students' dreams and aspirations. The definition of professionalism in this setting is to have a high standard of professional ethics, behavior, and work activities while carrying out the project. Professionalism is also the manifestation of the interest and desire to do a job well while holding positive attitudes. Lastly, professionalism here means the appropriate treatment of relationships with colleagues, peers, and clients (Shelton & Rotondo 2015, 3:16.).

Once the learning objectives are created, instructors should begin the process of generating a community engagement project. Each instructor may have his or her own methods of generating a project. Kerns, Shelton, and Puglisi (2014), find that individually, professors can approach community leaders, local NGOs, small businesses, and tourism boards to see if and what needs exist and volunteer free student services to fulfill such needs. "Recruitment of project work also stems from board in which the instructor sit on, coffee house discussions and cold calling" (Shelton & Lindberg, 2015). Through these various methods, instructors create a personal connection between their classroom and business/organization leaders and by extension, the university and the community. In this individualized approach, the instructor creates and maintains a dialogue with the public entity, where the outside organization works with students to provide background information and materials to assist the students in their creative pursuits (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). In this situation, the instructor acts as a bridge between the 'client' and the student learners. Therefore, it is vitally important that the professor/instructor try to establish clear guidelines regarding what the final product delivered by the students will include (Kerns, et al., 2014) and disseminated to both students and community partners.

Kerns and Shelton (2014) find that these projects need to be planned out stage by stage, with a clear link to course materials. Class time should be set aside or reflection, on behalf of the students, to understand the link to educational content and curricula (Kerns, et al., 2014). For example, students could be asked about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of working with a community organization, or if and how engaging in community projects affected their learning experience in the class. In this way, the students and faculty are involved not in isolation or in addition to classroom

obligations but as a part of teaching and closely associated with professional learning. Below are some basic guidelines to successfully implement community engagement projects into classroom:

- Have an application process (paper or online)
- Set clear expectations within your syllabus, handbook, for students and for the external organization
- Provide clear learner outcomes on student - client relationship
- Create a client contract or memo of understanding
- Set aside time in class for a self reflection component for students to identify the benefit of working with community
- Reinforce common sense for students: Be professional (attire, speech, electronic communication), meet deadlines, know your target publics, work well within groups, ability to multitask etc.….

Professors that create community engagement opportunities in their courses are by default, emphasizing how crucial it is to engage in our local communities because they depend on us just as much as we depend on them. Service-learning components are an important tool for learning how to take a thoughtfully informed and rational approach to living and working in community that is tempered by active empathy, respect, and care (Cress, 2013).

"Town-gown" relationships are crucial for economic development and sustainability as various educational institutions and their community leaders are more often working together both on and off campus in the coordination of sharing of limited resources. Research has overwhelmingly shown that these town-gown relationships contribute to a higher overall quality of life for everyone involved. The most effective way to teach students the importance of community engagement is through academic based service learning projects. This paper explains the benefits of expanding the collaborative to include the community (town) and the local college or university (gown), analyzes the impact of community engagement on students, educators and community members, and provides real solutions on how to implement community engagement projects in a classroom.

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