

Abstract

Faculty integration of service-learning into the classroom has proven an effective method of engagement within the *undergraduate* experience. This case study addresses a gap in the student-engagement literature with a discussion on the effectiveness of service-learning projects on class content-comprehension at the *graduate* level. A post service-learning experience graduate student focus group provided four findings that can help guide both novice and veteran faculty in implementing or enhancing service-learning within the graduate experience. Students noted service-learning aided course content-comprehension via practical application, the importance of organization/representative fit, the need for a follow up session, and gratitude toward adult-like treatment.

Engaging the Graduate Student in Learning through Service-Learning: A Case Study

Justin Charles Velten

Introduction and Rationale

There is a large body of research surrounding the effects of college student engagement on student learning, grades, and retention. There seems to be a positive connection between student engagement and student learning (Ewell, 2002; Carini, Kuh, and Klein, 2006). Moreover, in the online classroom, it is predominantly via student engagement that learning takes place (Arbaugh, 2000). Kuh et. al (2008) discovered a significant positive correlation between increased student engagement and college Freshman grades and retention.

When considering student engagement across both Freshman and Seniors, Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) learned that Seniors react more positively to partnering with peer students on class-related projects and the integration of multi-course concepts. There seems to be an engagement-transition that takes place over the course of a student's college career. Students move from engagement via interaction with faculty and staff through hard work, being prepared for class, and writing and rewriting academic papers in their Freshman year to seeking methods to integrate their textbook knowledge through engagement in projects.

Engagement has three overarching categories: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. This study specifically considers cognitive engagement as it relates to the utilization of cognitive abilities to learn by way of self-guided experience (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Moreover, in order for students to garner the most from their engagement experience it is important they be grouped with peer students (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997). There is an apparent link in the literature between college student engagement and undergraduate student learning outcomes.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the role of service-learning as an engagement tool for graduate students. Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) note that as undergraduate students mature, they become

more interested in experiential learning through class projects, such as service-learning. Therefore, from the literature, it is reasonable to assume that graduate students will experience and view student engagement via class service-learning projects in an even more positive way than college seniors.

This study seeks to discover how service-learning within the graduate class might affect graduate student engagement by way of increasing classroom content-comprehension. This qualitative study will utilize a focus-group like interview process of a current graduate class engaged in a community-based service-learning project. Data collected from this study should enlighten higher education and communication scholars on the affects of graduate student engagement through service-learning projects on student learning outcomes.

Research Question: Does graduate student engagement via class service-learning projects increase student learning of course materials?

Methodology

Participants

A group of eight graduate students enrolled in a graduate seminar in Organizational Communication at a Southwestern United States university. The convenience-based sample of participants was made up of both males and females representing a spectrum of ethnic backgrounds.

Procedures

As a part of a graduate course regarding organizational communication theory, students were engaged in a service-learning project with the TAP for Literacy: Tyler Area Partners for Literacy. TAP is a “coalition of community partners seeking to advocate for, promote, and support literacy among children and adults in the city of Tyler and surrounding communities” (TAP for Literacy, 2013). TAP was in need of assistance in reorganizing its organizational structure to optimize community contacts prior to its large community unveiling mid-semester. The predominant areas where TAP sought assistance were in:

1. How to structure a model of communication across all levels of TAP constituents, including community leaders, literacy program partners, a steering committee, potential partners, and program participants.
2. How to market TAP to increase community partnerships and participation of low-literacy level participants.
3. How to develop a model of collaboration among all Tyler area literacy groups to lessen work-overlap and increase group cohesion and networking.

Representatives from TAP met with the graduate students the first day of class to discuss their needs and ask if the class would provide assistance. Upon the class agreement to engage in this service-learning opportunity, the TAP representatives discussed their primary needs. Students worked on the project together through in-class discussions and individual research outside the classroom. The class faculty periodically facilitated discussions regarding the project and how current class materials, including current research, could be applied to the TAP project. During the eighth week of classes, the TAP representatives returned to hear the class proposal for organizational change. After the unveiling of the TAP program, TAP representatives met

again with the graduate students to inform them that many of the class' conceptual suggestions were implemented prior to the official TAP unveiling and more are planned to be implemented in the future.

Throughout the semester, many of the graduate students commented on the value of the service-learning experience. Therefore, in an effort to capture the richness of these observations regarding student engagement through service-learning, this graduate class was utilized as a form of case study. During one session of the fifteenth week of class, students were asked a series of questions regarding their service-learning experience. The focus group session was audio recorded and data anonymously analyzed for thematic material. For the purpose of this study, the lead TAP representative will be referred to as the service-learning project liaison.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview data analysis involved what Sandelowski (2000, 2010) refers to as fundamental qualitative description. She notes that many studies adhere too closely to research data analysis design categorization (i.e. grounded theory, phenomenology, etc.) that can, in turn, lead a researcher only to findings thus related to that design. Oppositely, fundamental qualitative description utilizes sound data collection (i.e. focus groups) while allowing data analysis to move freely, without pre-set designs that can restrict discovery.

Qualitative research calls for the researcher to project meaning back on the data as a way to better understand what is observed, but Sandelowski (2010) calls for data analysis more "data-near", where thematic data is allowed to project its own meaning (p. 78). One way in which to secure qualitative data analysis internal validity is for a researcher to request affirmation or clarification from participants post-data analysis by way of reading researcher notes. Sandelowski (2000) commits that fundamental qualitative descriptive data analyses offer a "straight description" of data and "comprise a valuable methodologic approach in and of themselves" (p. 339).

For purposes of this study, all eight participants were interviewed together in a focus group type interview method. According to Morgan and Krueger (1998), focus groups help the researcher "understand what happened during an experience or project" and "learn lessons that will guide...future work" (p.15). A trained, third-party interviewer conducted the 45-minute focus group around three questions dealing with the students' experience in service-learning with TAP. More specifically, questions centered on whether the project increased student connection of textbook and classroom theory to real-world situations and how working with the teaching faculty on this outside-the-university service affected the students' overall educational experience and understanding of course materials.

The interview session was recorded electronically, and in an effort to pull themes from the focus group content, the primary researcher met with the third-party interviewer for a debriefing and data analysis session. Focus group content as well as field notes collected throughout the semester were monitored for recurring or group-affirmed individual student/participant comments. It is important to note here that each student fully participated in the focus group discussion and there was no observer-perception of groupthink.

To strengthen the internal validity of data analysis, study findings and discussion were sent back to each participant for reading. This submission offered participants the opportunity to add, subtract, or adjust researcher comments regarding the focus group interview session in the case of a misinterpretation. However, participant feedback was only affirmative regarding the findings of the study, therefore confirming the overarching themes noted in the findings below.

Results

This study of graduate student engagement via a service-learning project yielded four pertinent findings. Overall, these findings point to the importance of engaging graduate students in community-based service-learning opportunities while mandating particular criteria therein. More specifically, the primary discovery of this study was that participants noted the service-learning project helped them better understand classroom theory-based content when linked to a real-world experience. Secondary findings included the importance of matching appropriate service-learning project liaisons with students, that students would like to receive a follow up regarding the implementation of their suggestions, and how working alongside the professor made the graduate students feel more like adults and colleagues rather than students only.

Linking Theory and Experience

The first and primary finding of note was how the service-learning project helped the graduate students link classroom theory to experience via practical application of knowledge. The graduate seminar was theory laden, covering and discussing a different significant organizational communication theory nearly every meeting. Students engaged in dialect regarding the theory and its implications and uses and seemed to have a grasp on the course content. Instead, the focus group revealed an overarching class concern regarding the distant nature of the content and the difficulty students were having with fully understanding significant organizational communication theories.

However, there seemed to be a consensus among the students that when the service-learning project was introduced, class theory content began to make sense. When applied to a real-world need, where students could address a real issue in the community, students began to see more clearly the intersection of theory and practical application. Students noted that upon the inclusion of the service-learning project, what the instructor had been teaching “just clicked”.

There were surely multiple areas of class content that seemed to make more sense when connected to the service-learning project, but there are two specific instances or examples I want to pull from the semester. One of the first times I, as instructor for the course, began to note student engagement of course content through inclusion of the service-learning project was in the weekly student research presentation. For the first eight weekly meetings of the course, students were assigned to locate, read, and present recent academic research regarding organizational communication. At first, students would present the information from the papers they located via online research databases, but there seemed a perceived disconnect between their presentations and their real understanding of the content therein. However, as students began work on the TAP service-learning project, the research articles began to have more relevancy to their current responsibility of helping TAP

reorganize its organizational communication structure. Students not only became more engaged in these reading and presentation assignments, but they also began to see a more clear connection between the theory of the research and how it is applied.

The second way in which students displayed a more clear understanding of course content through the integration of the service-learning project was through the application of course concepts and theories to the TAP's needs. As previously stated, TAP was initiating a community literacy program, but with their great community support, discovered the challenges of effectively communicating with these various supporters and advisors. Moreover, TAP had in place a system that held some stakeholders within an inner circle, while other community partners were kept at a distance. These two levels of interest in the TAP organization led to communication challenges for TAP leaders and coordinators.

To combat this organizational communication challenge, students leaned heavily on the *us and them* concept as it relates to organizational communication (i.e. Goffman, 1963; Morone, 1997; Tompkins, 2004). We had discussed the concept as a class and the students decided to view the TAP organizational communication issue by using the class concept of Critical Theory (i.e. Jurgen Habermas; Mezirow, 1981; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) through the lense of the *us and them* ideology. Students suggested TAP leadership move away from a two-tiered organizational structure where communication quantity and quality differed depending on where recipients lay within the structure. There was an overarching concern that this dichotomous method of communication might lead to an *us and them* mentality between the inner circle and other literacy partners. Using Critical Theory concepts, students instead advised TAP leadership to send the same informative newsletter to both groups on a routine schedule.

These are only two examples of how the graduate students were more fully engaged through the implementation of a service-learning project. There were certainly more instances to mention and even those that went unnoticed or unmentioned. Throughout the semester, students would offer positive unsolicited feedback to each other and to me regarding how glad they were to be involved with TAP and how course concepts simply made more sense due to the service-learning experience.

The Right Fit

Even with a service-learning project that helps students better understand classroom content, there lies a need for the selection of a suitable service-learning project liaison. Participants made special note to how greatly the overall positive service-learning experience was influenced by the courteous and professional nature of the TAP coordinator with whom they worked directly. The coordinator, serving as the service-learning project liaison, visited the class at the beginning, once for a clarification meeting, and twice at the end of the project and was sure to thank the students for their work and affirm them in their strong contribution to TAP. This attitude of appreciation and acknowledgement of student topic-proficiency gave students the sense that their voices were heard and suggestions truly considered. Students noted that, in this case, the service-learning project liaison was a good match and seemed tailored to the specific group of students and class content.

For example, participants noted that even though the coordinator appreciated their work, there were a couple instances when he chose to move in a different direction

than what the class suggested. In the case of a negative student to service-learning project liaison relationship, students could have become resentful to any disagreement. However, in this case of strong student to service-learning project liaison collegiality, students happily accepted the occasional tendered deference as part of the learning experience. Thus, the second finding of this study was that it is important that graduate students feel a sense of comfort/ease and connection to the service-learning project liaison.

Follow Up

This study also concluded that students prefer some form of follow up regarding the service-learning project. This third finding denotes the level of interest students had in this service-learning project; it was not just another academic assignment with little to no bearing on practical application in their eyes. Students displayed a true interest in knowing if their suggestions were not only accepted, but implemented, and how they were received or to what extent they were successful or unsuccessful.

The original agreement with TAP was for students to propose findings and suggestions by the end of the semester, but upon the first service-learning work session, just one week after meeting with TAP representatives, students self-imposed a less than one month deadline. Within 29 days from the initial request for assistance from TAP, the graduate students were prepared to offer an organized proposal and discussion regarding the needs of TAP. This quicker-than-expected turnaround allowed TAP to implement proposed ideologies before the end of the semester.

Upon the suggestion of the service-learning project liaison to TAP, students met with him a final time so that he could again thank the students for their assistance, assure them of the value of their work, and discuss suggestions implemented. Students seemed ecstatic to learn that any one of their suggestions was implemented or in the planning stages of implementation, offering these students a real sense of value. However, students later disclosed an unquenched need for additional follow up. Students would have liked to learn more about which plans were eventually implemented and the findings thereof. These graduate students were not only interested in completing the assignment, but became very engaged in the outcome of their academic efforts in this practical application.

Treated as Adults

The fourth discovery of this study was that students like the way the service-learning project transitioned them from student to professional and adult. At the graduate level of education, students should have a strong grounding in the course content and begin seeking ways to apply their knowledge in practical application through research and service. Waldeck et al. (2009) relate the trend for graduate faculty to mentor graduate students in such academic goals. Within an appropriately implemented service-learning project, a graduate student is ushered into a significant role of consultant within his or her specified area of expertise, which can be a representation of the current course or a past set of courses in a particular content area. Students in this study noted that within this service-learning model, they felt as if they were working with, or alongside, the professor as he moderated the project.

The class noted that the faculty served as a facilitator of conversations on the project, allowing students room to work and make decisions, while providing corrective or guiding suggestions along the way. These graduate students commented on how this faculty-approach created opportunities for them to be the experts and colleagues with the professor, which in turn built their confidence. During this project, students also seemed to psychologically move from the role of student to adult as well as professional, all of which seemed an important and beneficial experience for them at the graduate level.

Conclusion and Discussion

It is evident from the findings of this study dealing with graduate student engagement via service-learning projects that graduate students garner course-complimentary benefits from service-learning projects. There are, of course, unseen benefits to both the students and the community when graduate students engage community partners in service-learning projects (a suggestion for furthering this study would be a pre-post [service-learning experience] test model of student-understanding of class content). In turn, service-learning in the graduate school offers benefits to the graduate student, two of which were captured in this study. The first benefit to the graduate student was the way in which the service-learning project helped students bridge the gap between theory and practice. The service-learning project allowed students to see theory in action and apply it for the benefit of others. Through this service-learning project, the graduate students noticed a notably more clear understanding of class content.

The second benefit to the graduate student via service-learning was that their confidence was built as they worked as professionals in course content alongside the professor. Students transitioned from the role of student-only to a sense of adulthood where they took on a challenge facing the community and used their knowledge to offer expert advice. This intangible benefit pays dividends to students as they transition from the classroom to their careers.

Along with the benefits of service-learning in the graduate school, this study revealed three important factors to consider when setting up or initiating service-learning. First, students discussed the importance of matching the right service-learning project liaison with the class. There is often times no guarantee that the liaison will be professional and courteous, encouraging students in their roles, but the teaching professor should seek those qualities in the liaison to the best of his or her ability. The service-learning project liaison utilized in this study had significant experience working with college students in a mentoring role, which made him an excellent candidate for graduate student interaction. Finding the right fit for your students can be a challenge and adds to the overall time allocation for setting up a service-learning project. However, it is clear from this study that the end-result success for the project and the graduate students is worth the extra screening.

The second factor to consider when initiating service-learning in the graduate school is the follow up process. Students in this study seemed to enjoy the overall service-learning experience, but maintained a desire to gain even further knowledge of their efforts' end-results. In the case of the class under study, students gathered one time during their typical class time at a local café to conduct class and meet with the

service-learning project liaison for a post-proposal follow up. The liaison discussed items either implemented or in the plans to be implemented and thanked the students again for their contributions to the community literacy effort.

However, students still wanted more information regarding the implementation of their ideas as that information came along. Students in this class completed their initial proposal to TAP within about one month from the start of semester classes, which allowed for a follow up meeting regarding the students' suggestions. In many cases, the service-learning project may last across multiple semesters, take the entirety of the semester, or not require a completion in full. In such cases, it can be difficult to provide feedback to students regarding the implementation of and success of their suggestions. Nonetheless, wherever possible, students seem to garner value in the feedback from their community/service partners. Moreover, this high level of interest in the implementation of their input suggests that graduate students view such projects as possibly holding more practical value than other typical assignments.

The third factor to consider when implementing service-learning into the graduate course is the role of the faculty. It is clear from the findings of this study that the graduate teaching faculty plays an important role in the successful service-learning experience of the graduate student. In the case of this study, the professor allowed the students to meet with the service-learning project liaison directly to learn of the need, facilitated discussions on the matter, and encouraged students to consider themselves the professionals on the topic and present their finding in such a manner. This teaching within service-learning model allowed students to own the project - either its success or failure. However, the faculty did not completely withdraw from the students, but moderated the project in an effort to act as a kind of safety net. This fine line presents a challenge for the faculty and requires that he or she be self aware so as to intervene when needed, but to step-out when students needed space to grow and achieve on their own.

In the case you consider implementing service-learning into your classes, I would like to offer a few insights from this study and my experience in service-learning. The first lesson I have learned and suggest is that the faculty select a project that is attainable across the students' semester time-allotment and level of ability. There are service opportunities available to faculty that are simply too lofty for a single-class application. Some service opportunities begin and find resolve during a single semester, while others contribute to an on-going service effort that closely ties to the class content, such as in the case of nursing students serving clinical hours at a local low-income medical facility. Whatever the case, teaching faculty should select a service-oriented goal wherein students of a single semester can feasibly attain a clear connection between the service and the course content.

These same faculty must also make room in the course for time dedicated to in-class work committed to the project. In the case of this study, students were given freedom to develop their own ideas as to what might help TAP with organizational communication issues. However, I set a time apart during the last session of class before their final pitch to TAP. During this meeting that took place in my home, I helped them prepare their thoughts in an outline format and facilitated conversations that encouraged them to work together and develop a shared vision for TAP. Whether it be working together in groups during class time, having the opportunity to ask questions of

the faculty, or simply a debriefing discussion post-experience, faculty have a real opportunity to develop teaching moments that help students clearly connect the service and course content.

Alongside selecting a project that does not consume a student's work-load and offering in-class time for work on the project, faculty should carefully select a service-learning project with an attainable end-product. Again, some projects begin and end during a semester and some continue on without end, but the teaching faculty must consider if the service is something that is simply doable by the students. For example, in the case of this study, I knew that TAP had a public launch date set for mid-semester, which can lead to a shorter-than-appropriate time crunch on the teacher and students. However, I also learned that TAP's issues did not have to be entirely fixed by this launch date. Students discussed which items needed priority attention and focused on those, while still providing TAP with suggestions on their long-term issues. Choosing a service-learning project where students feel rushed or pressured to perform on a tight deadline can lead to unnecessary stress, a lack of student interest in the self-benefits of the project, and a failure to produce a meaningful outcome for the partner organization.

There are many service-learning opportunities both within and without the university walls, but my second suggestion for those considering the implementation of service-learning in the classroom is to carefully consider the opportunity before accepting the partnership. In order for students to gain a better understanding of class content via the service-learning project, the project must be closely related to the content of the course. This does not mean that a Marketing course must only serve Marketing organizations, but that service partnerships be based on a commonality. A Marketing class could work with a local not-for-profit animal shelter on how to develop a marketing strategy to reach a particular target audience. This direct connection of service-learning project experience and classroom content is what research is showing develops a more clear understanding of course content for the students.

Lastly, I would suggest jumping into service-learning in a small way before attempting a large project. When I first began implementing service-learning projects, I would ask sophomore students in an Interpersonal Communication class to visit a nearby retirement home. We would go as a class and spend about 35 minutes playing Bingo or simply sitting with the residents, listening to their stories and telling them about life as a college student. This exercise was designed to teach students about interpersonal communication in the areas of listening, interacting with those who are different from oneself, and to stretch their interpersonal comfort zones.

There were times when I thought this service-learning assignment was really lame, but what the students taught me was that even though this assignment added to their busy schedules and even though they dreaded the time with the elderly, the experience and what they learned was invaluable. It can be intimidating to set forth on a project alongside the students, learning while they learn, because in all reality, you may make a misstep along with them. This is okay – remember that as a good teacher you are doing what it takes to increase your students' understanding of course content while serving others. My encouragement to you is to start small, but to start.

In closing, this study concludes that engaging the graduate student via service-learning, when thoughtfully implemented, does increase student learning of course material as shown through graduate student self-reports. There are many differing

directions a professor can take when seeking a service-learning project to implement in the graduate class. However, from this study it is evident that there are a few guidelines to follow in order to create a best-case scenario for the graduate student. There are sure to be more guidelines available and many yet undiscovered, but this study reveals the importance of incorporating service-learning when successfully engaging the graduate student.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1992). *Critical management studies*. London: Sage.
- Arbaugh, J. (2000). How classroom environment and student engagement affect learning in internet-based mba courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 9-26.
- Endo, J., & Harpel, R. (1982). The effect of student-faculty interaction on students' educational outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 115-135.
- Ewell, P. (2002). An analysis of relationships between NSSE and selected student learning outcomes measures for seniors attending insitutions in south dakota. *National Center for Higher Education Management Systems*. Boulder: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.
- Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 59-109.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, R., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 540-563.
- Mezirow, J. (1981). An critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education*, 3-24.
- Morgan, D., & Krueger, R. A. (1998). *The focus group guidebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Morone, J. (1997). Enemies of the people: The moral dimension to public health. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 993-1020.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 334-340.
- Sandelowski, M. (2010). What's in a name? Qualitative description revisited. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 77-84.
- TAP for Literacy. (2013). *What is tap for literacy?* Retrieved from TAP for Literacy: Tyler area Partners for Literacy: <http://tapliteracy.org/>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 599-623.
- Tompkins, P. (2004). *Apollo, challenger, columbia: The decline of the space program: A study in organizational communication*. Cary: Oxford University Press.

Waldeck, J. H., Orrego, V. O., Plax, T. G., & Kearney, P. (2009). Graduate student/faculty mentoring relationships: Who gets mentored, how it happens, and to what end. *Communication Quarterly*, 93-109.

Author

Dr. Justin Velten serves as Assistant Professor of Communication at The University of Texas at Tyler, where he teaches courses on Intercultural, Interpersonal, and Persuasive Communication. Before coming to UT Tyler, Dr. Velten served as Major Gifts Officer with Herald of Truth Ministries, an expatriate-focused Christian media missions organizations and Go Culture International Coach for expatriates preparing for international and intercultural experiences. His research interests lie within intercultural readiness training within education and missions as well as student engagement through service-learning. He has assisted the UT Tyler Global Awareness Through Education (GATE) program with intercultural readiness training and program assessment and has presented Service-Learning research in Canada and as well as Intercultural Communication research at the International Communication Association conference in Lodz, Poland, and was invited to speak at the International Intercultural Communication Scholars conference in Hong Kong and the Modern Society in the Context of Multicultural Communication conference in Moscow, Russia. Dr. Velten has also published research manuscripts in various areas related to the field of Communication and provides interpersonal, organizational, and intercultural communication consultation to local and multinational organizations.