

Helping Students Become Civically Engaged Through Service Learning Courses

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In recent years, the use of service learning in higher education has gained more acceptance and usage. This article is intended to introduce service learning to political scientists and policy-makers who are not familiar with this pedagogical approach. We provide a brief explanation of service learning and describe some of the research demonstrating the benefits of service learning to students, faculty, and the community. Then, we describe how we have used service learning in our political science courses. Lastly, we provide some recommendations for using service learning in the classroom.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the pedagogy of service learning has gained more acceptance and usage in higher education. For many proponents, service learning is a teaching method that creates significant opportunities for civic engagement with students directly connecting their academic experience to the larger society. Political scientists have been among the leaders in not only employing service learning but in studying its impact on creating civically engaged citizens (Barber and Battistoni 1993; Beamer 1998; Campbell 2000; Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000; Hunter and Brisbin 2000; Jenkins 2010; Kirilin 2002; Perry and Katula 2001).

This article is intended to introduce service learning to political scientists, policy-makers, and others who are not already familiar with this pedagogical approach. Those who have already used service learning in their classrooms or have worked with students on service-learning projects will find much of the material familiar, especially in the first part of the

article. We will begin with a brief explanation of service learning and describe some of the research demonstrating the benefits of service learning to students, faculty, and the community. Then, we will note how we have used service learning in our political science courses. Lastly, we will provide some recommendations for using service learning in the classroom.

Explanation of Service Learning

The Corporation for National and Community Service, a leading organization in the promotion of service learning, developed an extensive toolkit for service learning in higher education.¹ It defines service learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Seifer and Connors 2007, 4). Service learning simultaneously has two goals. It seeks to enhance the community through the service provided and to facilitate powerful learning consequences for students. The two goals are related in that experience enhances understanding, and understanding leads to more effective civic action.

In further defining the concept of service learning, the Corporation for National and Community Service, citing the work of Eyler and Giles (1999), note the following common characteristics:

- They involve cooperative rather than competitive experiences and thus promote skills associated with teamwork and community involvement and citizenship.
- They address complex problems in complex settings rather than simplified problems in isolation.
- They offer opportunities to engage in problem-solving by requiring participants to gain knowledge of the specific context of their service-learning activity and community challenges, rather than only to draw upon generalized or abstract knowledge such as might come from a textbook. As a result, service-learning offers powerful opportunities to acquire the habits of critical thinking; i.e. the ability to identify the most important questions or issues within a real-world situation.

¹ The American Political Science Association has also developed a toolkit for using service learning. See selected resources above.

- They promote deeper learning because the results are immediate and uncontrived. There are no “right answers” in the back of the book.
- As a consequence of this immediacy of experience, service-learning is more likely to be personally meaningful to participants and to generate emotional consequences, to challenge values as well as ideas, and hence to support social, emotional and cognitive learning and development.

Accordingly, service learning is *not* the same as an internship, an add-on to an existing school or college curriculum, a volunteer program logging a set number of community service hours in order to graduate, or compensatory service assigned as a form of punishment. Howard (2001) notes that service learning is distinguished from these other forms of community engagement by the emphasis placed on the academic learning component of the course and on the development of civic skills as opposed to professional skills. A properly designed service learning course places greater importance on collaborative learning with the students, faculty, and community partners all engaged in the academic process.

The research into the benefits of service learning has been well demonstrated for students, faculty, and the community. Studies have shown improved academic performance for students with relation to grade point averages, LSAT scores, critical thinking skills, and writing skills (Astin et. al. 2000; Eyler, Giles and Braxton 1997; Furco 2002). Moreover, students who participate in service learning were also found to have increased engagement to their communities and more tolerance of others (Eyler et. al. 2001; Morgan and Streb 2001; Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997).

Faculty members using service learning have reported increased satisfaction with student learning and participation (Eyler et. al. 2001; Standerfer 2002). Community partners in service learning projects have reported satisfaction with student participation as unfulfilled needs are met in the local community (Eyler et. al. 2001; Standerfer 2002).

Classroom Examples

We have both been using service learning teaching methods throughout our academic teaching careers at various institutions. In this section, we will briefly outline some examples of how we have employed service learning in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

In upper-division undergraduate courses, students conduct research into public policy issues of particular interest to local service partners for their service learning projects. These projects provide students with the skills of conducting policy research and directly engage them into the local community to address various public policy concerns. For the service component of service learning, the assignment involves the students in groups working with a local service partner to identify areas to research. Examples of local service partners have included elected officials such as the County Judge and Mayor; government entities such as parks and recreation departments and the local school districts; and various local non-profits. The learning component consists of a research paper designed to help the service agency with their public policy issues. Some of the issues addressed included the following: creating of a bike friendly community in the local community; comparing the organization and programs of other parks and recreation departments; providing for animal welfare in the county; understanding the impact of legislative mandates on educational curriculum; and comparing the funding sources of adult education programs. The research paper serves as the major writing task for this course with the primary purpose of providing the local service partners with meaningful and useful research for their particular policy issues. Additionally, the students provide an individual reflection paper describing their experience with the service learning assignment.

In masters' of policy studies and public service programs, students also partner with organizations to provide research of particular interest to community partners. Examples of local service partners include city departments such as Renton Human Services Department, state commissions such as the Arkansas Governor's Task Force on After School and Summer Programs, and non-profits such as the Alliance for Education and Northshore Senior Center. Through the community-based projects, students practiced important academic skills, including: research design, quantitative analysis, team-building, project planning, and personal reflection. The finished products demonstrated the students' analytical and writing skills and provided an opportunity to network with potential future employers and colleagues. Examples of community-based project include: conducting a statewide survey of middle and high school students to estimate the demand for after school programs, designing an interactive map of school-based resources, evaluating a volunteer program, and researching the correlation between race and rental evictions. Students are assessed individually and as a group for the research they produce. Additionally, students write reflective essays requiring them to describe and analyze their

project team dynamics and their own execution of leadership tasks within the project team.

Students have reported increased satisfaction and learning from these projects. For example, one undergraduate student in their reflective paper noted that the service learning project “made all of the lectures and discussions we had this semester come together and instead of just hearing about how frustrating the educational system is and how tough it is to get effective measures passed, we got to experience it”. Another undergraduate student observed that their project “provided my group the actual opportunity and real world capability to link the policy topics we covered in class to how it actually happens in the real world”. In formal course evaluations, a graduate student wrote, “The community partner projects were challenging and a great opportunity for learning. Working with a partner outside of academia had some real life challenges. Very good practical application for work with non-profits and other community partners.” Furthermore, community partners have expressed their pleasure with the projects. One of the partners in their evaluation of the project wrote that “we actually had a document we could use. The work proved useful in discussions and legislation the quorum court was pursuing at the time.”

In the graduate programs, students rated the service learning courses and teaching on a 5-point scale, in which the reference group was other instructors at the institution. Table 1 presents a summary of the student evaluations combining the indicators of course as a whole, course content, instructor’s contribution, and instructor’s effectiveness. The decile rank compares the class with all other classes at the institution. A rank of “7” means the class’s scores on that indicator were better than 70% of other classes.

In their qualitative comments, students mentioned appreciating the “real life connections” in community-based projects. One student felt the service learning class was “the most practical and useful class I’ve taken” and another commented, “I learned skills I will be able to apply to my professional life and that will allow me to advance as well at work.”

Table 1. Student Evaluations of Service Learning Graduate Courses (5=highest, 0=lowest)

Course	5	4	3	2	1	0	N	Avg.	Decile Rank
Management & Organizations (Fall 2008)	55%	32%	12%				20	4.6	7
Leadership & Organizations (Winter 2009)	70%	21%	9%				20	4.8	8
Management & Organizations (Fall 2009)	49%	31%	21%				17	4.5	6
Leadership & Organizations (Winter 2010)	65%	24%	11%				18	4.7	8

Recommendations

Based on our experiences in designing and teaching service learning courses, we would recommend the following steps. First, evaluate how a service learning project could best help to achieve your course goals and objectives. Because they require time and energy, the community work and related assignments should directly address course goals. These course goals may be related to content mastery (e.g. understanding voter behavior) or skill building (e.g. writing a newspaper op-ed).

The next step is to identify partners to work with in the community. We have found that this is the most important step in determining the long-term success of our service learning work. The literature on service learning stresses *reciprocity* in community-university relationships. Many partners find working with students rewarding, as a form of their own service to the community. We have found, however, that this good will has limits. Government officials and non-profit directors are busy, and using their agencies as a laboratory for student learning is not sustainable for them. Instead, service learning projects will ideally produce a product (e.g. a survey, a literature review) or a service (e.g. organizing a community meeting) that is of value for the community partner's work. If available, a university-wide service learning center is the best place to start to look for a community partner. Building on relationships already established by university staff and/or other faculty not only makes for a smoother project, it also keeps community partners engaged with the university. In other

cases, instructors may have to make these initial contacts with community partners. In any case, we strongly recommend initiating conversations several months before the class is to be taught so that instructors and community partners have time to find mutually beneficial projects. We also recommend working with the same community partners over time. The first project is often challenging and a learning experience for both the instructor and partner. Subsequent projects benefit from revisions to assignments and the course syllabus, as well as better communication.

Accordingly, in our experience, the best community partners are those committed to working with students and interested in a longer-term relationship with the university. We have found that the nature of the agency's work or the details of the project itself is of secondary importance. Community partners who see themselves as co-educators are more likely to value what students bring: energy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to learn. In contrast, we have found that community partners seeking a replacement for paid work will likely be disappointed by the uneven quality of student work.

After establishing a partnership and project goals, the task is to design appropriate assignments such as research papers, journals, reflection papers, etc... to both assess the project work completed and to support students' integration of community experience with theory and classroom lessons. Lastly, it is important to evaluate the projects in order to make any necessary corrections for future courses. In addition to standard student course evaluations, we have informal "debriefing" conversations with partners after the course.

There are numerous websites and other resources available that provide more detailed instructions in designing service learning courses. Here are just a select few resources:

American Political Science Association.

http://www.apsanet.org/content_7584.cfm?navID=546.

National Service Learning Clearinghouse.

<http://www.servicelearning.org/>.

Campus Compact-Resources for Faculty.

<http://www.compact.org/resources-for-faculty/>.

Guide to Service Learning.

<http://www.fiu.edu/~time4chg/Library/bigdummy.html>.

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