

Service Learning in Online Education

Opportunities to Promote Meaning and Harness Student Energy

J. Nicholls Eastmond and Neal Legler

INTRODUCTION

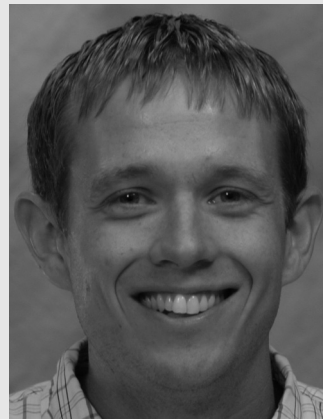
If the last decade of technological growth and innovation has taught online educators anything, it is that learners separated by time and space need not work in isolation. Significant resources have been devoted to developing tools and best practices that effectively connect students to their instructors and their peers. The payoff has been great, as online education has arguably begun to adapt many of

the benefits of face-to-face learning, with the added advantage of flexibility for the student.

Yet with this growth and innovation, another type of isolation has remained largely overlooked; namely the isolation of the student, as a participating citizen, from his or her local, national, and worldwide community. A growing number of online courses succeed in connecting learners to each other, yet too many still fall short in



J. Nicholls Eastmond,
Department of Instructional Technology and
Learning Sciences, Utah State University,
2830 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322.
Telephone: (435) 797-2642.
E-mail: nick.eastmond@usu.edu



Neal Legler,
Department of Information Technology,
Utah State University,
3075 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322.
Telephone: (435) 797-1903.
E-mail: neal.legler@usu.edu

connecting students to the realities of the communities in which they will operate.

Since at least the time of John Dewey, educators have taken growing interest in the principles of experiential learning as it relates to service (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Over time the notion and practice of service learning has evolved with application primarily in face-to-face contexts. While there are many definitions of service learning (Furco, 1996), each varying in its emphasized outcome, a good general definition is that provided by Eberly (1997): "the integration of community service with educational growth" (p. 19).

For our purposes, we will add that service learning is an approach that harnesses student energy and puts it to work on socially worthwhile projects, rather than assignments that have no practical value other than providing "practice." Howe (1997) summarized the experiential benefits of service learning as follows:

It is based on active learning, which is characterized by very different behaviors on the part of both teachers and students. Both are engaged in planning what is to be done and how; both carry it out together, often outside the classroom in the world of reality—families, communities, groups with particular needs, institutions with adequate resources and dependent on volunteer assistance; both get together to evaluate what has been accomplished and to suggest changes that will produce better service. (p. vi)

As online collaboration technologies emerge and become established, the barriers to providing service learning activities to online students become fewer and fewer. With some innovation, we believe service learning can become an integral part of the online learning experience.

EXAMPLES OF PAST SERVICE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Over the past decade, Nick Eastmond has attempted to integrate service learning

projects into his face-to-face classes (Eastmond & Vitale, 2002). For the purpose of promoting ideas for worthy service learning activities, we provide the following recap of several of the projects that have been successful in his classes. It is our belief that several of these could be implemented, in some form, in an online class. Note that, for practicality's sake, we make no distinction between projects that are done on a volunteer basis or projects that are done under contract with monetary gain involved:

- A formative evaluation of distance education, using the two-way interactive EdNet video system in Utah, undertaken by an evaluation class and involving telephone interviews with the then-current group of students;
- A needs assessment study of the curriculum of the Department of Instructional Technology at Utah State University, done in preparation for an accreditation visit of the National Council on Teacher Education (NCATE), combining the efforts of an on-campus class with those of a distance education cohort taught face to face;
- An effort, spanning three terms of an honors course, to raise funds for the building of a school in the Republic of South Africa. The course addressed the topic of race and communication in the United States and the new South Africa. Students raised \$8,354 of the \$15,000 needed to build the school. That donation was supplemented by the New Zion Baptist Church of Philadelphia to build a four-room schoolhouse in the former Transkei, near Port St. Johns. One student from the final class, while on an internship in South Africa with her husband, visited the remote school and sent back pictures;
- A study of the impact of the 5-year plan for the State Library Division under the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), funded by the State of Utah,

with proceeds used to start an endowment for student internships in overseas locations;

- A qualitative evaluation study of the reasons teachers terminate their teaching contracts early, done as part of the Teacher Supply and Demand Study for the State of Utah (a paid project);
- An evaluation of the impact of the federally funded Reading First Program on the training of preservice teachers around the Navajo Nation. Over spring break, we took a handful of students and traveled to the Four Corners region of the United States to conduct interviews and focus groups with faculty and students at three universities (also a paid project);
- Three articles completed by student groups for submission to a special issue of the *International Review of the Educational Technology Research and Development (ETR&D)* journal. The project was unpaid, but a contribution was made to the profession; and
- A building project, culminating in a 16-foot bridge across a local canal and a wooden stairway, plus a trail a quarter mile in length. The project opened a new route for foot traffic to access the university campus. The class raised half of the funds to pay for the project, with the other half donated by a private foundation. Once again, the project was part of an honors class addressing race and communication in the United States and Africa. Building a bridge was a highly symbolic project for such a class (Packer, 2008).

While these examples deal mostly with education and social issues, numerous examples exist in other curriculum areas as well. The following are some ideas that others have suggested or implemented:

- For courses dealing with nutrition, Berman (2006) suggests that students can be involved working in local commu-

nity facilities such as soup kitchens or food pantries. Students should make the arrangements with the agencies and identify what their needs are and what the duties will be. Ideally, a project such as this would give students an opportunity to apply their skills in things such as menu planning, food preparation, and so on (Berman, 2006).

- Brigham Young University regularly has its senior communications students develop, as a capstone project, an advertising or public relations campaign for a nonprofit cause. Recently, a graduating advertising cohort was publicly recognized by the Office of National Drug Control for its work in developing an antidrug campaign (Nibley, 2004).
- Colorado State University has been known to offer service learning seminars for pre-med students. One such seminar focuses on the history and biology of HIV-AIDS, then gives students the opportunity to serve in nonprofit agencies focusing on HIV-AIDS prevention, education, and care (McCarthy, 1996).
- As part of a current events, political, or social science course, Berman (2006) suggests that students can work together to form a communications organization that gathers information about pending legislation and disseminates the information to the community, collects information from the voters, and sends the information to the local, state, or national legislators.

The examples above demonstrate that university classes can accomplish socially worthwhile ends and still achieve positive learning outcomes. In the projects the author carried out, students responded well, expressing satisfaction in feeling that their efforts were “for real,” and that the social outcome would be significant. The feedback from the students was similar to that quoted by Eberly (1997) in reference to

returning Peace Corp volunteers: "I learned more than I contributed" (p. 20).

Some of these examples could more feasibly be carried out in an online course than others. Those involving combined student effort on a physical structure or in a shared physical location would, no doubt, be difficult to achieve online. However, if students share access to similar communities, community services, or partners, wherever they may be located, they can be encouraged to serve where they are located and share their experiences with their online colleagues. Likewise, communities in need of assistance often exist beyond physical regions, extending online, for example. And today it almost goes without saying that the growing and ever more accessible suite of communication tools available to online learners can provide the means necessary for collaboration on shared projects and connection to online communities. What is most needed for identifying appropriate online service learning opportunities is ingenuity and a good understanding by instructors of the nature of their students and the communities they do or could have access to.

SERVICE LEARNING ONLINE: TRANSCRIPTION ACTIVITY EXAMPLE

Service learning activities implemented online do not need to be large in scale or expense to result in positive outcomes, including increased student investment in the class. One fairly simple example, which we recently implemented in an educational research course, demonstrates this point. The online course is media-intensive and designed to immerse educators in the research process through guided-design activities. While evaluating the course, we identified a need to make it more accessible to the hearing impaired by providing transcripts to the online course videos. Providing transcripts, we believed, would not only benefit hearing impaired students but would also increase the value of the course

for all students by providing another means of reviewing the content.

The course contained roughly 20 hours of video, spread across 5- to 15-minute clips introducing activities and readings. We saw this as an opportunity to employ the help of our students in transcribing the videos as an alternative service learning activity, with the understanding that they would be doing so to assist future students who might have unique accessibility requirements.

We chose to make the transcription activity optional, as an alternative to an online institutional review board (IRB) certification assignment, which would suit some students' professional interests better than others. Providing options meant we needed to attempt to measure out an equivalent workload for students, no matter which option they selected. The full IRB option generally took students 4 to 6 hours to complete.

To achieve equity in completion time, we identified a standard range of minutes the students would need to transcribe and also created an abbreviated IRB assignment (estimated 40 minutes to complete) so that students would still be exposed to the core concepts of research ethics. We were careful to provide the alternative early in the course, before major projects and activities got under way. As such, it provided a useful introduction to the course and the activities that would follow.

IMPLEMENTATION

We offered the transcription alternative for two semesters; this was how much time it took to assign out all of the videos, given the number of students enrolled in the class. Each semester we included a description of the alternative activity and its purpose in the course syllabus. We left the choice entirely up to the students as to which activity they were more interested in. Students who knew they would be undertaking research connected with the

university (for a master's thesis or PhD work) were counseled against doing the short IRB and service learning option, since they would be required to complete the full IRB certification for their own research. Given these options, students had to make a choice. If their choice was service learning, they had to contact the teaching assistant for a specific video transcription assignment.

In both the 2008 and 2009 classes, we found that about a third to half of the students were eager to take the transcription option—more than we anticipated, to the point where we started to worry whether we would have enough videos to go around. There were several reasons for the demand. Some students appeared to find the service option a favorable alternative in terms of the requirements. One reported that he did not think it would take as long to complete (although he said he had decided otherwise by the time he finished). Others had more intrinsic motivations. For example, one student noted her connection to a family member who was hearing impaired, whom she felt would benefit from the sort of work she was helping with.

Of the students who responded regarding their experience with the activity, reactions were overwhelmingly positive. One of our hopes was that the activity would help exemplify the need and process of improving instruction over time through evaluation of existing needs and the implementation of solutions (one of the intended learning outcomes of the course). One student said that through the activity, she “[became] more aware of designing with accessibility in mind. Because of your awareness and drive to make this class more accessible—I have found myself considering these ideas as I design things at work.”

Others said the simple activity helped them get more out of the class. One student reported that “the experience was enjoyable because it led me to learn more

about what I was transcribing. I think it absolutely added to my experience in the course. I don't feel as if I missed out on the assignment that I replaced by doing the transcription. It is always good to feel like you can help others learn. Thank you for the opportunity.”

Another enterprising student, who wanted the experience to be a true service exercise, completed both options. She said transcribing helped her focus better on what the instructor was saying, while helping her feel rewarded for the opportunity to help out.

As a final point of feedback, one student who chose not to do the service learning option expressed appreciation that she was given a choice. For her, the alternative certification option fit her professional goals better, and the service alternative seemed a little overwhelming.

CONCLUSIONS

The transcription activity provided a small example of the sort of thing that can be done to add service learning to an online course, yet it revealed some useful anecdotes. For one, it reminded us that students often welcome opportunities to participate in service-oriented activities, especially when the activity relates to their own life experience, observations, or personal relationships. Some research suggests that a majority (64%) of college-age students are already involved in volunteer activities of some sort (Jacoby, 1996a), while other studies show a drop in the level of volunteerism from high school to college (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This suggests that students have the will to serve their communities but are dependent on others, particularly their instructors and institution, for the opportunity to incorporate service into their complicated schedules (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Likewise, service learning has great potential to help students feel a stronger investment in a class, be it online or other-

wise. If done right, service learning can have a unifying effect on all involved. Eberly (1997) wrote, "[Service learning] can be a unifying force among those who serve. With the exception of the parent-child relationship, there is probably nothing that binds people together more strongly than working together in a common cause" (p. 29). This sentiment was echoed by a student who participated in the bridge building project noted earlier. He reported that, "Before the project, we didn't interact a lot as a class. After the project we became friends" (Packer, 2008).

Imagine the potential of such an outcome among students of diverse backgrounds. As one Black student noted in reference to the school-building project in Africa, "It is quite easy to start a conversation when you are working side by side on something you both believe in" (Eastmond & Vitale, 2002).

Student feedback in our educational research course indicated that service learning can help students view their education in broader terms—beyond benefiting themselves and toward benefitting others. This broader focus can have a lasting impact on their thinking that is both motivating and instructive. Students who experience service benefits in a class setting, we believe, will be more likely to engage in service to their local, national, or world community in the future, and will be more sophisticated in searching out these opportunities.

Students will also learn valuable lessons about community and practical activities along the way. Referring to the bridge-building activity mentioned earlier, a student involved in obtaining permissions from the three organizational entities with proprietary interest in the bridge stated, "Obtaining permission was a more difficult process than actually building the bridge." That is a lesson about the community that will last far longer and be felt more deeply than reading the same conclusions in a textbook chapter.

These and other benefits of service learning can and will be achieved more often in online instruction as instructors, administrators, and designers find new and innovative ways to integrate service into their curriculum and course design. Efforts to bring service learning online could most likely to be championed, as observed by Eberly (1997), by professors who have had previous experience with service learning and know from experience its benefits, either through U.S. Peace Corps service or other activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To those wishing to try service learning in their own online instruction, we offer some practical recommendations, based on experience.

1. Align the activity, literally or symbolically, with the educational objectives of the course. Provide opportunities for students to apply, focus, or reflect on the content and aims of the course, and where possible, involve them in the decisions about what the service project will be.
2. Find ways to align the activity with student interests and experiences and be sure that it meets a relevant need. Students will be more likely to find motivation and meaning when the activity has relevance and affects something or someone they know and care about. Where possible, involve students in defining the project.
3. Depending on the nature of the activity and its criticality to the course aims, service learning can be offered as an alternative optional activity. Online students tend to appreciate options, and service taken as an option can be more meaningful than a mandatory assignment for all.
4. Be prepared for student uptake on a service-learning option to be greater

- than you might expect. Have enough work available to meet a high demand.
5. Fit your conception of community to the realities of the online course. Service learning endeavors are historically more challenging to implement successfully in nonresidential colleges (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996) because students are less capable of engaging in activities outside of the classroom. Online courses, where students are dispersed geographically and across time, are likely to share this challenge to a greater extent. In identifying a community to service and a community partner, if any, to engage with, be sure that it is a community, type of community, or partnering organization that all students have access to—be it an online, regional, national, worldwide, or demographic community. Where an online course provides additional variables in successfully connecting with a community or community partner from location to location, it may be wise to provide alternative activities or requirements should one or more students struggle to get started.
 6. Provide easy-to-use tools for student collaboration and be sure students are properly trained through orientation modules and instructor outreach to use the tools. Asynchronous communication tools are necessary for online students, who struggle to find a common time to meet online. However, real-time communication tools, such as videoconferencing or chat, can prove useful at times for allowing students to work as groups or for allowing the instructor to touch base with groups or individuals.
 7. Have a solid plan and structure in place for managing the service-learning activity (Berman, 2006). Any time online students are expected to collaborate together in achieving an end result, delays, setbacks, and pushed deadlines are to be expected. Have clear directions and contingency plans in place.
 8. Provide opportunities for reflection on the activity (Berman, 2006; Jacoby, 1996b). Reflection is one of the keys to successful experiential learning. In our experience, students are much less likely to find meaning in a project or connect the service activity with the objectives of the course unless they are encouraged to reflect upon their experience. Reflection can come in the way of journaling, discussing, creating papers or presentations, or even completing a simple evaluation or responding to a feedback request.
- We have reached a time when students can be expected to interact throughout their lives in a broadened, global community, facilitated by modern communications technologies. The time has therefore come to extend service-learning opportunities from the live classroom to the virtual classroom and the online world. It is our hope that more educators will find ways to integrate service learning into their online programs. We look forward to hearing the success stories!

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