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Making a difference:

Bridging Theory and Practice in the Social Science Classroom

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**Introduction**

By their nature the social sciences deal with people and the social structures they create. Thus, students in a social science classroom must be able to relate the topics discussed in class to the world beyond academia. Yet, since the behavioral revolution in the social sciences, the focus has become less on the practical application of knowledge and more on theory testing and analysis. While theories are certainly important, the need to bring these theories out of the classroom is increasingly being recognized. To that end, experiential learning (also called service learning or community based learning), presents a useful tool in helping students connect materials they learn in class to the “real-world”.

Service learning “"is a pedagogical strategy that intentionally integrates service to the community with classroom learning."[[1]](#footnote-1) It rejects the “banking model” of education, involving the downward transmission of information from teacher to passive student. Rather, it envisions education as a collaborative venture between teacher and student forcing students to take responsibility for their learning. It involves, "(a) volunteer activities done by (b) individual students with high cultural capital for the sake of (c) individuals with low cultural capital (d) within the context of an academic class (e) with ameliorative consequences"[[2]](#footnote-2)

By moving beyond the classroom, experiential learning can help students connect what they learn in a course to what they see in their community, illustrating theoretical concepts, and helping to fuel discussion and better understanding of course materials. It has also been shown to increase student awareness of societal issues, increase interpersonal skills, increase a sense of social responsibility, and encourage a life-long commitment to civic involvement. On a more practical level, experiential learning can provide students with the skills employers are searching for in new graduates, including the ability to work collaboratively, developing and implementing strategic plans and organizing and running projects.

This paper discusses a project initially developed for an introduction to world politics course that has since been adapted to classes in sociology. The project involves organizing a campus campaign, to be run by students, focusing on issues related to course materials. The project is structured to allow for minimal faculty input, allowing the students to design, develop, and run their own campaigns.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section one will outline the background for the project identifying the types of institutions and classes in which it was best implemented. The second section will discuss the literature on service/experiential learning identifying the research done on the subject as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the pedagogy. Section three will describe the criteria identified as best practices for experiential learning projects. Section four, will delve into the project, discussing its structure and implementation. The next section will look at assessment. The paper will conclude with an examination of what still needs to be done in order to properly evaluate the effectiveness of the assignment.

**Background**

The project was initially developed for a class in world politics as a way to allow students to delve more deeply into the types of issues dealt with in class. The class is part of the general education curriculum in a small (2300 student), liberal arts based school, in the Midwest. The school offers 60 undergraduate majors encompassing pre-professional, interdisciplinary, and more traditional ‘liberal arts’ programs. The vast majority of students enrolled at the school come from neighboring regions. The students in the class are mostly freshmen and first-semester sophomore non-majors with little prior knowledge of the world or global issues.

The classes tend be small with a limit of 30 student per class. As will be discussed below, this allowed for the division of the class into smaller groups of 6-8 student which were responsible for developing and implementing the service learning project. The originating goal was to allow students to explore the many issues facing the world, while at the same time helping them understand the connection between their actions and what can often seems as insurmountable problems. The project was adapted beyond the initial structure to include larger classes and a more varied student population for use in Introduction to Sociology and Social Problems courses taught in multiple different sociology departments within northeastern Ohio colleges, universities, and community colleges. These institutions of higher learning included both public and private, rural and urban settings. The class sizes ranged from 25 to 100 students divided in groups of 5 – 10 people.

**The Value of Service Learning**

The benefits of service learning have long been recognized. Service learning can provide a crucial bridge between the theoretical world of the classroom and the real world, demonstrating the applicability of those theories to students in a way that no amount of lectures can. More importantly, it has been shown to improve students’ academic performance, increase social awareness and activism, and help develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Further, it can provide a powerful framework for educational institutions. It can help them bridge the traditional liberal arts with the professional skills demanded by employers. It can bring more coherence and integration to both the curriculum and faculty roles by incorporating service to the community and the institution into the classroom, taking up the call, issued by Benjamin Barber[[3]](#footnote-3), to reassert the University as a civic institution.

At its most basic level, service learning benefits the student by helping them connect with their communities, affording them “the opportunity to apply experiences gained in helping others to their understanding of material learned in the classroom.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The connection was recognized by John Dewey, who noted that student involvement in the community can provide students with an opportunity to apply what they learn benefiting not just themselves but the wider public.[[5]](#footnote-5)

These experiences can serve as examples of broader theoretical concepts discussed in class or as potential starting points for discussion and evaluation of new ideas. As noted by Cohen and Kinsey: service learning can enhance achievement of goals and objectives by helping students understand complex ideas and material.[[6]](#footnote-6) Further, based on a study out of the University of Michigan, service learning has been shown to help develop substantive knowledge and improve academic achievement, provide practical skills in problem solving, and increase ability to apply principles from the course.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Two separate studies stand out as exemplars that demonstrate the benefits of service learning to students’ abilities to retain and apply materials from class. Astin and Sax conducted a pre-post-test study of 3,450 entering freshmen in 42 institutions with federally funded community service programs. They found positive effects of service learning on a broad range of variables including: increased interaction with faculty, time spent on homework and studies, enhanced leadership abilities, social self-confidence, and a self-perceived increase in critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, as well as knowledge of people from different cultures and races, and the understanding of problems facing the community and the nation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In a study conducted by Amy Strage, involving a comparative case study of 475 students in an Introductory Child Development course, 166 of whom were in a class with a service learning component, the benefits of service learning to increasing students’ ability to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to real world situations was demonstrated. The study compared grades earned by those in the service-learning classes and non-service learning classes finding modest benefits to students doing service learning. While the results showed students in the service learning classes did no better than their non-service learning peers in mastering the basic facts presented in the course, they did better on essay exam questions and essay self-assessment questions. This indicates that while service learning may not help students with information recall it does provide an advantage when students are required to apply the concepts beyond the classroom by defining and solving problems.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In addition to helping students in the classroom, service learning can also contribute to the growth in the sense of students’ social responsibility as well as increasing their awareness of social problems and their role in solving them.[[10]](#footnote-10) In 1989, Benjamin Barber, called on American universities to reassume their civic mission to build communities.[[11]](#footnote-11) He noted there is a need to bridge the two dominant trends in American academia—purely theoretical research and purely vocational training—and develop a bridge between the two and connect the institution to the world beyond campus. To that end, service learning can play a role by fostering a more active citizenry and relinking colleges and universities with their local communities as well as bridging knowledge and civic responsibility and public work.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The connection between student involvement in service learning and their willingness to continue to pursue civic service after the class is also widely discussed in the literature. Debats, Drost, and Hansen, note a strong relationship between students’ perception of life as meaningful and their involvement in service activities.[[13]](#footnote-13) Giles and Eyler, similarly, note that service learning can be a powerful tool for getting students ready to be a citizen in their community.[[14]](#footnote-14) In a study conducted by Reed et al., 34 students in an undergraduate psychology class were asked to undertake a service project that involved dedicating 8-10 hours over the course of five days to community service. They found that, even for such a short period, students demonstrated an increased awareness of social problems, sense of social responsibility, a greater awareness of the meaningfulness of college life and a willingness for future work in a service role.[[15]](#footnote-15)

While building a sense of social responsibility and connectedness and providing students with a method for better understanding materials in the classroom, service learning can also help build the practical skills demanded by employers, thus aligning the more traditional liberal arts with the continued shift in higher education towards a more pre-professional (vocational) orientation. As noted by Steven Brint much of the twentieth century has been characterized by a continuous shift of faculty, students, degrees, and resources away from liberal arts majors towards the professional majors.[[16]](#footnote-16) This in great part is due to the fact that, unlike in countries where higher education is highly subsidized by the state, in the US, higher education institutions are becoming ever more dependent on tuition to survive. This has become more so in the latter part of the twentieth century, as state budgets shrank. Consequently, American higher education has been very vulnerable to the market, being forced to cater to consumer demands and market pressures.[[17]](#footnote-17)

As a recent Gallup survey of employers illustrated, employers are emphasizing the need for college graduates to have applied skills as they enter the job market. This criteria far outpaces either the student’s major or where they received their college degree as a deciding factor in hiring.[[18]](#footnote-18) In this regard, service learning can provide a new template for higher education, "[by] linking the classroom to the world of praxis..."[[19]](#footnote-19) These experiences teach students valuable skills including working collaboratively, time management, planning and following through on a project, as well as more rudimentary skills such as written and oral communication.

**Criteria for Good Service Learning Projects**

Although service-learning projects can take many forms there is some agreement as to what such projects should include. At the most basic level, the project must combine classroom learning with service to the community. Most importantly, it must allow students to reflect on the application of course materials to actions taken in the community.[[20]](#footnote-20) The project described in this paper, is structured as to be applicable to a broad definition of community and can be defined as narrowly as the local neighborhood or as broadly as the international community.

The most basic criteria for service learning, and most widely accepted, can be found in the *National and Community Service Act* of 1990. The document outlines a method

under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and the community; that is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for the student to think, talk, or write about that the student did and saw during actual service activity; that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Any effective service learning project must include these characteristics at a minimum.

In addition, Dan Butin, argues that the focus of the project must be on those being served, whose “circumstances, outlooks, and ways of life” must be respected. Further, the service being provided must be “meaningful and relevant…to community and the community being served should determine what service they want.” [[22]](#footnote-22) And finally, the service must be connected to the academic content of the course. In other words, the project must help students engage with course materials, forcing them to reinforce, expand or question what they learn in the classroom. As noted by Amy Strage, "students learn course content as they service their community and reflect on the connections between explicit course content and their experiences in the field."[[23]](#footnote-23)

At the same time, the project cannot provide “transparent experiences” that result in little connection between course content and the work students do outside the classroom.[[24]](#footnote-24) Consequently, it is necessary to have a reflective component in all service learning projects to allow students to process what they learn, as they learn it. While it is widely accepted that a reflective component is necessary, the nature of that part of the project can vary. Alan Waterman identifies two distinctions in the reflective part of the service learning project: 1. whether the focus is place on the personal experiences and development of the student and/or on more structured classroom learning and 2. whether the format of the reflection should be written or oral.[[25]](#footnote-25) The project described in this paper, at various times, used both written and/or oral reflections and allowed the students to both reflect on their personal experiences in doing the service learning assignment as well as the function and organization of the project and connecting the information they learned about their topic back to the course materials.

**Structure of Assignment**

The project involves developing and running a campus campaign addressing a major global issue. The primary outcome of the project is to raise social awareness of the issues. A secondary objective can be added involving some kind of substantive outcome, for example funds being raised or a petition being signed

The project addresses several pedagogical goals, above all, providing students with an opportunity to engage with the topics covered in the course in a much more substantive level than is allowed in a typical 15 week semester. The exercise serves the additional purposes of introducing students to the type of issues being addressed by practitioners in the fields, before embarking on further study in the discipline, as well as providing them with the skills needed to address the issues they are investigating. This project was, thus, found to be best suited for a social science survey courses at the 100 or 200 level, where students have not achieved a high-level of specialization.

The campaign is very student driven, allowing students to choose the topics they wish to address, thus giving them an opportunity to investigate and work in areas they feel passionate about. At the same time, it is structured to allow for minimal faculty guidance, in both the selection of the topic and the composition and execution of the service learning assignment. This was done for two reasons: 1. the limited amount of time to complete the project, thus necessitating the need for much of the project to be completed outside of class, and 2. the need for students to take ownership of their work.

Project Outline

The project can be divided into five steps (outlined below), with students taking the lead. The goal is to keep the process as simple as possible, thus empowering the students to act independently and run much of the project on their own. Maintaining the faculty’s role primarily as a manager and facilitator or as a support consultant. This encouraged students to think creatively about their work and take responsibility for their activities without deferring to an authority figure while at the same time feeling that they can take calculated risks.

***Step 1: preparatory research***

At the start of the semester students are asked to divide into groups of 6-8 students based on broad categories of subjects dealt with in class. For example, in the introduction to world politics class the categories were: human rights, conflict and war, environment, and poverty. Once the groups are determined, students are then required to do research, finding out about the types of issues within the general topic in order to narrow their focus to a specific issue. The goal here is to allow the students to identify issues they feel passionate about and about which they would be interested in learning more. Generally, the research should be brief and limited, lasting no more than a week, in order to allow plenty of time to organize the campus campaign.

It is important to note that the goal at this point is not for students to become experts in the topic but rather to become familiar with the types of issues with which they can deal. A deeper knowledge and understanding of the issue will be developed as the students undertake and develop their campus campaign. An important part of any experiential learning project is for students to learn through the process of doing and reconnecting that knowledge back to the classroom.

As part of the process of choosing their specific issue area, students are required to partner with a non-governmental organization working on that issue. Working with these organizations provides some clear advantages considering the time constraints faced by the students. Primarily, most of these groups have ready-made campaigns that they are organizing. For students, it simply becomes matter of joining. Students are thus provided readymade activities that they can adopt if they choose, making it easier for the less creative students. More importantly, all of these organizations provide valuable resources for students, in educational materials and supplies for putting on the campaign such as posters and flyers. Students are required to make contact with the organizations in the first two weeks of clases because oftern resources are limited and based on a first-come-first-served basis.

*Step 2: setting the goals*

Once students have decided on the topic and the specific area of focus. The next step is to determine what will be accomplished. It is important that students set proper expectations, choosing goals that that can be reached in one semester. While achieving world peace is certainly admirable, a semester is too short a time to achieve this objective. In contrast, getting 500 signatures on a petition is very doable in fifteen weeks. At the same time, students should not be discouraged from attempting to accomplish bigger things. In our experience, students, with a bit of encouragement, have taken on substantial projects including raising funds (close to $5,000.00) for children in need of heart surgery in Vietnam, funding sanctuaries for endangered Macaws in Latin America, and organizing a massive letter writing campaign for Amnesty International on behalf of child prisoners.

In determining how the goals are to be achieved the organizations the students are working with can come in handy. As noted earlier, if students either don’t want to or simply cannot develop their own campaign ideas, many of these organizations provide ready-made campaigns with projects and activities students can use. In order to ensure student ownership, it is important for the students to choose activities that they see a complete-able in one semester and that fit in their already over-crowded schedules, while at the same time achieving their goals. Concurrently, it is important not to artificially limit students in their creativity, since it is their project. Above all, students must consider how best to achieve maximum impact. Finally, students must be cautioned not to get lost in the creative process of choosing activities and losing sight of the greater goal of educating the community about their cause.

*Step 3: Divide responsibilities*

After establishing the goals, the students will divide the responsibilities. It is imperative that the students clearly identify the specific steps necessary to complete the project as well as the timeframe for the completion of each part of their campaign in order avoid any questions about what needs to be done and when. The more detailed the outline the better since it will limit the need for oversight. The schedule will need to be maintained by a group leader chosen at the beginning of the project, preferably by the students. It will be up to the group leader to coordinate all group activities, making sure everything is completed on time.

In order to minimize faculty domination of this project, it is imperative that each group have a leader whose responsibility it is to keep everyone on task. As anyone who has ever organized a class group project will attest, a pattern quickly emerges that sees one or two people take over the project while the rest remain as passive observers or simply take credit for work they had little to do with. Generally speaking, this tends to be the group “leaders” either by default or because they are the ones who care the most about their grade. Since it is up to the group leader to make sure everyone does their job, the final assessment (as will be discussed below) gives priority in determining the grade for the rest of the group to the leader, thus providing them with the tools necessary to make sure everyone does their part of the project.

In order to help students organize their projects, a planning form was developed and is available in the appendix. The form lists the results of all the above steps, requiring students to identify the project they are doing, the organization(s) they are working with, their goals/expected outcomes, and the project plan. The planning form, is submitted to the instructor prior to moving on to the next step in order to ensure the project is feasible and on-track.

*Step 4: Take action*

The culmination of the project is naturally something that will draw attention to the cause being advocated and result in both the education of the public and a potentially substantive measurable result, for example a petition or funds raised. It is important to emphasize the progressive nature of this project. It is easy to become overwhelmed when considering all that needs to be done to make this campus campaign successful. Consequently, the main task for the instructor is to make sure students focus on the step they are on rather than the outcome or the “action”, which comes after all the preliminary steps are completed. At the same time, students do need to remember that they are expected to take some action as a culmination of their preparatory work.

Students will need to take a series of actions that support each other. Since the larger goal is education, repetition and reinforcing activities are the most effective methods for drawing attention to the campaign issue. For example, for one project our students chose to put up posters that continuously provide additional information. The posters were put up in waves with each round adding additional information to previous posters. It is important for students to consider the best way to generate widespread support and attention while at the same time remembering the time limits they must work with. Consequently, they must carefully choose actions for maximum impact.

*Step Five: Reflection*

As noted in the literature, a reflection is central to experiential learning, providing an opportunity to connect student experiences outside of class with the materials from class. At the same time, reflection allows students to think about their project as it progresses. One of the key educational elements of this project is for students to learn how to work collaboratively, develop and implement strategic plans and organize and run projects. According to National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), these are all skills identified by employers as crucial in potential employees.[[26]](#footnote-26) Consequently, the reflective component is structured to force students to evaluate the outcome and function of their campaign, as well as how it was organized and run.

As noted earlier, this project used both oral and/or written reflective assignments. The choice of assignment type was governed by instructor preference and the time available as well as the other assignment required in the course, which were often determined by the broader school curriculum. If using oral presentations, the reflections can be done at any point in the semester depending on what needs to be emphasized. If the emphasis is on the issue and integrating what students learn from their projects with classroom materials, presentations can be integrated into the semester at appropriate points, with students presenting on their issues as the topic is discussed in class. For example, when discussing global conflict, the group addressing conflict and war can be asked to present, integrating their project into what is being examined in class. At the same time, it is important for students to present their project at the end of the semester, in order to allow for a wider examination of the project itself, in order to answer questions on its structure, organization, and function.

While the written reflection is done individually by each member of the group, as opposed to the entire group doing the presentation, like the oral reflection, a written reflection can be structured to be turned at any point during the semester, depending on the desired focus. While it is difficult to use a written reflection to have students instruct their classmates on a particular issue, it can be used to gauge specific student understanding of their topic and their ability to integrate it with classroom materials. To that end, written assignments can be made due at any point in the semester. Still, as with the oral assignment, it is useful to have a written assignment due at the end of the project, at which point students can reflect on the project as a whole, answering questions that deal with structure and function of the project.

In order to guide students in developing their reflection a rubric was developed that focused on specific questions students were expected to answer, at a minimum. The questions are listed in table 1.

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| Table 1: Reflection assignment questions |
| WHAT?   * What was the issue you dealt with? * What did you do for a campus campaign? * What organization did you work with? * What do I expect to get out of this experience (purpose/goals/ideals)?   SO WHAT?   * What impact did the project have on me? * What did I do that was effective? Why was it effective? * What did I do that seemed to be ineffective? How could I have done it differently? * What values, opinions, decisions have been made or changed through this experience? * What have you learned about the topic, the people I work with, and yourself? Did anything surprise/shock you? |

**Assessment**

The assignment is structured to allow for multiple assessment methods while at the same time, keeping the process fairly simple. The assessment of the project occurs at two level: at the student level, driven by peer evaluations, and at the instructor level. Instructor’s assessment of the assignment is based on the reflective component as well as the final project outcome. Generally, assessment of the project structure and components is not done. Rather, the focus is on the process, outcome, and ability to integrate the project with classroom materials. Since the project is supposed to be built and run by the students, assessing the various components of the campaign will inevitably lead students to create projects they feel will satisfy the teacher instead of addressing their chosen issue and will also likely, although indirectly, interject the instructor into the structure and operation of the project.

Since a majority of the project occurs outside of the classroom, where the instructor has no way to perform direct observation, peer evaluations are crucial. To accomplish this, each student in the group is asked to evaluate the other group members based on the level of their contribution. This can be done several ways. The evaluation form can be fairly simple, for example using a Likert scale on which students rate the contribution of fellow group members, or more complicated, breaking the evaluation of contribution into various components such as attendance at meetings and contribution to implementing the project.

Whichever method is used, it is important to note that the group leader’s evaluation is counted as a greater percentage of the students’ grades than all the other evaluations. The purpose for this, as discussed above is to give the group leader leverage to coerce the other members of the group to do the work that needs to be done. Students are often willing to allow others to do the work for them if given the opportunity and free-riding is very common in group projects. Making it clear that the group leader has the ability to seriously influence a student’s grade tends to curtail any potential free-rider issues.

**Conclusion**

Experiential learning has been shown to provide great benefits to students in both their academic work and in their civic development, connecting what they learn in the classroom to the real world and engaging them with the community they live in. The project discussed in this paper is aimed at providing students with an opportunity to address some of the issues dealt with in the classroom in greater depth than what is allowed in a typical 15-week semester.

The service learning project required students to partner with a non-governmental organization in order to organize a campaign with the aim of educating the campus about a specific issue. In addition, the project could be modified, easily, to allow for a more substantive outcome such as fund raising. The expectations were that students would identify a specific topic about which they cared, identify goals they wanted to achieve, develop the steps to reach those goals, and implement and run a semester long action.

While the project has been developed over a period of six years, an evaluation of its effectiveness has still not be done. Anecdotal data, in the form of student feedback, has demonstrated that students do enjoy the project and feel it has some academic merit, helping them learn about the issue as well as giving them practice in developing and running a campus campaign. The same anecdotal evidence has also shown the limitation of this project, in that it is best applied on a campus where commuter students are not the dominant population and the class size is rather small (no more than 50 students). Still, in order to determine the value of the project a more systematic evaluation needs to be conducted. It would be worth investigating if the project aids in students’ understanding of course materials, the project’s influence on student attitudes and commitment to civic engagement, and perhaps its relationship to academic performance.

**Appendix:**

**Project Outline**

**Issue:**

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**Group members:**

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**Group leader:**

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**Organization (s) you will be working with:**

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**Goal:**

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**How will you achieve these goals?**

**Will you be able to work with any organizations/individuals on campus? (list organizations/individuals)**

**Project Plan:**

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| **Date** | **Activity** | **Person (s) responsible** |
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