Juggling Teacher Responsibilities in Service-Learning Courses

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In the service-learning writing courses I teach at Wright State University, my academic goals seem simple. I want my students to improve their writing skills and to develop civic literacy. The special challenge of achieving these objectives begins to come into focus in defining civic literacy. In my courses, I define it as having the ability to critically examine the complex social situations that create and perpetuate needs in our communities and an awareness of our responsibility as literate individuals to address those needs.

It is, perhaps, the complexity of this goal that has led Richard M. Battistoni to note that a service-learning course necessarily requires "greater time and effort spent on coordinating and structuring activities and class discussions than a traditional class" (94). However, service-learning teachers may find that the service component of a course can become a fierce competitor for the extra time required for the classroom component. In order to develop and maintain the community and university relationships necessary to sustain service-learning courses, the teacher often must play multiple, demanding roles that make it difficult to keep the energy of a course moving in the direction of its academic purposes. The teacher may even be lured toward the "service" aspect of the course to the degree that students experience a loss of learning. Yet, if service-learning is to secure and maintain a place in higher education, the primary rationale behind its existence must be its efficacy in achieving important academic goals.

During the seven years in which I have been teaching service-learning courses, I have experimented with a number of course designs in an effort to help my students achieve the learning objectives, settling, for the time being, on two main designs. In the first, based on the idea of learning through teaching, my university students work in small groups on writing projects with inner-city public school students and write journals and reflective essays about their experiences. In the second model, groups of two to three business writing students work for nonprofit agencies to create documents such as newsletters, handbooks, brochures, web site copy, research reports, press releases, newspaper articles, and public service announcements. In this article, I share my experiences with these two models and discuss what I have learned about the various roles service-learning teachers perform.

Roles of Service-Learning Teachers

First, service-learning teachers have a unique role to play as partners with members of the community. In a service-learning course, activities such as planning syllabi and assignments, normally the sole responsibility of the instructor, are complicated by the need to model our democratic ideals by collaborating with community partners. As Battistoni has noted, "If students are to think about citizenship as knowing geographic neighbors and being in a committed relationship with their community, the structure of the campus service-learning program as a whole needs to mirror these values" (90). We cannot just sit in our offices, define a community's needs, and design course syllabi and assignments to address those needs without the input of our community partners, imposing our "service" on them in a hierarchical fashion. Rather we need to work with them collaboratively in a relationship based on reciprocity. Such relationships involve researching and networking to make the initial contacts; meeting to establish course goals and structure; and communicating documents through fax or mail. Because others are involved in this planning, there can be no procrastination; this work must begin long before the course does.

Once the course is underway, the usual role of the instructor is further complicated by the need to facilitate the students' service projects, often serving as mediator of conflicts between the students and the community partners. These responsibilities mean more phone calls and emails, and the burden of these tasks is multiplied by our concern, often to the point of worry, that our students' writing be of sufficient quality to constitute real service.

Service-learning teachers must also act as managers of various logistical tasks. We may need to check with the university legal office about liability for our students when they are at their service sites. We sometimes have to set up transportation to and from the projects. And because the projects are often more innovative than those in traditional courses, there may be materials to purchase: videos, audio tapes, batteries for tape recorders. At the end of the course, there may be certificates, plaques, or gifts to present to the community partners to thank them for sharing the role of educator with us.

A fourth role we must play is that of public relations coordinator. This role is important for several reasons, the first of which is recruitment. At Wright State, there is no designation for service-learning courses in the course catalog. Therefore, for students to find out that these courses exist, I must arrange for special postings in the listing of course offerings for the upcoming term, make presentations to classes, create and distribute flyers, do mailings, and respond to student inquiries.

Several important scholars among us have noted another reason it is important for us to shoulder public relations responsibilities. At the 1998 CCC Convention in Chicago, Edward Zlotkowski and Bruce Herzberg pointed to the need to develop institutional infrastructures to support the longevity and stability of service-learning in higher education ("Challenging Academic Insularity"). And Tom Deans, in his essay in *Writing the Community*, suggests that in promoting the pedagogy of service-learning, we follow the "grass-roots" model made successful by our colleagues in Writing Across the Curriculum programs (33-34). This model proceeds by "building on the enthusiasm and word-of-mouth success of the 'early adopters'" (33).

However, in order to succeed in this endeavor, early adopters need to attract attention to the work of their students. That means writing press releases or holding end-of-term events. For the course in which my students assist in a local public school, we have a party and present all of the public school students with folders and pencils embossed with the university logo and books of the class writings. At the end of my business writing course, we hold a reception at the university to which we invite our community partners, department chairs, deans, provosts, and university public relations representatives. Events such as these can function as a way to thank and honor our community partners and to assure their continued good will. They can also provide a way for community partners to get ideas from each other about possible future projects. However, planning such events entails many extra tasks such as handling invitations and RSVPs, arranging for refreshments, and purchasing gifts. While these activities can be a wonderfully satisfying way for all involved to celebrate the students' accomplishments and the university-community partnership, orchestrating them can confront the lone teacher with a daunting set of tasks and drain energy from other, more traditional academic goals.

Because of the need to purchase extra materials, service-learning classes can create a drain on a department's budget, often necessitating that those who teach them play a fifth role, that of grant writer. Grants must be researched and written, laborious enough tasks in themselves; then, should those efforts bear fruit, the teacher must manage a budget, which is no small matter given the number of expenditures already enumerated. In fact, the teacher may need to manage two budgets, one for the grant money, which will only pay for certain types of expenses, and one for the university's matching funds, which also is limited to a particular set of expenditures. Then periodic financial and programmatic reports must be made, along with a summary report at the end. Preparing for the financial portion of these reports may entail moving funds from one type of account to another in coordination with departmental support staff and the university funding office.

The sixth unique role service-learning teachers must frequently play is that of program evaluator. Some grants require that certain objectives of the granting institution be evaluated in exchange for grant monies. For example, when a colleague, Saralinda Blanning, and I received $200 from Wright State University's then Office of Multicultural Affairs, we were provided with a set of pretests and post-tests and required to evaluate the changes in our students' knowledge of and attitudes toward people of diverse groups. Not only did we devote class time to the administration of the survey instruments, but we also spent many hours analyzing our students' responses and writing a report of our findings which, however interesting, did not directly address the more focused academic goals we had established for the course.

The evaluation process in service-learning courses is complicated in other ways as well. Sometimes, teachers need to collaborate with community partners in the actual grading of students' service projects. In my business writing course, where the students write documents for nonprofit agencies, I consider the community service partners the experts on how well those documents meet the needs of their organizations and constituencies. I also need their input as to what worked well in their experience of the projects and what suggestions they might have. Consequently, after the students present their final projects to their agency partners at our reception, I send out emails and letters, asking for their assessment of the quality of the products and the processes. Of course, good teachers are always engaged in the important processes of reflection and course revision, but when those processes involve so many others (seven different agencies, with 2-3 collaborators at each), it is necessarily more complex and time-consuming.

So far, I have discussed the unique roles service-learning teachers may play in: 1) collaborating with community partners on course design; 2) managing various logistical matters; 3) facilitating projects and mediating conflicts; 4) coordinating public relations; 5) writing, administering, and evaluating grants, and 6) collaborating with community partners in evaluating the process and products of the course. Where do the course goals enter into this long list of responsibilities? They are evident only in our efforts to collaborate with community partners in planning the courses, in our facilitation of the student projects, and in the final assessment of the projects and processes with an eye to setting goals for future courses. Fully half of the roles listed here do not directly relate to the academic goals of the courses.

If it is true, as Battistoni has asserted, that for service-learning courses to succeed in their academic purposes, teachers must spend more time and effort planning classroom activities and discussions than they do in traditional courses, service-learning teachers have a real dilemma. How can we reserve the extra time needed for the academic concerns of our courses while juggling all these additional roles?

Attempted Solutions

In my seven years of service-learning teaching, I have tried three methods for managing the workload: team teaching, enlisting the help of a teaching assistant, and securing various forms of institutional support. Team-teaching made a kind of sense to me: A colleague and I could divide the various duties. I have team-taught service-learning courses twice, both times with colleagues who were interested in service-learning pedagogy and who did not want to make their first attempt a solo flight. The first time with Debbie Bertsch should have been the ideal partnership. We had already enjoyed a successful team-teaching experience in another course, and we already knew that it would mean making extra time to collaborate on class preparation. However, we were committed to doing everything we could to use the relationship to reduce the typical workload of service-learning courses. We split the journal reading, each reading the journals of half the students the first time we collected them, then switching and reading the journals from the other half of the students the next time. We also split the conferencing and developed an unusual system for grading essays. Each of us would be the "close" reader for half of the essays, making careful notes on the strengths and weaknesses of those essays, and the "fast" reader for the other half of the essays, making no notes on those. Then we would get together, discuss the essays and negotiate the grades. In terms of the logistical duties, I set up the transportation to the service site, and Debbie bought the materials we needed. By the end of the course, Debbie and I agreed that because we had wanted to team-teach rather than engage in turn-taking, the extra time required for collaborative decision-making and for planning individual classes cost us more time than we saved in other ways. The same was true the second time I team-taught with Saralinda Blanning in spite of the fact that she handled most of the duties associated with overseeing our grant.

After the team-teaching solution proved unsatisfactory, a university administrator suggested that I secure the help of a graduate teaching assistant to handle some of the responsibilities. However, as soon as I sat down to meet with Beth Wheeler, the teaching assistant who would be working with me, and looked into her face, I knew that my own democratic principles would not permit me to use her in such a hierarchical fashion. I told her that I wanted to collaborate with her in teaching the class, and from that point, our relationship manifested all the challenges of team teaching, along with a few extra complications. Being the wonderfully honest person Beth is, she told the students on the first day

of class that service-learning was a whole new experience for her and that she would be learning right along with them. As a consequence, the students treated me as the "master teacher" and her as my gofer. This situation resulted in emotional tension between the students and Beth and between Beth and me, which sapped our energy and distracted us from our academic purposes. My colleague, Debbie, had a similar experience when she enlisted two undergraduate teaching assistants who had taken her service-learning class the year before to facilitate groups who were writing documents for nonprofit organizations. Again, they faced all the extra time constraints of team-teaching, and, in addition, since the teaching assistants were receiving independent study credit for their efforts, Debbie reported that she sometimes felt as though she were teaching two courses simultaneously.

The final method I have tried for reducing the workload of service-learning courses has been to secure various forms of institutional support. Though this kind of assistance comes near what Herzberg and Zlotkowski propose in their charge that we develop infrastructures to support service-learning, my limited experience suggests to me that it is no panacea. Two stories will support this view.

In 1998, our provost heard of my efforts in service-learning, and, wanting to support them, he assigned the Director of Student Life to write a proposal to Ohio Campus Compact for me. I met with her in several hour-long sessions during which I attempted to explain the course in question and gave her copies of my course syllabus and assignments and of a previous grant Saralinda Blanning and I had written. The director was a nice woman who worked hard to get an effective proposal together, but she probably had more than enough of her own work to do, without taking on my cause. I can only imagine how she must have felt about receiving such an assignment. After we had met over two drafts that did not come close to communicating my view of the course and what it was intended to accomplish, I realized that if the proposal were successful in securing a grant, then each time I had to write a report, I would be accountable for delivering on goals and objectives that were not my own. With only one long night before the proposal had to be postmarked, I completely rewrote it myself.

The other story involves a short-lived experiment at Wright State University to create a fulltime staff position in our Center for Teaching and Learning to provide support for faculty interested in teaching service-learning courses. The head of the Center was able to set aside enough in his budget for a one-year staff appointment. During that year, the service-learning coordinator held two workshops per quarter to generate faculty interest in and knowledge of service-learning. As an early adopter, I was expected to attend and often speak at these functions in order to play a part in what Deans describes as the "grass-roots" process on our campus. I needed to form collaborative relationships with interested

teachers across disciplines. At the end of the year, my help was also solicited to collaborate in an unsuccessful attempt to write a proposal to the Associate-Provost, asking her to make the staff position permanent. This surge of interest in service-learning at my institution was certainly something I welcomed. I regret that it was not more successful, and I hope that the spark will yet ignite, resulting in a permanent, institution-wide service-learning program. However, the point I am making here is that the effort required to achieve the long-term health of service-learning by developing institutional infrastructures to support it will, at least in the short-term, add to the workload of service-learning teachers, further complicating our efforts to focus on the academic goals of our courses. What, then, can we do to hold on to that which should be our primary concern?

Recommendations

If our institutions are to develop infrastructures that support civic literacy as a primary value of service-learning, it is important that early adopters committed to civic literacy be part of the process. At my university, other than renegade teachers such as myself, what has been called service-learning has been undertaken mostly by the College of Education and Human Services in the form of student teaching and by the College of Nursing and Health in the form of clinicals. They have been concerned primarily with the acquisition of professional skills, not with the development of civic awareness and responsibility. Therefore, if the service-learning programs at our universities are to have a civic thrust, the impetus must come from elsewhere—from early adopters who view the development of civic literacy as one of the academic concerns of service-learning. If service-learning teachers make adjustments in our workloads in order to better support the learning goals of our courses, these should not come at the expense of our involvement in promoting institutional infrastructures for service-learning.

What I do suggest, however, is that we as individual teachers simplify our non-pedagogical tasks in every other possible way. For myself, I have made several decisions. First, I will no longer team-teach in my service-learning classes, nor will I request a teaching assistant. Second, I will cut expenses and/or ask my community partners to share them. In the course that involves university students in writing groups with local public school students, I will ask the collaborating school to share in the expense of publishing students' work. I may also ask my students to share the cost of refreshments and other purchases. At this point, I am even questioning the advisability of continuing the culminating celebrations. While they clearly serve an important function in enhancing the community-university partnership and in promoting good will, perhaps the accompanying trappings (refreshments, gifts, etc.) constitute an expense in time and money that could be postponed until appropriate institutional support has been developed. All of these actions taken together should significantly reduce the need for grant monies, which leads to my third decision. Unless the grant in question is for big money to support a cross-disciplinary or institution-wide service-learning project, I will not write any more grant proposals. The small $200-$2,000 grants are not worth the work they create. Fourth, I will instead attempt to persuade my department chair and my dean to support service-learning by setting aside some of their discretionary funds for whatever transportation and public relations expenses are absolutely necessary. I will also ask them to support service-learning by granting me a course load reduction, making the argument that service-learning teachers need to free up time to collaborate with our community partners while keeping our focus on students and academic objectives.

We should expect our institutions to support service-learning just as they do other pedagogical and scholarly activities. In addition, because service-learning in composition studies is a relatively new pedagogy, we need time to study those who have done it longest and best so that we can find the most effective methods for achieving our academic objectives and for designing the needed infrastructures. University mission statements and other such documents can help us provide our administrators with a rationale for supporting service-learning in our institutions. At Wright State University, one of the General Education goals is to help our students develop "an awareness of the moral and ethical insight needed for participation in the human community." In order to keep promises like this, we need to appeal to our administrators to provide the necessary time and resources.

Works Cited

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