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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Service-learning: In service of whom? A professor of business reflects on resolving an underlying tension in service-learning

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Abstract: A first-time service-learning instructor explores balancing the obligation to help students achieve approved learning outcomes with ensuring that the service-learning partner receives value from the project. This is a vexing issue because few students deliver professional work. The author recommends that while students must be the instructor's top priority, the instructor also has an obligation to use his or her expertise to help the service-learning partner glean value from students' efforts. To meet this obligation, the instructor must be very generous with his or her time. This investment of time will pay off for everyone involved in service-learning courses.

Subjects: Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management; Small Business Management; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: service-learning; marketing research; learning outcomes; reflection; experiential learning

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Volchok is a marketing strategist with 28 years of experience in branding, marketing communications, new product development, and customer relationship management. He has held managerial positions at Ogilvy & Mather, SAGE Worldwide, Michael F. Carey Associates, CYRK, LLKFB, as well as his own boutique marketing consulting firm. He has created highly successful brand-building marketing communications, consumer and trade promotions, and CRM programs for numerous Fortune 1,000 companies, middle market companies, and start-ups.

Volchok earned his PhD in political science at Columbia University.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Service learning integrates community service with classroom instruction and reflection to enrich students' learning while teaching civic responsibility and strengthening the surrounding community. This dual aim fosters both student growth and the common good.

This essay presents the reflection of a first-time service-learning instructor who is an experienced professor and long-time marketing consultant. He explores the tension balancing the obligation to help students achieve approved learning outcomes while ensuring that the service-learning partner receives value from the project. This is a vexing issue. Few students deliver the professional work service-learning partners need.

The author recommends that while students are the instructor's top priority, the instructor has an obligation to use his or her expertise to help the service-learning partner glean value from students' efforts. To meet this obligation, instructors must be very generous with their time. This investment of time will pay off for students and community service partners.

1. Introduction

My decision to incorporate service-learning into my Marketing Research course did not come lightly. For years I have discussed service-learning with colleagues who have used it in their classrooms. My concern was that my Marketing Research students' knowledge of marketing is limited, perhaps too limited to make a real, meaningful contribution to a service-learning partner.

After reading articles on service-learning, I learned that "marketing research is one of the areas in which nonprofit organizations in general are most lacking and is thus an area of great potential contribution from service-learning" (Petkus, 2000, p. 66). I took a leap of faith. I made the commitment to test service-learning in this class.

My Marketing Research course is a "flipped" three-hour, three-credit class with one-hour in a traditional, brick-and-mortar classroom. It scores high on the Quality Matters rubric, which my college uses to evaluate online classes. I have always used team projects for the last two of the course's four modules. For these team assignments, I ask students to create surveys.

2. My conundrum: Meeting my fiduciary responsibility to students and clients

As an experienced marketing professional, adding a real client piqued my interest. I worked for nearly 30 years as a marketing professional, holding executive positions, at two international advertising agencies, a top promotions agency, and a direct response agency. I was a founding partner at two trade marketing consultancies. And, I consulted to Internet start-ups on a variety of branding issues. Clients, I have learned, are always surprising. They have unstated motivations. They have unanticipated changes of heart. Clients—good ones, bad ones, and those who fall in between—keep you on your toes. You must always be alert, honest, flexible, and ready to present and support your recommendations. Earning a client's trust is serious business. Their needs are paramount. Any successful marketing consultant will attest that satisfying a current client is easier than acquiring a new one, and a happy client leads to more work.

Meeting my obligations to both the service-learning partner and my students entails a tension that I confronted when designing and implementing service-learning. My students—the community college students I have been teaching for 10 years and the graduate students I taught for nearly 9 years—rarely deliver work that meets the standards clients demand. How do I balance obligations I owe to my students—to introduce them to the curriculum, help them achieve the desired learning outcomes, and help them hone their critical thinking and communications skills—with my obligation to provide the service-learning partner with sound advice? These concerns dogged me throughout the development and implementation of this course.

3. Designing a service-learning course

When I incorporated service-learning into this course, I thought of the aphorism often attributed to Confucius, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember. I do and I understand." Millennia later, educational theorist, John Dewey argued that experience is not sufficient for real learning. To paraphrase Dewey, we do not learn from our experience, we learn from reflecting on experience because reflection requires us to reconsider our experience so that we can affirm or refute old thoughts (Dewey, 1937/1997).

If reflection is an important component of learning, it is also an important part of teaching. I, therefore, chose to present what I learned developing and teaching my first service-learning course as a reflection. Unlike a traditional research report, I chose to write in the first person. Because the college limits enrollment of partially online classes, there were only 24 students in this class. I do not, therefore, have statistical power to conduct a quantitative analysis. My research is necessarily exploratory. I address two important questions: (1) Can I offer a challenging service-learning assignment that would foster real student learning? (2) Can I deliver value for our service-learning partner? Reflecting on building and teaching this class illuminated answers to these questions.

My reflection is based on: (1) Reading the service-learning literature in general and service-learning in marketing classes in particular, (2) conferring with my service-learning partner before, during, and after the semester, (3) reading two sets of reflections my students wrote, one at the start of the semester and the other at its conclusion, (4) grading my students' service-learning team projects along with other written assignments, (5) observing my students in the face-to-face sessions, (6) talking to students during office hours, and (7) reviewing the transcript of a focus group that the college conducted with six students immediately after the end of the semester.

4. My marketing research course before the service-learning assignments

My experience working with scores of marketers from large multinational brands to Internet start-ups has convinced me that marketing is a team sport. It is not a suitable game for the "lone wolf." All good marketers must know how to navigate the sometimes choppy waters of teamwork. In the classroom, a lone wolf, or a go-it-alone Rambo, often has a negative impact on the performance of student teams (Barr, Dixon, & Gassenheimer, 2005, p. 82; Volchok, 2006). Before I incorporated service-learning, team projects were a core component all of my marketing courses. Working in teams of four to six, students developed and implemented a survey for the college bookstore. So far, this sounds like a service-learning assignment because it obliged students to work within their "course based, credit bearing educational experience" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). And, students had to "participate in an organized service activity" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). But, here is where my course fell short on the service-learning standard: *I played the role of client*. The college bookstore was not involved in this assignment. Without a real client, this was just another academic exercise with no *real* service performed.

5. The appeal of a real client

Service-learning, by definition, entails a real client. Typically, service-learning partners are nonprofit organizations. They are more receptive to using students with limited experience than for-profit corporations. Nonprofits often use "volunteer" labor and are less likely to employ professional marketers than for-profits. Consequently, there is a significant opportunity for reciprocal learning between the nonprofit service-learning partner and students (Klink & Athaide, 2004).

Based on my discussions with students over the years and reading their reflections, most of my students are not driven by altruism. They are far more interested in gaining credentials for a better job than in performing social service. I decided, therefore, not to stress important social outcomes—better intercultural understanding, improved social responsibility and citizenship skills, and greater involvement in community service—that are often touted as benefits of service-learning. Instead I focused on my students' priorities: pass this class, graduate, and land a well-paid job. I stressed that successful completion of the service-learning project will help them earn a high grade as well as provide stories to impress hiring managers during their critically important job interview.

Working on a real assignment for a real client would be a more challenging learning experience for my students than assigning exercises from the course's textbook. Wrestling with this assignment fosters the development of employment-related critical thinking, communications, and teamwork skills that students need. The research, however, on using a "real" client in undergraduate marketing classes is mixed. Amy L. Parsons and Elzbieta Lepkowska-White write, "Our research also demonstrates that overall undergraduate students find theoretical projects to be equally or, in some cases, even more effective than projects that utilize real businesses" (2009, p. 157). Nevertheless, I moved forward with caution.

5.1. Building the service-learning course

Upon deciding to incorporate service-learning into my Marketing Research class, I contacted the college's service-learning coordinator and described my concept. I mentioned that the service-learning assignments would be primarily focused on the second half of the course. And, the assignments would be based on developing surveys. Within a few days, she found a suitable client, Entrepreneur Space, an incubator for entrepreneurs in the food services industry. This organization, administered

by Queens Economic Development Corporation, is a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to create and retain jobs through programming that assists small businesses and promotes tourism and business development. One of the best things about this partner is that it is experienced in service-learning. Colleagues who have worked with them report that management is a "good" client. In this context that means two things: (1) Having realistic expectations of what students can accomplish for them during the semester and (2) Not wanting to be over-involved or under-involved with students (Laughton & Ottewill, 1998; Lopez & Lee, 2005).

Before the semester began, I met with the founder of Entrepreneur Space and the executive director of Queens Economic Development Corporation. They expressed their needs. I listened intently. They said they wanted my class to develop a survey they could use to understand how their clients feel about the services they offer. I suggested that they, in fact, needed three surveys: The first survey would be the "entry" survey for newly acquired clients. The second would be an ongoing survey that clients would take annually. The third would be an "exit" survey for clients who no longer require an incubator, or because they decided to close their business.

My partners readily agreed to my suggestion. I then tried to lower their expectations. I reminded them that my students were community college students, who have completed only one or two marketing classes and, with the exception of a few veterans, have limited experience working in a professional capacity. I reminded them that service-learning is not an internship. They would only see my students while in my classroom, or when they tour their facility. While the feedback they provide students will be greatly appreciated, students will be graded solely on their achievement of the courses' learning outcomes and not whether they met the service-learning partner's objectives. I told our service-learning partner that as a member of the faculty, my primary obligation is to see that my students meet the course's approved learning outcomes. I thanked them for the opportunity they were about to provide, and promised to make every reasonable effort to see that they received value from this project. To that end, I committed to meet with them shortly after the end of the semester to review my students' surveys and separate the wheat from the chaff.

6. Teaching the class

During the first class, I informed my students that they would be completing a service-learning assignment for a real client. After I read their assignment, I offered the same words of caution I heard 35 years before when I was an advertising account executive at Ogilvy & Mather: "Be careful what you recommend to your client. They just might try to implement your idea." I informed them of their duty to offer their client sound solutions. I told them to think of the class as if it were a consultancy and I their boss. I advised them that they must act professionally, meaning that they must arrive at our face-to-face classes on time and prepared, and they are required to complete all assignments by the due date. Late assignments, as I emphasized over the semester, will not be accepted. I echoed the words of my mentor at Ogilvy & Mather, an irascible elderly creative director, "You cannot succeed by being a day late and a dollar short." I did not tell students that they would be evaluated differently than the way I evaluated subordinates in my professional life. While I would review the client's feedback, I would evaluate them the same way I evaluate all my students: On their mastery of learning outcomes using grading rubrics posted on Blackboard.

To make the service-learning project manageable and representative of the way marketers actually work, I divided this class of 24 students into four teams. Each team had roughly equal GPAs and the team GPAs had roughly equal standard deviations. I tweaked the team roster to ensure that teams were not skewed in terms of gender or ethnicity. To encourage students to work productively, each team was given a team room on Blackboard to exchange files and conduct synchronous and asynchronous discussions. As part of flipping this class, our 1-hour, weekly, face-to-face classes were discussions, not lectures. All of my lectures were posted on Blackboard as written transcripts and videos that I produced. Half the class time was devoted to questions about the weekly reading assignments and class projects. The balance of the class required the four teams to discuss their service-learning assignment. During this time, I made my rounds to each team, answering

questions. I also peppered the teams with my own questions. Students are quite adept at asking questions about demographics. But, questions that focused on attitudes and feelings are difficult for them. Most of my comments during class discussions and my critique of their first drafts dealt with structuring questions that probed respondents' attitudes.

Students submitted two drafts of their surveys. Both drafts were graded. To make certain that all students worked well with their teammates, students were required to submit an evaluation of each teammate's performance as well as their own contribution to the project. Failure to complete this evaluation would result in a grade of zero for the project. I have used this technique for many years. I have found that students are more likely to be active team players when they know I seriously consider teammates' evaluations when awarding grades. With some teams, every student gets great peer evaluations. But, among teams that excel, teammate evaluations are frequently highly critical; members of highly functional teams have a low tolerance for slackers.

As with all service-learning assignments, students engaged in reflection. Students were assigned two 750-word reflective essays. For the first reflection, students expressed concerns about taking a partially online class, working in a team, and completing a service-learning assignment in equal measure. In their final reflection, students tended to be more upbeat about the service-learning project, in general, and working for a real client, in particular. No student indicated that his or her experience preparing this project and presenting to the client was unfair, uninformative, or overly burdensome. In fact, students were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the service-learning assignments. Several students reported that this experience piqued their interest in becoming entrepreneurs. No one, however, said they wanted a career in marketing research, but a few wrote that they gained a new appreciation of its importance. Perhaps that is because at the start of the semester students could readily name entrepreneurs who are super-rich. At the end of the semester, none of them could name a marketing researcher other than his or her professor.

After students completed their assignment and final reflection, they met with their client. The most junior client, the client service director, asked each team probing questions, which they answered to the best of their ability. The client asked wonderful questions, questions that a fair, but demanding client would ask. It was a great introduction to client service.

6.1. Assessing the success of my service-learning class

I have lots of touch-points to assess my students' performances and their feelings about service-learning. In my face-to-face classes, I observed my students' progress during their team conversations. I saw them struggle at first with the terminology and problems associated with structuring a survey. But, midway through the semester, many students started to sound like junior marketing researchers. While some of their comments were sophomoric, most students increasingly demonstrated keen insights. I also noticed that more students visited me during office hours than students in my other classes. And, these students were enthusiastic about the service-learning assignment, although I did hear a few complaints about a teammate here and there. Such complaints are not surprising. I hear them in every class in which I assign team projects. But, what is unique about this class is that no one dropped out. In 10 years of teaching at this community college, this is the only class with no attrition. This is anecdotal evidence, to be sure, but other evidence supports the idea that students were deeply engaged in this course because of the service-learning assignments. And, this evidence is also supported by research (Bove & Davies, 2009, pp. 231–232).

There are two especially interesting sources of student opinions regarding service-learning: The reflective essays and a focus group with six of my students the college's service-learning group conducted shortly after the semester. Upon reading the focus group transcript, I was elated to find that students reported that this service-learning project gave them "a valuable, real-life experience."

With students' reflections, I learned that this service-learning experience inspired students to take more responsibility for their learning, as well as to collaborate more closely with their classmates in

general and their teammates in particular. In their final reflections, many students discussed their responsibilities to the service-learning partner, their teammates, and themselves. Here, are a few comments:

- … [we] were responsible for an actual client which added an even greater challenge because there is the uneasy feeling of making sure you do everything right.
- [This service-learning project] showed me how much companies rely on the feedback from the people who they are serving.
- This service-learning project also helped me understand group work and groups in general better. I still hold true to my feelings of hating to work in groups. I, personally, always end up doing most of the work while working in a group. (This comment came from one of my best students. The service-learning partner hired this student after the end of the semester.)
- Unlike other classes, this class and this project gave me insights on how to work in the real world with real clients. It is much better than just studying and memorizing the concepts [from the textbook].
- The service-learning project definitely deepened my understanding on the role marketing research plays in helping marketers make effective decisions.
- Another skill that I have learned from this [service-learning] task is some time management. Time management has always been a struggle for me to get right … Without time management skills, a student would find it difficult to balance his or her job, personal life, and the work required to complete this project.

The benefit of service-learning is that it engages students far more deeply than traditional team projects. The prospect of facing a real client seems to have pushed students to ask deeper and more thoughtful questions, and to demand more of themselves. As a result, students expressed a greater than usual interest in completing their Associates degree and then earning a Bachelor's degree. Three students even expressed interest in starting a food service business, which is our service-learning partner's specialty.

Service-learning pushes students to become more active in their learning. Anyone who has taught at a community college will recognize the comment by Kolb and Kolb, "Many students enter higher education conditioned by their previous educational experiences to be passive recipients of what they are taught" (2005, p. 209). Service-learning assignments force students to take a more active role in their learning.

7. Feedback from our service-learning partner

Did the service-learning partner feel it received adequate service? Based on a 90-minute meeting I had with the founder of Entrepreneur Space and the client service director, the answer is an emphatic "yes." The first part of this meeting dealt with the surveys my students developed. The client service director presented a set of three surveys that incorporated the best aspects of my student's surveys. I made a few editorial suggestions, which the client accepted along with my recommendations on how to administer these surveys to avoid transcription errors while speeding up data processing.

A marketing consultant learns to declare victory when a project is completed on time, on budget, and the client happy. My class helped our service-learning partner develop workable surveys. Bother my service-learning partner and I judge this service-learning class a success. But, it will be a while before the client will need more surveys. And, it will be at least a year before it has collected enough data for either my marketing research class or my statistics classes to analyze. But, what about finding a service-learning project for next semester? As I have suggested, happy clients request more work. In the second part of the meeting, we outlined a service-learning project for my Introduction to Marketing course.

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8. The remaining question

Another question must be entertained: Is service-learning a good use of the professor's time? Service-learning does require instructors to invest an enormous amount of time. Research shows that faculty are concerned about the time commitment service-learning entails (Goodell & Kraft, 1991; Lopez & Lee, 2005; Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003).

I am aware of the tensions between my two constituencies and I am now confident that I know how to alleviate them. I firmly believe that service-learning projects help community college students develop the skills they will need on the job. These projects also satisfy my nostalgia for client service. When I accepted my full-time teaching assignment in 2006, I closed my marketing consulting practice. On occasion, I miss it. Fulfilling my obligation to the service-learning partner satisfies my need to ply my trade while providing students with a great learning experience. The conclusion I draw is that service-learning is a very rewarding investment of my time.

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