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A Practical Approach to Service Learning

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Abstract

“Men and Women for Others” is a core Ignatian value. Often, however, when teaching working adults—adults with full-time jobs, families, and a host of other obligations—it is more challenging to incorporate Service Learning into prescribed coursework. This article provides a very practical description of how adult learners can be engaged in Service Learning projects—projects that enhance their learning, their lives, and their communities.

Service learning was introduced into Regis's academic conversation some fifteen years ago. Fortunately, the term was broadly defined and examples covered a gamut, from group service learning projects to simple exercises, such as writing letters to editors. As faculty, we were encouraged to incorporate service learning into our courses, and I have done so ever since.

Now we have access to the rich resources of the College of Professional Studies Office of Service Learning, capably directed by Amy Sheber Howard;¹ information on the Ignatian form of service;² and a list of volunteer opportunities.³ The latter provides descriptions and contact information for sixty-four organizations. An excellent summary of the Regis definition of service learning, critical elements and faculty tips is found in the document, "Service Learning Best Practices."⁴

Why Bring Service Learning into a Classroom?

Given that so few of my learners have heard of service learning, I imagine the question for many faculty members is why incorporate this form of intentional, experiential learning into a five-week or eight-week course? And, if faculty do, is it worth the effort?

I find service learning expands and enriches classroom experiences, grounds the Regis mission within the course, brings community into the classroom, engages active learning, enlivens a class -- yes, even at 9 p.m. -- changes lives, and provides an element of "surprise" in the course. Yes, it is worth the small investment of preparation time.

Introducing Service Learning into the Classroom

Working on the principle of "structured flexibility," I recognize that our adult learners come to us at different phases of their lives, with varying demands on their time, and a range of personal and professional interests. For these reasons, I make service learning an option.

Discussion of service learning is an integral part of the course introduction during the first class meeting. I define and explain what service learning is, relative to the course, and the requirement for five hours, which must be divided into two sessions. This spacing of engagement allows added time for reflection on the community-based experience and the opportunity to return to the classroom with new questions.

I describe the expectations: framing the experience within the course concepts; learning from others in a community

organization; accepting the assigned service duties of the group; reflecting about social justice issues in the experience; and tying specific experiential examples back into course content. I discuss the required structured service learning paper by providing a single-page handout on the writing requirements, sections, and points for this end-of-the-semester assignment.

A hard copy of the sixty-four organizations is made available to learners. I accept other groups that are often closer to learners' homes. The major limiting criterion is that there can be *no* prior work and/or volunteer experiences with the selected organization. When asked about this limitation, I explain we are more attuned to our surroundings when walking into an unknown social environment than we are in a known environment. When learners are accepted by one of the organizations, they complete the Personal Safety & Property Disclosure Release Form.⁵

Balancing Fairness

Asterisks on specific weekly assignments show which ones are omitted if the service option is chosen. Trial and error is required to find the right balance in perceived fairness in the number of omitted written assignments with the required five hours of service learning.

What I recognize but do not emphasize is the added time and commitment it takes to make contact with the right person, set up a meeting, and, in some agencies, attend a short orientation. The additional time does not count towards the required five hours. The added time commitment does seem to increase the perception of worthiness of the service learning experience.

Coming Together

Students go out into the community, not as experts but as learners and servers. They enter into the life of the organization and the lives of some staff members and, sometimes, the lives of clients. Bringing their gained

experiences and knowledge back into the classroom completes a pedagogical circle.

The structured service learning paper is equivalent in substantial grade points to a final course paper, or final case study, or project paper and must meet Regis's standards of excellence. The required sections are specified, including one on social justice. The academic requirement is to reflect back on the experiences through the lenses of the course materials and articulate the linkages between experiences and course concepts. Citations to textbook concepts are required.

The service learning presentation is crucial and provides a type of peer-to-peer learning. It is impossible to share service learning experiences without discussing what the organization does, clients, and "case" examples. We all learn from the experiences.

Service learning presentations come alive in ways that typical course presentations do not. Quiet learners become animated in "telling the story." Amazement, humor, pathos, and anger at policies are common reactions, as relatively privileged learners try to comprehend the lives of those who are struggling. In the presentations, respect is often paid to staff members who spend long hours with tight budgets helping so many.

As facilitator, I listen and ask questions, if necessary, to ensure a full presentation that includes: social justice (almost always covered), course content ("How did you relate your experiences to the course?"); knowledge acquisition ("How did you get most of your information?"); and quality of the experience ("Knowing what you now know, would you do this again? Why?"). I assess the quality of presentations including the depth and kinds of details provided.

Learner Motivations

Why do busy adult learners consider service learning? Motivations are mixed. There is the immediate desire by some to have fewer written assignments and/or do something different to earn course points. Other learners

admit to being on the cusp about doing some sort of volunteering, and the service learning option is the incentive. Others have shared that they chose the option to set examples for their children. Still others have general knowledge of a particular group or organization, and the service learning activity provided a way to get inside and gain more information.

A Facilitator's Reward

First-time adult learners approach the service learning instrumentally--a course assignment to get grade points. Few have any notion that the experience might change them, or others. Thus to hear a learner tell class members during the presentation, "I have signed up for additional hours and will be volunteering after the course ends," or a class member state, "After listening to the presentations, I am going to do service learning if it is offered in a future course," I know something transformative has occurred in the five or eight weeks. Driving home after the last night of class, I too can reflect that maybe, just maybe, the course had a small impact on lives of some learners--a facilitator's reward. HJE

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Notes

¹ Regis University, "College for Professional Studies Office of Service Learning," accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=ars&p1=sl&p2=sps>.

² Regis University, "Ignatian Collaborative for Service & Justice," accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=ars&p1=sl&p2=icsj>.

³ Regis University, "Volunteer Opportunities & Events in Denver," accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=ars&p1=sl&p2=rc&p3=vo>.

⁴ Bobbie Ewelt, "Service Learning Best Practices," unpublished manuscript for Regis University, Denver, Colorado, 2011.

⁵ Regis University, "Personal Safety & Property Disclosure Release Form," accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=ars&p1=sl&p2=sps&p3=disclosure>.