A New Sweet Spot: Service-Learning for Graduate Online Students in Jesuit Business Schools

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Abstract

Jesuit institutions are ranked among America's best colleges and universities according to the 2013 results by US News and World Report.[1] With such accolades, our community might frame the recognition as an opportunity for greater challenge as we collectively aspire to provide better access to meaningful education with the vision of furthering the Jesuit mission and educating men and women for others. The goal of this paper was to consider a new "sweet spot" at the intersection of service-learning, graduate education *and* online learning at Jesuit business schools, continuing the integration of excellence in both tradition and innovation. We propose a new research stream that may add to the work of Van Hise and Porco in pursuing a better understanding of and an opportunity to expand the distinctiveness of Jesuit business education.[2] Our work concludes with an invitation to participate in research to enhance the existing service-learning, graduate, *and* online distinctive competencies in Jesuit institutions and extend our students' sense of "solidarity for the real world" and choices to "perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed."[3]

Introduction

Jesuit institutions are ranked among America's best colleges and universities according to the 2013 results by US News and World Report.[4] Gregory F. Lucey, S.J., President of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) states "This is a great reflection on the hard work and dedication that presidents, administrators, faculty and staff have put into making their schools such excellent places for learning."[5] With such accolades, our community of administrators, staff, and faculty might frame the recognition as an opportunity to rise to even higher levels of accomplishment as we collectively aspire to provide greater access to meaningful education with the vision of furthering the Jesuit mission and educating men and women for others.

To find the sweet spot is to locate the place where your equipment (e.g. a spot on the basketball court or the center of baseball bat) supports optimal performance. We make the analogy that just as in sports, in Jesuit "classrooms" there is an opportunity to explore a new educational sweet spot. Aspiring to create unique and value-added experiences based on the Jesuit mission, ensuring academic rigor at the graduate level, and providing educational opportunities with greater accessibility, the new sweet spot may be the

intersection of service-learning, graduate education and online learning at Jesuit business schools.

We begin with a general background on service learning, graduate education, and online learning, as discrete constructs. We then reconsider these constructs through the lens of Jesuit mission and their current state in Jesuit education. In the third section of the paper, we reflect on the potential for Jesuit business schools to further distinguish their online graduate programs from others by providing service-learning opportunities. The paper concludes with a call for action and an invitation to engage in a new research stream, a new sweet spot if you will, with the goal of enhancing the existing service-learning, graduate, and online distinctive competencies in Jesuit institutions and extending of the reach of transformative business education.

Service-learning, Graduate Education, and Online Learning

Service-learning pedagogies are formally established on at least one-fourth of American college and university campuses.[6] There are projections for growth in jobs requiring graduate level degrees and in addition, technologies and competition are creating tremendous growth in online education. Each of these elements has an impact on the learner and the learning context, and just as important, on our collective future.

Service-Learning – Focusing on Identity and Place

Service-learning integrates meaningful service with instruction and reflection, providing mutual benefit to both students and communities.[7] As a teaching and learning strategy, it encourages transformation as students reflect on their own perspectives and values (their identity) and complex, real world situations (their place) in the context of the curriculum. In addition to the ability for students to apply what they have learned in the "real world," as students make meaning of the experience, research has demonstrated the potential for a positive relationship between service-learning and personal identity, as well as moral development, leadership and communication skills, cultural and racial

understanding, commitment to service, and academic learning.[8]

The location or place of learning in service-learning is fundamental, consistent with Dewey's ideas of experiential learning.[9] Whether set in international or domestic locations, service-learning experiences have provided students with a place to learn about themselves and others whose identities may be different from their own.[10] For example in a project management class at Xavier University, students focus on action and reflection as they plan and carry out service projects in the community, outside of traditional classroom walls.[11]

In the early 1990s, service-learning became increasingly popular among faculty who teach undergraduates in the liberal arts and social sciences. Courses in religion, philosophy and psychology used the pedagogy to explore such concepts as justice, moral responsibility and the human condition while providing students "a profound engagement with the real world."[12] These courses predominantly followed the discipline-based model of service-learning where students were expected to have a presence in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences at frequent intervals using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding.[13]

Over the past decade, service-learning has gained popularity in the professional schools, especially in schools of business.[14] Faculty and administrators recognized the opportunities that existed to provide the community with valuable skills and resources in areas ranging from accounting to management and marketing while exposing students to challenging, real world experiences to develop their professional skills. Problem-based service-learning and community-based research emerged as the primary models employed by faculty. In these models, students serve community-based agencies as "consultants" or "researchers."[15] Together with the agency, they create a project that meets both agency need and utilizes the professional skills students are developing in their course.

Graduate Education – Building on Identity and Place

The Degree Qualifications Profile distinguishes levels of learning outcomes for graduate education from those for associate's and bachelor's education; utilizing the concept of incremental challenge, graduate education provides distinct value, building on educational outcomes achieved in earlier degrees.[16] Not only are the outcomes for graduate education distinct from those of undergraduate education, the types of learners are also distinct. Traditional undergraduate students tend to be defined as those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, and although there are traditional graduate students (those entering graduate school before their thirtieth birthday), there is an increase in the number of "non-traditional" students enrolling in this critical resource known as graduate education.[17]

The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States states:

> Our competitiveness in the global economy hinges on our ability to produce sufficient numbers of graduate-degree holders – people with the advanced knowledge and critical-thinking abilities to devise solutions to grand challenges such as energy independence, affordable healthcare, climate change and others. One of our greatest resources is our human talent, and as a nation we must invest in educating more of our population at the graduate level to ensure capacity to innovate and to secure our intellectual leadership in the future. [18]

Graduate student demographics are shifting from "traditional" students who apply before their thirtieth birthday and have fewer responsibilities, towards "nontraditional" students who are forty and older, have work and family commitments, and are pursuing higher education as a means of improving employment options.[19] The job market for positions requiring master's level education is projected to grow 18% between the years 2008 and 2018,[20] preparing people for careers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations.

With the shifts in demographics of graduate learners, a better understanding about the tenets of adult learning creates a need for reflection on effective graduate instructional design, including clarity regarding relevance or usefulness of the learning;[21] recognition of the adult as responsible, capable and self-directed;[22] utilization of techniques that build upon individuals' needs and experiences;[23] focus on real-life situations; presentation of a task- or problem-centered learning orientation; and intentional design of internal or intrinsic motivators.[24] Rather than relying on transmitting information through lecture, adult students may have more effective learning experiences when engaged with group discussions, problem-solving exercises, case methods, simulations, games, and/or role-plays.[25]

Online Education – Minimizing Identity and Place

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that even before the beginning of the twenty-first century, one-third of institutions of higher education in the U.S. offered some type of distance education delivery, including 1,230 degrees and 340 certificates in 1997-1998.[26] Between 2003 and 2009, a study of 2,500 U.S. academic leaders indicated double-digit growth in higher education enrollments in online classes.[27] In 2007-2008, the percentage of online graduate students was greater than twice the percentage of online undergraduates— 9% vs. 4%.[28] Online learning has tremendous potential to serve diverse students and support collaborative inquiry, in terms of creating access for those dispersed geographically, unable for whatever reasons to relocate or to participate in specific synchronous face-to-face offerings.[29]

As a communication medium, online learning can involve webinars, podcasts, asynchronous discussions, video sharing, social networking, and other formats that provide current, relevant and efficient platforms.[30] Online learning provides opportunities for asynchronous discussions using guided questions, self-reflection through web-based journaling, and e-portfolios to support meaningful, internalized, and transformative learning. Discussions structured to facilitate reflective inquiry are particularly effective when facilitated in a virtual environment: instructional

methods promoting explorations of issues related to social equity are easily migrated for examination in web-based classrooms.[31] The "Community of Inquiry" approach is a framework for virtual settings that is focused on active processes, critical thinking skills and reflection, based on students' cognitive presence, sustained through social presence, and reinforced by teaching presence.[32]

Service-learning, Graduate Education, and Online learning in Jesuit Institutions

In the 2010 speech to Jesuit institutions of higher education, Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, asks: "How many of those who leave our institutions do so with both professional competence *and* the experience of having, in some way during their time with us, a depth of engagement with reality that transforms them at their deepest core?"[33] Nicolas challenges educators at Jesuit institutions to both educate our undergraduate and graduate students for professional competence *and* provide transformative experiences that cultivate in them qualities central to Jesuit education. The educational goal of our institutions is to form "men and women for others." Jesuit education should result in a radical transformation not only in the way people think and act, but in the very way they live in the world—
as men and women of competence, conscience and compassion, seeking the greater good.[34]

Service-learning: Experience, Reflection, Action

For over twenty years, Jesuit institutions have embraced service-learning as a teaching method that enhances and complements the Ignatian pedagogical process, giving students an opportunity to demonstrate Jesuit values.[35] Service-learning students engage in a service *experience* that places them within a community organization to either perform direct service with clients (tutoring, teaching, providing meals) or project-based work for the agency (research, marketing, curriculum design). Students integrate the onsite experience with course content through a series of reflective activities. *Reflection* is a vehicle used to not only deepen the connections between the classroom learning and the service project, but also to encourage students to make meaning of

their experience as it applies to their own personal values and choices. The reflective process should not merely lead students to delve more deeply into the subject matter but should motivate them toward *action.* Students must discern what they will do with this new knowledge and how it will inform their choices and values, now and in the future. They should be challenged with the question: "now what?" Similar to the Ignatian approach, this action may manifest itself in minor or major ways, it may impact the judgments or decisions of a student, or may motivate them to affect change in their community.

Preston Driggers, a faculty member at a Jesuit institution, says about his experience teaching with service learning, "I too can reflect that maybe, just maybe, the course had a small impact on lives of some learners – a facilitator's reward."[36] Service-learning provides Jesuit business schools the opportunity to not only develop the professional skills of their students, but to further the Jesuit mission. Through meaningful engagement with community organizations, students develop the habits of the heart that are the hallmark of a Jesuit education: the mature concern for themselves and others, and the duty to act. This engagement is a vehicle for teaching the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching. Especially those tenets which are the most relevant to business: the principle of participation, the principle of preferential treatment for the poor and vulnerable, the principle of solidarity, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, and care for God's creation."[37]

Graduate Education: The Magis

The concept of "magis" is so much a part of Jesuit education that Fr. Geger, S.J. goes so far as to say that "No term appears more popular in the parlance of Jesuit institutions today than the magis."[38] For those unfamiliar with the concept, for better or worse it has multiple definitions, including "excellence" and "the more universal good" as a distinctive way of being for Jesuits.[39] There are twenty-seven Jesuit undergraduate and graduate business colleges and universities, distinguished by 400 years of Jesuit tradition, creating a unique approach to business where leaders "understand that true success extends beyond wealth creation… a global community of

business leaders who are changing business for the better every day."[40]

> Jesuit Business Schools offer the only leadership development programs that make business people more successful through rigorous, values driven academics and rich community connections.

> We are a "system" of schools that blankets the United States. We create powerful students who act ethically because they understand the true meaning of being a whole person.[41]

Members of the Jesuit business school community encourage students to offer their stewardship in their communities with the aspiration to promote economic growth and vitality, and to positively contribute to ethical business challenges. The Jesuit MBA focuses on the pursuit of excellence, development of personal potential, respect for the World, commitment to service, creative imagination, reflective engagement with society, and responsibility to be a voice of reason and conscience in society.[42] More than twenty-five Jesuit institutions offer MBA programs with the goal of graduates who demonstrate strong ethics, technical competence, and social responsibility.

Online Education: A New Paradigm of "Men and Women for Others?"

Jesuit programs pursing online education as a delivery method have the collective resources of the Jesuit Distance Education Network, or JesuitNET. JesuitNET seeks to support online delivery both as a means by which to provide flexible and accessible educational options, as well as a resource to support face-to-face classrooms. As a type of managed service organization, JesuitNET brings expertise to support the delivery of Ignatian pedagogy by facilitating marketing, encouraging shared resources to decrease redundancies, training faculty in online teaching processes, and with special initiatives to address offerings in Latin America, and through the Center for Online Bioethics Education. Unique from many other higher education communities, Jesuit institutions are able to benefit from pooled resources to access this level of expertise, not in technology alone but rather in technical expertise steeped in Jesuit vision, mission, and values.

As of December, 2009 JesuitNET lists fourteen Jesuit schools that offer *online* programs; these institutions offer nearly 100 certificates, bachelor's, and master's degrees in numerous areas of study.[43] Online education is clearly on the radar in Jesuit education and service-learning is a strength at many of these same institutions.

A New Sweet Spot: Service-Learning in Graduate Education through Online Learning in Jesuit Institutions

Our business schools are realizing that they must not only provide a world class business education but also a transformative educational experience that results in nothing less than a lifelong commitment to promoting the common good. As William Byron, S.J. suggests, "No Jesuit business school can be excellent without being authentically Jesuit. 'Jesuit' is one of the markers that sets them apart and establishes them in a recognizable class. Most, if not all Jesuit business schools have miles to go in their respective efforts to articulate their Jesuit identity and integrate genuine principles of Ignatian leadership into education for business."[44] The two defining principles of Ignatian leadership are what Byron refers to as "Humbition, an amalgam of humility and the *magis*." Byron points out that the term *magis* is derived from the Jesuit motto, "Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam" which suggests that leaders developed in the Ignatian tradition must keep looking higher—to the greater good of others and to the greater glory of God.

Service-learning has been identified as one means to further infuse the Jesuit mission into business education; indeed it is a common theme of presentations made at the meetings of Colleagues in Jesuit Business Education.[45] However, much of this attention, as well as research presented in other forums, has focused on undergraduate students in face-to-face classes. With changes in higher education, including a growing demographic of adults returning for graduate level programs,[46] as well as an increase in accessibility to programs due to advances in online technologies, a new opportunity exists to consider how to serve these particular students' unique learning needs.[47] Just as service-learning can infuse the Jesuit mission into undergraduate face to face classes, we wonder about the possibility of

service-learning as a means to do the same for these graduate online students.

Given the existing success of Jesuit graduate business programs and the research on service-learning at the undergraduate level, we ask what evidence is there for service-learning as an effective teaching approach at a graduate level. In the "Degree Qualification Profile" (DPQ), the authors claim that the "press toward helping many more students earn degrees has not been grounded in any consistent public understanding of what these (associates, bachelors, and master's) degrees ought to mean."[48] While not attempting to be a one size fits all, the DPQ provides illustrative standards for levels of student performance in five areas (broad integrative knowledge, specialized knowledge, intellectual skills, applied learning, and civic learning) that should be uniquely enhanced at individual institutions (i.e. based on the specific mission to foster religious exploration, the arts, character development, and so on). Service-learning fits within the "applied learning" area of the DPQ, providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they can do and to integrate theory and practice. At the graduate level, outcomes for "applied learning" include creating learning artifacts that demonstrate integration from multiple disciplines, including writing and assessing the significance of the work relative to existing challenges; and creating, designing, and implementing projects in out-of-class settings to apply advanced knowledge with reflection on insights gained, and self-assessment of professional performance and continuing development relevant to the experience.

In the spring of 2012, the authors and a group of collaborators began to tackle several questions: if Jesuit institutions already have expert capacity for online learning through JesuitNET, can that resource be leveraged further? If there is potential for service-learning (as a form of "applied learning") at the graduate level, what evidence is there for service-learning as an effective teaching approach in an online delivery format? In 2003, Howell, Williams, and Lindsay identified the need for experiential learning strategies for collaborative, interactive and relevant applications in online education.[49] More recently, seminal author in the field of service-learning, Kenworthy-U'Ren called for "optimizing the intersection

between online learning and service-learning" in business education,[50] stating "it is a complex issue we cannot afford to ignore."[51] Given the reality of online learning in higher education, there is very limited research regarding online service-learning in terms of effective processes and student outcomes.[52]

To begin to answer the above questions, the authors proposed two models of implementing service learning in the online environment: single course and linked courses distributed models. In the following section we briefly describe our initial thinking on the models and goals of the pilot studies, and then outline a proposed research agenda that without doubt will further be informed by testing those models. The models are in the pilot phase and currently being tested in classes taught by the authors (during the spring 2013 semester). The distributed models of online service-learning that we envisioned involve students working with community partners who may or may not be located near the institution of higher education. We use the term "distributed" to describe these models because the community partners' geographic locations are distributed around the country, and are likely to be located in proximity to the online student's location. Each course is at least three credit hours and has a minimum of twenty hours of service required (although that may be different depending on the implementing institution). The models are flexible enough to have students work in groups or individually. However, both models require intense faculty and University service-learning unit interaction to manage the large number of individual projects with community partners who may be new to service-learning.

The first model, distributed single course model, is suitable for courses that want to utilize service learning in a three credit hour online course. In this model the service-learning opportunity is structured around the course content. Depending on the course content, the instructor can design learning activities in response to either direct service or project-based work that students complete with the community partner. Students are responsible for finding their community partner; the faculty is responsible for providing direction on the type of service they can engage in depending on the class-specific content. The

second model, distributed linked courses model, utilizes two linked course sessions, three credit hours each. During the first course, students focus on cognitive learning and understanding the concept of service-learning in addition to the class content. The students also develop their own partnership relationship and prepare a partnering plan. In the second course, students apply the learning from the first/prerequisite course by implementing the partnership plan and actively engaging in reflection on mutual benefits of the service-learning experience. In this model, community partners are typically in close geographic proximity to the students and projects are generally done individually rather than in groups.

In the two pilot studies, one per model, we examine student perceptions of value and effectiveness of different pedagogical characteristics of service-learning for graduate online adult learners; the experience of community partners and their perceptions around added value from having graduate service-learning students; and finally we reflect on our own experience of the learning process as well as lessons from implementing a service-learning class using the online environment as a medium. Data for the study is collected through learning artifacts of the class (ePortfolio, Discussion Board posts on structured reflection, questionnaires, and feedback from the community partner); follow-up interviews with community partners, as well as the instructors' journals on implementation.

In Jesuit education, it is in the *way* we teach, verses *what* we teach, that formation and transformation is possible. Through service-learning, students reflect on their own experiences, values, feelings and perspectives to arrive at an understanding of the meaning and significance of what is being studied. Graduate students, particularly with unique adult learning capacities and needs, often have the skills to produce work with higher levels of critical thinking and less time invested by the community agency in project supervision and mentoring. And, online learning that is constructed in such communities has the potential to reach beyond a single classroom to impact local communities on uniquely personal levels. For us as educators, the challenge lies with creating intrinsically meaningful pedagogies that address

the context, as well as the experience, reflection, action, and evaluation of Ignatian pedagogy.

A Proposed Research Agenda in Lieu of Conclusion

The first part of this paper considered service-learning, graduate education, and online learning as distinct constructs, beneficial in isolation in many different settings. We then considered the reality of each of these constructs as they exist today at Jesuit institutions. Our third section proposed that if these constructs provide value independently and are consistent with Jesuit mission and current practices, then when they are utilized in combination they may provide a means to further the long standing tradition of excellence of Jesuit education, relevant to contemporary contexts. As the context of the educational landscape changes, so too must our research questions in order to guide our teaching and support our students and communities to the best of our understanding and ability.

While some scholars call for increased use of service-learning,[53] others recommend additional research to address innovation in service-learning practices.[54] The latter authors acknowledged that existing research has established the presence of service-learning as a tool for civic engagement, however, questions regarding the qualities of the student, faculty, and community partner, among others, remain unanswered. A meta-analysis of 103 service-learning studies examined the evidence on different types of outcomes, including academic outcomes, change in participants, and program elements that act as moderators in the amount of change in participants, as well as generalizability of results across educational levels. [55] The authors concluded that structured reflection is key in achieving outcomes (academic as well as personal and social) as it was generally associated with larger effects.

While research on service-learning in online settings is emerging, research on service-learning in online settings for graduate adult learners has yet to receive more attention. The body of research on service-learning in online settings is growing. Scholars recognize that it provides hands-on learning; values life experiences of adult learners; may address preferences for greater

interaction; and can open the world of service-learning to students with disabilities, in rural locations, with other personal or professional commitments, and students that otherwise would not be able to participate in experiential education.[56] Service-learning online enables students with existing obligations and commitments to engage in (electronic) dialogue in many different locations at more convenient times, combined with potentially life changing experiential learning opportunities.[57] In addition, other scholars emphasized the benefit of electronic reflections to bring together diverse communities engaged in experiential learning of personal significance.[58]

Therefore, we theorize that in combination, service-learning for graduate online students has the potential to be a new sweet spot, one that is as of yet under-studied. Building on the existing literature, and integrating the literature from service-learning, adult-learning, and distance learning, we feel that future research will contribute a deeper understanding of innovative teaching and learning possibilities by addressing the following areas: (1) characteristics that contribute to effective graduate online service-learning, including <u>adult learner characteristics</u> (previous experience with community partner area of service, work experience, age, gender, learning style, etc.); <u>context characteristics</u> (forming vs. anonymity in the online learning community, duration of class, student self-selection of community partners, community partner training, number of (in-) direct service hours, etc.); and <u>process characteristics</u> (structured reflection, dialogue, etc.)
(2) specific academic (e.g. cognitive knowledge), personal (e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy, career development, etc.), social (e.g. relational skills and attitudes), and citizenship (responsibility, participation, and justice) <u>outcomes</u> that are most impacted by graduate online service-learning courses; and (3) how are the learner, context, process, and outcome characteristics similar and different for graduate online adult learners in service-learning and undergraduate, face to face, and / or traditional students in service-learning?

We postulate that as Ignatian and service-learning pedagogies together have had a positive impact on undergraduate face to face student experiences,

service-learning for graduate online students may also provide a distinctive and transformative experience for learners dispersed throughout the world, learning together in diverse communities, such that they both demonstrate a sense of "solidarity for the real world" and "perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed."[59] We leave with this question: who will join us on this new research agenda? ᴴᴶᴱ

Notes

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