Proposal for a Paper Presentation

Exploring the Effects of a Service-Learning Designation Process on Pedagogy and Course Outcomes

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Abstract:

Universities have been instituting a process of formally designating courses in order to maintain high standards of service-learning practice. An instrumental case study at a university in the United States explored the effects of the service-learning designation process on pedagogy and course outcomes. The study has produced a set of best practices in service-learning.

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education in many regions of the world have embraced engagement with the wider society through curricular innovation such as service-learning (see, e.g., Jacoby, 2015; McIlrath, Lyons, & Munck, 2012; Yu, Shek, & Xing, 2019). The growth of service-learning programs and the attendant increase in the number of related courses is not necessarily matched by improvements in pedagogy and student outcomes. In the United States, a growing number of universities have been instituting a process of formally designating courses with a view to maintaining high standards of service-learning practice (Jacoby, 2015). This paper is based on a case study of the service-learning designation process at a U.S. university.

2. Literature Review

Service-learning is the pedagogy that integrates relevant community service, complemented by critical reflection, into the curriculum. Over the years, the benefits of service-learning have been well documented. For example, as research has shown, service-learning is an effective means of developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills (Celio et al., 2011; Jacoby, 2015); fostering civic responsibility and acceptance of diversity (Rice & Horn, 2014; Strage, 2000); and promoting social change (Bowen, 2014).

Some U.S. universities not only provide guidelines for service-learning courses but also establish a process to review syllabi in order to designate a course explicitly as service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). The institutional strategy of course designation – appearing in bulletins and course schedules as well as on student transcripts – is "based on the assumption that if a course is well designed and meets the designated criteria of a service-learning course, the course is more

likely to produce desired outcomes for students and community partners on implementation" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 42).

According to Barbara Jacoby,

> Designation of service-learning courses has several benefits, including clearly defining service-learning in the institutional context, ensuring that courses meet consistent standards of high-quality service-learning, and allowing for transcript notation. It also enables students to readily identify service-learning courses, which is useful whether they are seeking to fulfill a requirement, choose an engaging elective, or avoid adding the challenges of service-learning to an already heavy set of responsibilities. (Jacoby 2015, pp. 113-114)

This paper reviews outcomes of the service-learning designation process at a community-engaged university in the southeastern United States. The university has delineated seven criteria for the service-learning designation (Table 1).

Table 1
Service-Learning Designation Criteria

1. The service-learning component of the course (or course section), as described in the syllabus, must reflect Barry University's definition of service-learning.
2. The syllabus must show direct and deliberate connections between the community service or community-focused assignment and the course content and must indicate how these connections will support or enhance student learning.
3. The community agency or service site must be appropriate to the course goals, and service placements must not create a religious, political, and/or moral conflict for the student. (A list of recommended or selected sites – or guidelines for site selection – should be included in the syllabus and/or attached to the application.)
4. Students must complete a minimum of 10 hours of community service – or a community-focused project requiring at least 10 hours – as part of a three-credit course. (For a two-credit course, a minimum of 6 hours is required.)
5. The service-learning component must count for no less than 20 percent of the total course grade.
6. The reflection (learning assessment) method or activity must be specified in the syllabus.
7. Students will earn academic credit for learning that is demonstrated and assessed, rather than for merely completing service hours.

Source: Center for Community Service Initiatives, Barry University (2019)

3. Methods

This paper is based on an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) aimed at exploring the effects of the service-learning designation process at Barry University, a community-engaged institution. The study explored the effects of the designation process on pedagogy and course outcomes.

Data were derived from a survey of service-learning faculty members (teaching staff) and through document analysis. All faculty members who has successfully applied for the service-learning designation (N = 36) were invited to participate in the study by completing a questionnaire and submitting their current syllabi for review. The survey response rate was 86% (n = 31). A total of 26 faculty members provided syllabi for review.

Document analysis entailed finding, selecting, and synthesizing information contained in the relevant documents (Bowen, 2009). The documents reviewed were the syllabi, an information sheet on the university's service-learning designation process, and annual reports of the university's Center for Community Service Initiatives.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings included responses to the survey regarding specific outcomes (Table 1), the critical reflection methods employed (Table 2), and best practices in service-learning.

Table 1: Service-Learning Outcomes

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The service-learning component of my course helped students see how the subject matter they learned can be used to address community issues.	23 (74%)	8 (26%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
2. The service-learning component helped students better understand course lectures and readings.	19 (61%)	11 (36%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3. The service-learning component had a positive effect on class discussion.	17 (55%)	10 (32%)	4 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
4. The service-learning component helped students become knowledgeable about community agency services and resources.	17 (55%)	10 (32%)	2 (6.5%)	2 (6.5%)	0 (0%)
5. The service-learning component helped students think about active citizenship.	20 (65%)	8 (26%)	3 (9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
6. The service performed by students benefited the community.	22 (71%)	9 (29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

7. Overall, the use of service-learning in this course improved the course.	21 (68%)	9 (29%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8. The use of service-learning has opened new research possibilities for me.	7 (23%)	10 (32%)	8 (26%)	5 (16%)	1 (3%)
9. I was pleased with the community sites where my students served.	20 (67%)	10 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 2: Critical Reflection Methods

Methods	Number (and Percentage) of Faculty Members
Journals	5 (16%)
Reflection papers	24 (77%)
Class discussions	24 (77%)
Research	9 (29%)
Case studies	3 (9%)
Portfolios	2 (6%)
Student presentations	20 (64%)
Exhibits	2 (6%)
Other ways – Documentary films, quizzes, final exams	10 (32%)

The study identified 19 best practices in service-learning, which were organized in six categories: Learning Outcomes, Response to Community Needs, Partnerships, Preparation and Orientation, Monitoring and Support, and Assessment and Evaluation. For example, in the category of "Response to Community Needs," the service site is appropriate for responding to the identified community needs, and in the category of Monitoring and Support, the faculty member accompanies the students to the service site and sometimes participates in the service.

The limitations of the research design and the implications of the findings are discussed in the paper.

5. Conclusion

The study on which this paper is based has shed light on service-learning as an effective pedagogical approach. The service-learning designation has served to reinforce the need for constant attention to rigorous academic standards. Moreover, the service-learning designation process can help a university maintain the viability and increase the visibility of service-learning.

Keywords: best practices in service-learning, critical reflection, service-learning designation

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