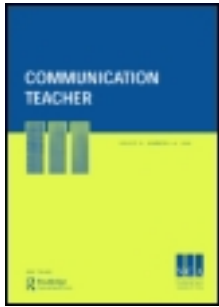


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Community Partners' Assessment of Service Learning in an Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Course

Sarah J Steimel

This assessment explored community partners' perceptions of service learning in a required communication course. Semi-structured interviews revealed that community partners believed that students were providing needed and valuable service, students were learning about the community, and students were learning through their application of course skills in an applied context. However, community partners also felt that students were unaware of or did not care what they should be learning, that faculty contact was rare or nonexistent, and that community feedback opportunities were rare and undervalued by faculty. Results suggest specific improvements necessary in service learning assignment design.

Introduction

Communication studies departments are increasingly integrating service learning projects into their curriculum (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Pearson, 2004). Specifically, the National Task Force on Service Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) found that 60% of graduating college seniors now engage in some form of service learning in their college careers. In its most basic form, service learning is “linking academic study and civic work through structured reflection” (Ehrlich, 2011, p. xii). Essentially, students are asked to practice what they are learning in their disciplines in community settings where their work will (hopefully) benefit others (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012)

According to Gibson, Kostecki, and Lucas (2001), the communication discipline and service learning form a “natural partnership” that offers possibilities for students to apply their communication skills and practices in real-world contexts, typically for

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nonprofit organizations (p. 188). As a result, Novek (2009) argues that service learning is rapidly proliferating in virtually all communication classes. Specifically, Oster-Aaland et al. (2004) concluded that “communication studies is a disciplinary leader in service learning” (p. 349)

Service learning’s rapid growth can be attributed in part to growing calls for university education to connect in clear and meaningful ways to the world outside of the classroom. For instance, Hummert (2009) asserts that communication research and teaching must “cross the bridge from the academy to the community” (p. 220). Similarly, Kahl (2010) argues that “for students to use communication to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others, they must be engaged in communication scholarship beyond the classroom” (p. 299). Service learning is seen as a way to build that bridge; as a way to build community connections (Novek, 1999), to make coursework relevant to students (Koch, Lelle, Long, & VanBuren, 2003), and to help students use academic concepts to solve “authentic, real world problems with tangible outcomes” (Quintanilla & Whal, 2005, p. 67). Existing research documents extensive benefits of service learning to both faculty and students (see, e.g., Jacoby, 2009; Kendall, 1999; Soukup, 1999). Specifically, Novak, Markey, and Allen (2007) found in their meta-analysis of nine studies comparing courses with and without a service learning component that “the addition of a service learning component increases learning outcomes...[by] about 53%” (p. 149). Further, service learning has shown positive effects on a wide variety of metrics, including increases in “complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking and cognitive development” as well as on “cultural awareness, tolerance for diversity, [and] altruistic attitudes” (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 60).

Unfortunately, “the service learning research agenda has been driven by academic concerns,” chiefly of student and faculty perceptions of learning rather than the perceptions of external partners (Cruz & Giles, 2000, p. 28). Stoecker and Tryon (2009) explain that although there are many claims of the positive impact that service learning has on communities, that impact often comes from the anecdotal experiences of faculty and students rather than from the perspective of the community partners themselves. However, the Carnegie Foundation (2012) argues in their Community Engagement Classification materials that meaningful service learning partnerships “require a high level of understanding and intentional practices specifically directed to reciprocity and mutuality” (p.1). As Jacoby and Associates (1996) explain, service learning educators who engage in orientation and continuing dialogue with community partners are able to develop higher quality relationships that deepen the students’ educational experiences. The present assessment sought to deepen the perspectives available on service learning by seeking external assessment. Specifically, community partners were interviewed about their experiences with student service learning projects. Because little previous research has addressed what community partners think about the success of service learning specifically in communication studies, the first research question asked:

RQ1: What positive outcomes do community partners observe as resulting from service learning requirements in the interpersonal and small group communication course?

Further, a truly dialogic relationship with community partners should not seek only to identify perceived positive outcomes of service learning. Rather, as Jacoby and Associates (1996) explain, consistent and ongoing feedback, particularly about potential problems, from community partners “creates the necessary momentum to reshape and redirect efforts” to ensure that service learning programs benefit students and community partners alike (p. 106). As a result, the second research question asked:

RQ2: What problems do community partners observe that currently limit the pedagogical value of service learning in the interpersonal and small group communication course?

Method

At the mid-sized Mountain-West University (pseudonym) where this study was conducted, we offer a sophomore-level class in interpersonal and small group communication that is required by a large number of departments/majors on campus. In a typical semester, 18–20 sections are offered on campus (and more are offered as concurrent enrollment at area high schools), and 600 or more students enroll. As part of their requirements for the course, students are asked to form small groups and to complete 8–10 hours of service learning with an area nonprofit organization. Essentially, students are asked to apply small group communication concepts as they volunteer with the organization, with goals of improving both the communication of the students in the group and providing some tangible benefit for the nonprofit organization.

Procedure and Participants

This external assessment was designed to learn how the community partners perceive the service learning activities completed by our students. In order to allow the community partners to share their perspectives and to guide the conversations toward issues important to them, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed that asked about overall strengths/weaknesses of service learning; specific behaviors that were beneficial/detrimental; knowledge/skills our students had or should have; and communication between community partners, faculty, and students, among other issues.

After Institutional Review Board approval was attained, approximately 30 of the community partners our university lists on the community involvement Web site (the same Web site that students use to find community partners to volunteer for) were contacted. The nature of the project was explained, and the partners were asked if someone in a position of working with our students would be willing to complete an interview. In total, 15 participants (seven male, eight female) from 15 different organizations agreed to participate in the study. Participants included directors,

associate directors, volunteer coordinators, community coordinators, and directors of development. Their organizations engaged in a wide variety of missions, including education, healthcare, community crisis management, youth development, and workforce training, among others.

Using the protocol as a guide for discussion, individual interviews were conducted that were tape-recorded. Once collected, the interviews were transcribed near-verbatim (filler words that did not alter meaning like “um” and “like” were omitted). The average interview lasted just over 35 minutes for a total of 532 minutes of audio recordings. This resulted in 152 pages of typed, single-spaced transcripts for analysis.

The data were analyzed using data reduction and interpretation by following the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, a repeated close reading of the transcripts was undertaken. Second, the data were inductively coded by jotting down themes that appeared to be recurrent across the transcripts. Third, coded data were collated into themes, broadening and narrowing as necessary to get at the underlying meaning of the data. Fourth, all of the potential themes were checked to ensure that they fit the data in the coded extracts. Fifth, the themes were defined and named. Finally, vivid, compelling extracts were selected from the data to represent each theme in the analysis below. Results were shared with a community participant to ensure resonance and clarity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

RQ1 Results: Positive Outcomes of Service Learning

The first research question asked: What positive outcomes do community partners observe as resulting from service learning requirements in the interpersonal and small group communication course? Through the interviews with 15 community partners who had hosted our students in service learning projects, the community partners explained that (a) students provided needed and valuable services; (b) students were learning, especially about the community; and (c) students were trying and refining their classroom skills in an applied/real-world context.

Students Provide Needed and Valuable Services

First, when asked about the processes of service learning, the community partners overwhelmingly began their stories by talking about how students provide needed and valuable services. For instance, Olive explained, “We work, all of our programming is pretty much run because of volunteers, so just generally speaking, volunteers allow us to provide our services.” Nate indicated that the state and federal grants that his organization relied on to provide community services say “that we have to be able to provide a certain percentage of our grant through community support and involvement. We do that by volunteers.” As a result, community partners began by talking about their need for volunteers.

When asked more specifically what student volunteers brought that other staff and volunteers did not bring, community partners provided three answers: time, new energy/new ideas, and technological skills. Initially, the students’ ability to provide

time to undertake projects that the organization's staff or other volunteers could not was an advantage. For example, Karen explained, "I mean, a lot of [students] will take initiative and be able to provide a lot of things that we would love to be able to do, but it's just that we're so swamped already." Moreover, while students could and did help agency staff complete routine tasks, students' time was particularly appreciated for their ability to take on a new "bigger" project that staff members were too busy to handle. In one case, Dawn explained that her agency had wanted to put together a resource binder to help clients know where they could seek help for various issues in the community, but it was not until a group of students were willing to tackle that project that it was completed. Dawn summarized:

You know, a lot of times we're so busy with the day-to-day stuff that we have big ideas about, oh, what would it take to do this or that or the other, but we never have time to put things together like the resource binder or those different things.

Thus, the students' ability to give time was seen as both a needed and valued service.

Second, students were especially appreciated for their ability to bring new excitement to the organizations. When asked again for unique contributions made by students, Karen indicated, "They're easy to show things because they're excited." This idea of excitement was repeated by Ethan, who answered, "They offer this energy that is just difficult I think to find." When specifically pressed about what advantages new excitement and new energy offer, Alan elaborated, "It's exciting, it's different, it's new. And they bring a lot of different ideas . . . students tend to bring a different energy, imagination." Thus, the new energy and new ideas brought by students were seen as a particular advantage of their service learning.

Finally, community partners explained that compared to other volunteers and staff, students were especially able to bring in technology skills that the agencies really needed. Felicia explained that the benefit of student service learners is that they are "more capable with picking up some of our technology-type of responsibilities." Specifically, Felicia described students building volunteer databases, using Facebook to promote the organization, and being comfortable contacting agency clients via email. Jack agreed, explaining that the communication students, in particular, were able to help his organization "in helping to produce marketing literature and helping to upgrade maybe some Web sites or do some things for web pages and things like that." The students were able to do different things than his other volunteers could do for the organization. Therefore, because the nonprofit community partners rely on volunteers for their operations and because students were uniquely able to contribute time, new energy, and technology skills, students were seen as providing needed and valuable services.

Students are Learning, Especially about the Community

The second positive outcome observed by the community partners was the increased awareness that students gained about the community. In fact, when asked what lesson the students most learned while volunteering in her organization, Carol answered,

“greater awareness of so many people in the community that maybe some students just don’t have the opportunity to interact with a lot of families that are suffering so badly from economic situations and hardships and so on.” Alan echoed this increased awareness for students as a primary learning outcome when he explained:

I think the realization that for a lot of students, not all, but for a lot of students, to hear about the kids that are low income and come from really poor living conditions, where the family dynamics are broken, a lot of them beyond repair. But I don’t know how many just in the day-to-day routine, how many of us really have the opportunity to see firsthand what it is.

In addition to giving students a greater awareness of what some members of the community may be experiencing, Dawn specifically argued that by seeing “real” people experiencing need, she found that students’ stereotypes about *who* is poor were often challenged. She explained, “I think students are often surprised by that too, that there are families and there’s the face of poverty that looks different than what we may assume.” Thus, by interacting with community partners, students gained a greater knowledge about the needs of the community and who those in need might be.

Additionally, Brian observed that, before service learning, students often also were unaware of the number and types of nonprofit agencies in the community who were working on a variety of issues. He stated:

Oh, I definitely think that probably, programs like ours, a lot of times aren’t on the forefront in a community. So, definitely I think that it gives them an exposure to all different populations and an experience they wouldn’t get elsewhere . . . because then they see that there’s more going on in the community than meets the eye.

By becoming more aware not just of needs but of agencies actively working to make a difference, Brian felt that students would be more likely to actually help the community in their adult lives.

That realization that students could make a difference was seen as a significant learning outcome by many of the community partners. Dawn argued, “I think that it’s really kind of eye opening for them too, to see how big the need is in our area, and how much they’re making a difference.” Iris, in particular, explained that she believed that service learning would lead students to volunteer again because they saw firsthand the positive difference they could make. Iris said, “I think it just shows that volunteering doesn’t always have to be sad, that it can be to up-build the community and uplift it and be an economic impact.”

Service learning has routinely been criticized in the literature as allowing students to feel good by volunteering a few hours without addressing structural causes of inequality or poverty (e.g., by actually building community capacity or empowering community members), leaving Stoecker and Tryon (2009) to argue that “there is some reason to suspect that poor communities may be serving the students more than the students are serving the community” (pp. 6–7). However, the National Task Force on Civic Learning (2012) concludes that service learning can and does make a difference for communities, in part by heightening students’ sense of social

responsibility and citizenship skills, their prosocial decision making, and their awareness of their own privilege. Further, the National Task Force found that students were more likely to consider social issues critically in their future decision making. These findings by the National Task Force mirror the community partners' beliefs that a major positive outcome of service learning was that students were learning more about the community and its interconnected needs while simultaneously developing a sense of agency that they could make a positive difference in the future.

Students Try and Refine their Classroom Skills in a Real-World Context

Finally, when asked to explore further the types of learning they saw in service learning students, community partners were particularly excited about the opportunity for students to apply classroom skills in a real-world context. For instance, when asked for an example of learning he saw students experiencing, Mark answered that “they get to practice what they’ve been learning in class.” Mark then specifically described one group of communication students who had helped him design an icebreaker scavenger hunt for groups of children. Mark explained, “That was a perfect example of follow-through on exactly what they learned in class, how they were able to teach what [the students] wanted [the kids] to do, have them do it, and report back on how it went.” Mark felt that what the students had learned about small group communication in their communication course allowed them to design an effective game. Similarly, Ethan talked about how his communication students were able to apply communication principles to helping him strengthen his organization’s marketing plan, saying, “It was a great opportunity to just kind of let them test their skill set.” Thus, the sense that students were able to use classroom lessons and vocabulary to implement “real” projects was a source of learning for students.

Additionally, as students applied classroom knowledge to the real world, they often encountered obstacles or unexpected events that deepened their learning. Brian described one group working to complete a group project they had promised his organization that kept running into unforeseen difficulties:

I think it helped them get a more realistic view of what it is to put together a system, and find that everything doesn’t work as perfectly as you thought it was going to. I think that is probably just life and that was probably a good experience for them to see, “Gosh, we had this all figured out and then when we put it to practice it didn’t go as smoothly as we wanted it,” and it probably helped prepare them more for when they get into the real work world.

This application of classroom skills in the imperfect and frustrating real world helped students not only to refine their learning of classroom vocabulary, but also to develop further their communication skills in general. As Ethan indicated, “They win by gaining experience . . . because to explain it to somebody else, you understand better than when you have [just] thought it through.” The community partners believed students gained “soft skills” from applying classroom material to the real world that they might not have otherwise gained. As Brian summarized:

There are a lot of soft skills that people don't pick up on if you're just learning the tools of the job . . . [like] find[ing] out what it is like to have somebody reject their project or try[ing] to get along with somebody, they're just more prepared for the work world, which as far as the book work you're just not going to get that.

The nonprofit community partners believed that a significant positive outcome of service learning was that students were learning more about both their coursework and about communication “soft skills” by applying their course material in “real-world” settings. As a result, this external assessment shows that community partners believe that students are providing needed and valuable services, students are learning about the community, and students are learning through their application of course skills in an applied context.

RQ2 Results: Problems with Current Service Learning Implementation

The second research question asked: What problems do community partners observe that currently limit the pedagogical value of service learning in the interpersonal and small group communication course? Through the interviews with the community partners who had hosted our students, they explained that (a) students were often unclear about or did not care about learning objectives; (b) community partners had little if any contact with faculty; and (c) community partners had little opportunity for meaningful feedback on student performance.

Students Unclear about or Do Not Care about Learning Objectives

Over the course of their interviews, all of the community partners I spoke with reaffirmed their commitment to service learning as more than just volunteering. As Dawn indicated, “We want the students, we really want to make sure that they have a service *learning* experience” [emphasis hers]. Similarly, Carol argued that students should be “engaged in activities that aren't just providing general service but in ways that might be a little more related to their discipline.” The community partners clearly told me that the *learning* component of service learning was important to them.

However, the community partners simultaneously revealed that, in their experience, the students they receive typically did not care if they “learned” or if the learning was related to their particular academic area. For instance, Carol explained:

I would have to say that more often than not it seems like they [the students] just want to complete the service requirement. To most of them, I would think it seems to matter less if I can come up with some creative ideas for a task . . . that would provide maybe something that's a little bit more related to learning in that particular class that they're taking.

This lack of caring particularly manifests itself in the students' obsession with just completing the hours required by their instructor. As Iris noticed, “Mostly, they just say we need eight hours and we don't care.” Gail agreed saying, “I think they

just want the hours, to be honest.” As a result of this focus on hours rather than learning objectives, several community partners indicated that students often sought the easiest possible task to fill their time. Carol noted, “So many of them make it clear quite early in the conversation that they really don’t care . . . they want to do the simplest thing and get it over with so much of the time.” Ethan agreed, venting that “I think most students on average are interested in ‘let us go dig dirt for a day. Let me get my hours in. Let me do my duty.’”

Rather than place blame on the students, several of the service learning partners felt as if the students’ professors were not clearly communicating what students should gain from service learning. For example, Nate explained, “I assume at that point that the professor hasn’t given them any specifics.” Karen described a similar assumption about the failure of faculty, saying, “I’m wondering does the professor probably even care, or they’re just kind of saying, ‘Oh, get your hours and tell me you’ve done it.’” Mark agreed, hypothesizing, “So maybe the professors and teachers aren’t giving precise instructions of what they want them to accomplish? . . . I don’t know what kind of introduction was given.” Thus, there seems to be a real concern not only that students are focused more on completing hours than on service, but also that faculty are not adequately instructing students as to what they ought to get out of service learning.

Community Partners have Little (If Any) Contact with Faculty

Second, in order for service learning partnerships to function well, community partners expressed that a relationship between the community partner and the faculty who were sending their students was crucial. Alan explained, “It’s a huge benefit when you know the instructor. Because then it’s real easy to communicate. It’s nice knowing exactly what instructors want from their kids. It makes it a lot easier to say, ‘Hey, I’m pretty sure from your instructor, this isn’t your agenda in the classroom.’” In his mind, knowing the instructor and having a conversation about what he/she wants their students to gain would allow him to really shape what students learn in meaningful ways. Moreover, Dawn argued that when faculty come down to her nonprofit agency, they got a much better sense of what the agency is/does and how students might really learn course concepts in that setting. Dawn argued, “What I think makes the biggest difference is just people coming down and seeing the facility . . . I think you have the professors come to us, they would get a better idea of what their students are doing when they are here and what they want them to be doing.” Alan agreed, saying, “I wish that instructors who sent their students to us did the same tour and the same acclimation so that they have heard and they understood our dos and don’ts and where we are coming from, that kind of thing.” In the minds of the community partners, communication with faculty (particularly in the physical space of the community agency) would help community partners actually partner with faculty in achieving meaningful learning objectives for students.

Unfortunately, the community partners overwhelmingly vented that faculty had largely failed to make any contact before (or even during) the students’ service

learning experiences. Every community partner interviewed was asked, in general, if the partners had interacted with faculty of the students being sent to serve, and if so, what forms that interaction had taken. Hannah quickly said, “None at all.” Nate simply but emphatically replied, “No.” Olive said, “No. Not typically involved.” Leo responded, “Not really, no. We’ve not been able to get to that point.” Mark provided a slightly different answer when he indicated, “Through the communications department, I’ve met a few of them just by chance, but not any ongoing interaction or consistent interaction.” So, while Mark had met a few of the faculty, the meetings were sporadic or “by chance” rather than a systematic part of service learning. When Jack simply answered, “No” regarding his interaction with faculty, I asked, “Is that something that would be helpful to you, do you think?” and before I could finish the entire question, he interrupted “Absolutely!” So while there seemed to be a real desire from community partners to interact with faculty, it appeared that in most instances that contact was not provided.

Little Opportunity for Meaningful Feedback

Finally, community partners felt that their opportunity to guide student learning was limited by the fact that faculty were not soliciting meaningful feedback on student performance. For instance, Carol had a group of students who produced a video for her organization as their project. When asked about those students’ instructor, Carol responded:

I don’t recall him asking me at the end of a semester for any sort of feedback whatsoever on a student. So I’m assuming that their grades or whatever portion of their grade that this project involved that he somehow just judged them on the final product that they produced.

In her mind, then, while the faculty member might judge the quality of the video in a non-contextual way, he was missing whether the students actually provided a video her agency *wanted* (and in fact, she revealed that for what her organization needed, the video was terrible). Other community partners also expressed that they were not typically asked to evaluate students at the end of their service term. When asked if she had been asked to evaluate students, Olive simply replied, “Never.” When I followed up by asking if evaluations would be something she would find helpful, she quickly replied, “Yes! If even just to provide some leadership . . . on who/what we are looking for in the next group.” Community partners wanted to ensure that instructors knew whether the products students produced were relevant to the community partners’ needs.

Some community partners indicated that they were asked to fill out a feedback form, but typically those forms only asked community partners to confirm the number of hours students worked. For instance, Gail said, “Usually we have an evaluation which just talks about did they fulfill their [hours] commitment.” Dawn agreed, stating that in terms of being asked for feedback on the students, “I think sometimes we sign a sheet saying that they were here.” Both Gail and Dawn, however,

explained that feedback is much more than just confirming hours because not all student volunteer hours are equal in terms of learning. As Dawn elaborated, “Some [of the students] might be more engaged in asking questions and visiting our Web site, and others you know may be coming in and sorting food and then writing a paper about sorting food.” While Dawn repeatedly clarified that their organization was grateful to the students who simply sorted food, she did not see those students as really learning anything related to small group communication. To her, then, evaluations should ask, at minimum, about the quality and relationship of service hours to course learning objectives.

When asked about feedback, Mark did indicate that he had received a few feedback sheets from one particular faculty member who did ask meaningful questions relevant to his students’ learning. Mark said, “I find them very helpful [because they] asked pointed, specific questions, what they did, how did they do it.” Thus, community partners expressed a desire for more engagement from faculty in such feedback.

Overall then, findings regarding this second research question revealed that, in terms of problems limiting service learning, community partners believed that students were unaware of or did not care what they should be learning, that faculty contact was rare or nonexistent, and that community feedback opportunities were rare and undervalued by faculty.

Discussion

The results of this external assessment indicate both promising and limiting trends in the implementation of service learning. First, in terms of positive outcomes of service learning, this assessment shows that community partners believe that students are providing needed and valuable services. This mirrors the findings of a study conducted by a partnership of researchers from UCLA and the RAND corporation, who found that community organizations strongly valued the contributions of student volunteers and perceived the students as highly effective in meeting both organizational and client needs (Gray et al., 1996). These community partners particularly valued the students for their time to take on special projects, for the energy and new ideas that they bring to the organizations, and for their assistance with new communication technologies.

Second, these community partners believed that students were learning about the community in which they lived and felt more positive agency toward making a difference. This means that the hopes of service learning described by Jacoby (2009) – that service learning can serve as a powerful introduction to students “to developing and understanding of the root causes of social problems and where to begin to find solutions” (p. 13) – are being observed by these community partners.

Third, the students were being given the chance to use their knowledge and skills in applied settings. Again, when describing the promise of service learning for communication studies, Soukup (1999) argues that service learning provides “a realistic place of practice, especially in more applied cases” (p. 8). These community

partners describe seeing that promise enacted as students gain both practical experience in classroom skills and “soft skills” more broadly that will help them in their future professional lives.

Unfortunately, however, the problems limiting the value of service learning described by these community partners are serious. Yet, as Jacoby and Associates (1996) argue, such problems provide us opportunities to refine our practice and to improve pedagogical design of service learning. First, the community partners describe the students as not typically aware of, or caring about, the instructional goals of service learning. They were focused instead on completing the number of hours “required” by their professor. This is likely due to what Pollock (1999) describes as one of the most frequent pedagogical designs of communication service learning projects. In this type of assignment, students are asked to reflect on their service learning retroactively, perhaps by writing journals or a paper *after* they have completed the service, tying the service to course concepts. As Pollock explains:

The service they provide does not require that they know course concepts nor that they be able to apply course materials in their service. For example, a student may work three hours each week in a soup kitchen . . . This experience may lead the student, upon reflection, to better understand theoretical conceptions of power, social norms and poverty. But the service that facilitates this does not require the student grasp course concepts. From this perspective, service is of benefit to learning, but learning does not necessarily benefit service. (pp. 115–116)

As a result of relying on retrospective sensemaking assignments, then, while students may be able to make course concepts “fit” to explain what they have done after the fact, they do not use the course concepts proactively as a meaningful part of their service. Given the complaints of these community partners that students’ service lacked the obvious *learning* component, instructors must make the pedagogical goals of service learning clear to students before they enter the community, rather than allowing students to make sense of learning only after the fact. This should involve specific discussions of which course concepts might be applied, examples of how concepts have been applied in meaningful ways in the past, and preparatory assignments that ask students to identify proactively which concepts they intend to engage before completing their service. Obviously, room will have to be made for alterations once students enter the field (as perhaps other concepts will surface), but such a proactive design would engage learning in a more meaningful way. Second, those goals/concepts must be clearly shared with community partners, who, in this study at least, really desire to design service projects consistent with classroom goals, but often felt they had no idea how to do that.

Further, as the second limitation reveals, these discussions of learning goals should not simply be a one-way communication path from faculty to community partners. The community partners universally desired more significant and sustained faculty interaction. When describing the goals of service learning in communication studies, Applegate and Morreale (1999) explained “service learning must create a true partnership with the community” (p. xii). To do that, faculty must make time to at least meet the community partners and tour their facilities before sending students

out into the field. Ideally, such an introduction would lead to a sustained relationship in which both sides could offer reflection and feedback. Similarly, faculty should hold workshops for community partners in part to explain not only the pedagogical goals faculty perceive for service learning, but also to clarify some practical student logistics (the 15-week semester, what a reasonable workload for students looks like, etc.). Partners should be encouraged at those workshops to clarify their expectations as well. As Jacoby and Associates (1996) summarize, “Once community partners understand the desired learning outcomes for students, they can be instrumental in helping to achieve them” (p. 105).

Finally, and consistent with the relationship described above, community partners desire faculty to solicit meaningful feedback from them regarding student performance. Although Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue (2003) were discussing community-based research specifically (rather than service learning more broadly), their argument that community-based work must be “conducted with and for, not on, members of a community” (p. xx) is an appropriate reminder here. When students are sent out to do work in the community, their evaluation should take into account whether the work they did with and for the community partner was valuable. They should not produce a video “on” the community partner (that the partner does not like and does not need) and be evaluated without such feedback.

In the end, by more clearly and proactively defining learning outcomes and vocabulary to be applied with students and community partners, by developing relationships between community partners and faculty, and by seeking community partners’ feedback, we as faculty can capitalize on the positive aspects of service learning for our students, classrooms, and communities by providing a stronger experience for all involved.

Opportunities for Future Research

This research focused on an external assessment of the service learning requirement of one university’s large, multi-section interpersonal and small group communication course. However, this project was able to reveal significant insights into the advantages and potential pitfalls of communication service learning partnerships. Therefore, further research should continue the work of external assessment on service learning projects at other universities and on other types of communication courses that have differing designs (in terms of hours required of students, etc.) This additional work could further substantiate the external value of service learning programs to community partners and to our students, and could continue to help us refine service learning assignments overall.

Additionally, the intent of this study was to provide an overall sense of the quality of service learning projects from the perspectives of outside community partners, particularly because the voices of community partners in assessment of service learning are typically underrepresented (see Ferrari & Worrall, 2000). Future research should build on this start by putting faculty, students, and community partners in conversation to gain a richer picture of the entire service learning process.

By continuing to develop external assessments of service learning projects in communication classrooms, researchers should be better able to understand how service learning projects affect both students and the community, and should be better able to design service learning opportunities to maximize learning for both sides.

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