

Journal of Communication Pedagogy

2018, Vol. 1(1) 24-26

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DOI: 10.31446/JCP.2018.07

Central States Communication Association

Service-learning as an Effective Pedagogical Approach for Communication Educators

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Service-learning combines the learning goals of a course with service to the community. Through service-learning, students engage in action and reflect on their experiences in order to connect what they see and do in the community with what they are learning in their courses. As Britt (2012) stated, “Conceptually, service-learning is a form of pedagogy that engages students in community service and regular guided reflection on the service in order to deepen learning and enrich communities” (pp. 80-81). Whether service-learning projects account for part of a course or an entire course is centered on service-learning, service-learning works because it connects theory with practice. Service-learning is an important pedagogy because it offers students a chance to do meaningful work that helps their community and teaches them the importance of civic engagement.

The theory of experiential learning provides the basis for including service-learning in the curriculum as it actively engages students with the curriculum they are studying. Service-learning projects provide students with the opportunity to tackle real issues and work in concert with real groups to solve real and practical problems. When students participate in a service-learning project, their experiences help them relate to the subject matter in a deeper and more significant manner. Rather than presenting abstract or theoretical examples and concepts in the classroom that may cause students to remain disconnected to the course content, with service-learning, students grapple with a variety of issues, become more involved in their own education (Weintraub, 1998) and increase their knowledge of the subject they are studying as well as their ability to apply this knowledge to social issues (Magarrey & Francis, 2005; Michael, 2005; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007).

How does Service-Learning Inform Communication Pedagogy?

From a pedagogical perspective, service-learning provides several important benefits to students. First, it engages students in their own education. Because service-learning connects students with what they read in their textbooks and hear from their instructors with actual

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experiences they observe, analyze, reflect on and learn from, this pedagogy provides students with a richer educational experience. As Tannenbaum and Berrett (2005) noted, students feel that service-learning assignments “increased the academic relevance and understanding of course content” (p. 199). As a result, students are no longer simply receivers of knowledge but active learners who engage with the material and link their experiences with the course content.

Second, service-learning helps prepare students for their civic life because it moves them beyond the classroom and helps them see firsthand societal issues about which they may have little knowledge or understanding. It gives them the chance to become involved with the community and helps them realize they can help be agents for social change. Stevens (2001) concluded that service-learning can help build a sense of citizenship in students who participate in this type of pedagogy. Similarly, Maresco (2005) found service-learning gave students “an understanding of the importance of working together for the benefit of society” and raised their awareness about “social, political, environmental, health and educational issues in the community” (p. 77).

Third, through service-learning, students are better able to identify the interconnectedness of their lives with the lives of others. Despite the significant focus on global citizenship (e.g., AACU, 2011; Crawford & Kirby, 2008; Lumina Foundation, 2014; Tarrant, 2010) in the contemporary classroom, questions still remain about whether college students are aware of how other individuals live on a day-to-day basis. Getting students out of the classroom and into the lives of others beyond the institution helps sensitize them to issues about which many of them previously could only speculate.

Fourth, service-learning helps meet actual needs within the community. Because students, faculty, and community members work together to determine the needs of the community and how the project will be implemented, significant work can be completed which contributes to the community and which community partners might not otherwise be able to accomplish.

Conclusion

Service-learning provides communication educators with a pedagogy that informs the curriculum and serves the community. Linking what is done in the classroom with work that serves the community enhances the teaching-learning process and acts as an effective communication pedagogy.

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