

Integrating Service Learning into a First-Year Experience Course: A Few Considerations

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In this essay I explore important considerations for integrating service learning in a three-credit hour semester-based, First Year Experience (FYE) course at a large American University with over 30,000 students enrolled on a four-year commuter-campus. I assessed classes that are civic-minded and engage students in larger comparative discussions of relevant issues and opportunities in the community; so including service learning into two of my FYE courses appeared to be appropriate (Mayhew and Engberg 2011; Tukibayeva and Gonyea 2014; Whiteford and Strom 2013). My experience as a second-year faculty member, teaching service learning to two FYE sections (about 20 students per class) for the first time, turned out to be challenging. When considering whether to do this on campus, I noted that, on average, only one out of 30 FYE sections was service-learning designed.¹ Therefore its application was experimental. My classes were comprised of students coming from a variety of academic majors: three-fourths were first-time students, with the other fourth divided up between struggling students (i.e., going through academic probation) and advanced-undergraduates seeking service opportunities.

This essay will primarily relate to the largest contingency of my FYE courses, first-time students. For many first semester students, adjusting to life at a university is a challenging experience that comes with inherent hurdles. Students are frequently adapting to new housing conditions, roommate relationships, and the new “adult” role, complicated for some students still living at home. Financial challenges, love interests, poor sleep habits, and fixations with internet streaming technologies can all create time

management difficulties that impact the quantity and quality of student work. Given the aforementioned and other challenges facing first-year students, one questions whether or not it is beneficial to integrate service learning into an FYE course.

Nevertheless, in my review of recent service learning literature, the value of service learning was highlighted for students and professors alike. Trudy Bers and Donna Younger (2014) stated that, when considering retention, compared to other FYE high impact practices, common reading programs and mentoring: “service learning has yielded the most research examining its impact on student success” (p. 85). On the campus I am part of, I have heard many stories from my colleagues on the value of service learning, though these have come from faculty who teach different disciplines at more advanced undergraduate levels. Professors and students’ stories embracing the opportunity to extend their efforts beyond the traditional classroom into K-12 local schools or academies, and whose focus relates—but it is not limited to—the following areas: campus-based volunteer and service-learning centers, local businesses, or alternative academic settings such as juvenile detention centers, are common. I have learned through interactions with colleagues and a related study of the recent literature that a student learns about herself in the process of service learning and ideally fulfills an identified need for a specific community partner or for the community at large. Despite all, the concern that arises is whether or not service learning should be promoted among first-year students.

This is a serious concern for the professor who may not be sufficiently aware of sufficient service learning opportunities in the community. Nonetheless, engaging students in service learning at an early stage of their undergraduate experience appeared to be an extremely

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valuable and precedent setting endeavor. This can lead the student off to a great start and potentially give practical and relevant meaning to their academic studies through their service experience, which could be informed to/influence their college and career paths.

Site supervisors themselves, as community partners, often serve as intermediaries, coordinating student schedules with site recipients and teaching students important valuable skills and lessons. For example, in service-learning in K-12 schools, a site supervisor may interview the student to identify strengths and weaknesses and struggle to simultaneously help the student meet the expectations laid out by the professor, as well as his/her parents who may be leaving their children after school to receive extended tutoring from a college student. In this context, how do the site supervisor and professor address the student who does not show up for his/her scheduled tutoring assignment? For the new academically-struggling student, taking the initiative to seek-out for help or to fulfill service-learning responsibilities, may be extremely intimidating. Instead of just attending to class regularly and passively sitting and listening to what a professor may deliver; students are expected to teach and to be taught in a new, perhaps, more self-directed context. This can cause a new level of stress for students, particularly to those who are used to being closely directed in school settings.

My recent experiment with integrating service learning in two non-major specific FYEs leads me to conclude a few different deliberations. In an attempt to describe and promote a symbiotic relationship among the student, site supervisor, and professor, I give a brief list of five considerations below.

1. **Meaningful service-learning assignments for students:** When possible, identify or change service-learning assignments to meet the students' needs. I learned that if students are not invested in service-learning assignments, they will resent the experience and may feel like they are wasting their time. Consequently, some students may perform at a subpar level, causing the rest to wish that the service learning assignment would end sooner.

2. **Be willing to take risks (but follow through):** Professors need to be creative in identifying service learning projects, but also extending trust to students, allowing them some autonomy in developing their own projects. When I debated whether to have my course designated as a 20-hour service learning course, I was relieved to learn that a campus office, specializing in K-12 math and literacy tutoring would facilitate background checks and serve as the liaison between students and school service sites. Over the course of the semester the campus office did an outstanding job serving my students; however, there were still a handful of students in each of my classes who were not able to go to school because of their own unusual work and school schedules. In this situation, the professor should be prepared to challenge students to come up with a suitable alternative to the generally assigned service assignment. However, students may try to steer more toward volunteer work rather than service learning. Where ought the professor to draw the line between service learning and volunteerism? This is serving behind the scenes at a food bank, for excellent volunteer opportunity. Further, the professor might ask whether face-to-face service-learning opportunities are the best way to do service learning. My current bias is toward the face-to-face option, though I am open to discussing meaningful online options with students.
3. **Early and regular discussions with students.** I found, similar to others carrying out service-learning related projects (see Butler and Christofili 2014; Maddrell 2014), that asking students to divide up their service-learning hours over the course of many weeks (e.g., four weeks), allowed time for better reflections and a useful opportunity to assess students' progress (Smith et al. 2011). Also, interviewing each student early on, about their particular service learning opportunity, helped avoid potential miscommunication issues on the expectations of their assignments.

4. **Promote responsibility:** I have learned that the professor should explicitly teach students how to be responsible. Discussing basic responsibility ethics—basic attendance and follow through skills—are crucial for ensuring that students do what is expected. For example, spelling out some scenarios to students or brief case studies in advance is extremely helpful for the whole academic environment. If a student needs to call in sick, what will happen to the stakeholders (e.g., K-12 students, teachers, and site-supervisor), at the service-learning site? How much advance notice will the site need, and how exactly should they be contacted? How should site supervisors and professors address students who did not come to school because of car issues, birthday celebrations, or just did not feel like going? What if the student is extremely bored at a service-learning site? How will the student take responsibility for his or her own teaching, tutoring, and learning?
5. **Be open to the unexpected:** Professors and site supervisors may be surprised about the take-away messages students acquire from their service learning assignments. Be open to unique types of learning that can take place. While one student may see reading to kids as babysitting, another student may see it as an opportunity to help a child developing an essential skill. By regularly sharing students' thoughts about their service-learning sites in class, the latter can use that feedback to improve its impact on students. I noticed these class discussions tended to help students feel more integrated both in class and at their service-learning site. Also, I learned that involving a peer mentor, a student who has previously taken the class and carried out service learning work in one of their other classes, is an extremely valuable element for helping students thrive in setting up and carrying out their own service learning work (Wooten et al. 2012). By the end of the semester, students (with the exception of one or two in each class) reflected on their service-learning participation and reported it as a valuable growing and learning experience.

Conclusions

Despite any undesirable considerations, integrating service learning in a First Year Experience appears to be a meaningful challenge to professors, students, and service site supervisors. It appeared that teamwork and course relevancy played a large part in helping students succeed in their service learning environments. Early reflections and discussion activities helped students become more engaged in their experiences and allowed them to learn from each other. Creativity in assigning and adjusting student projects was important to student success, as well as stating clear expectations of student responsibilities. Overall, it appeared that my service-learning FYE sections yielded a more civically engaged experience for first-time students, than my stand-alone sections.

Notes

1. The section that was designed as a service-learning course was taught by another professor and was run as a Learning Community Center, paired thematically with another course. Official service-learning designed courses at my institution require students to complete 20 service-learning hours each semester.

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