

Engaging the Online Learner via Experiential and Service-Learning Activities

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Introduction

As the world of web-based distance learning or more commonly known, online learning moves forward in bits and bytes, instructors may struggle with how to ensure that students learning online via the requisite tools (i.e., electronic reading, lectures or learning modules, written assignments, synchronous and/or asynchronous discussions) are also able to apply the concepts beyond the traditional written assignment (Hartman, 2002). By not limiting instruction to the web-based environs, educators may find that outside activities used in conjunction with an online course broaden learning experiences, thereby increasing concept application and retention for students in a general education course. This idea is supported by Wolfe and Green (2006), who wrote that “simply teaching in the traditional classroom is no longer sufficient preparation for today’s Recreation students...it might prove beneficial to expand the concept of the “classroom” and provide unique, experiential learning activities to reinforce concepts and theories presented in the classroom” (p. 186).

Theoretical Conceptualization

The theoretical basis for using off-line or real-world activities in tandem with an online class is found in constructivism and experiential education, which both posit that learners must construct their own meaning from experiences, and that reflection is a vital part of constructing meaning. From the cognitive constructivist perspective, “learners construct knowledge only through what they themselves do” (Prawat, 1996, p. 219). Each new experience is added to memories of past experiences, interpreted based on those occurrences, and reasoned and reflected on to make meaning in the current situation. To finalize the meaning-making process, learners need to apply the knowledge either “verbally, visually, and/or in the auditory channel” (Gholson and Craig, 2006, p. 122).

One useful framework for designing activities in a constructivist manner is experiential education and David Kolb's experiential cycle. Experiential education is the "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). In practice, this translates to a learning cycle in which a student has an experience, reflects on it, generalizes it to other settings, and then applies or experiments with that newly gleaned knowledge, and is ready to begin the cycle again. The critical piece of this cycle, as well as in models proposed by Dewey and Lewin, is reflection. To wrestle with the abstract, reflect on what occurred, and accommodate and assimilate that information into existing cognitive maps, allows for the construction of new knowledge (Kreber, 2001).

Jacoby and Associates (1996) defined service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together" with structured reflection and reciprocity. Therefore, service-learning is a dynamic extension of Kolb's experiential cycle with the additional requirement that the activity fulfill a community need and that both the student and service recipient learn from the experience (Ralston & Ellis, 1997, p. 14).

There are many opportunities for instruction – both online and off – where educators can offer assignments requiring the application of concepts and a critical reflection afterwards, in order to secure understanding, application, and meaning-making. Moreover, research indicates that instructors utilizing service-learning components can benefit beyond traditional academic outcomes. The Higher Education Research Institute conducted a research study to compare service participants with non-participants on 35 learning outcomes. Their research demonstrated that the service participants engaged in community service resulted in a significantly higher difference on each of the 35 learning outcomes which can be summarized in three broad categories of academic development, civic values, and life skills (Astin, 1996).

The University of Utah's undergraduate requirement for diversity has been adopted since 1995 with the long term goal to extend "cross-cultural understanding, perhaps replacing the impulse to stereotype with better informed reasoning, understanding and judgment skills" (<http://www.ugs.utah.edu/assessment/dv.htm>). The use of experiential and service learning activities have been most useful in facilitating an opportunity for students experience and reflect on their own "society -- its norms, laws, public policies and discourse -- in the context of the rich and various cultural diversity that has shaped it." (<http://www.ugs.utah.edu/assessment/dv.htm>). Service-learning may be effective in helping students understand and integrate values and skills that form the foundation of diversity and cross-cultural understanding, such as care and compassion, honesty and trustworthiness, respect, responsibility and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.

Description of the Experiential Learning Activity

The diversity visitation assignment requires each student to attend an event or visit an agency that will increase their 'diversity world view.' The purpose of this assignment is to apply those lessons and topics covered in the online lectures and learning modules while participating in an activity within their own community. Each student may attend or visit any number of diversity sites, such as, a church, school, care center, cultural event, club, a festival, etc. Whatever the site or event selected, the diversity visitation should be a new experience for each individual. Some of the popular selections have included attending an African American church, a Catholic Mass, a Buddhist Temple; a school for the deaf and blind, or school for the extremely disabled; a nursing home, a day-care center for the elderly; ethnic/cultural celebrations (Native American Pow Wow or Living Traditions Festival) or alternative lifestyle (gay and lesbian) clubs or events.

Following the site visit the students must complete a series of reflection questions designed to apply the concepts covered in the course. These probing questions are designed to make connections between the experience and a deeper understanding of the theoretical and conceptual concepts. For example, several questions facilitate reflection on accessibility of the physical facilities and activities by people with disabilities, people with socio-economic challenges (i.e., poverty), and/or the involvement of non-dominant populations.

Description of the Service-Learning Activity:

Service-learning is a powerful form of experiential education that involves the student in solving human and community-based problems as part of their academic learning experience (Ralston & Ellis, 1997). The key to the effectiveness of the process is the identification of appropriate service-learning experiences and the reflection process. The service-learning activity in the online Leisure Behavior and Human Diversity course is designed to explore diversity in a recreation or community service setting. Research has demonstrated that student need assistance in identifying community needs and direction in how to effectively serve to fulfill those needs (Hart, 1998).

The instructor provides a list of viable options and community needs that will expose the student to an unfamiliar group, population, or way of experiencing recreation. Since students are often enrolled in an online course from outside the institution's region and even from international locations, the list must be rather broad in scope and provide links for students to research opportunities in their own community. During the third week of the semester, students submit a proposal for approval for the service-learning activity even if the activity appears on the recommended list. This step ensures that students engage in an acceptable service project and informs the instructor facilitating communication with the community agencies involved in

the project. The students must provide a minimum of five hours of service, obtain written verification of the service rendered, and complete a written reflection following the experience. Students have provided service for nursing homes or assisted living facilities, coaching athletes in the Special Olympics program, volunteered for the Veterans Administration Hospital recreation program, mentored participants in a youth-at-risk program, served as leaders in an after-school recreation program at the local Boys and Girls Club, and the National Ability Center.

Expected Learning Outcomes

The diversity visitation and the service-learning activity are instrumental in building meaningful connections between academic knowledge with the real world experience. Additionally, service-learning can help students develop a range of skills related to community stewardship, civic action, and a general caring about their community. Each semester the students have completed a post-class survey regarding the learning outcomes achieved in the course resulting from the diversity visitation and the volunteer service-learning experience. The majority of students report an increased level of comfort with members of other racial, ethnic, religious groups and/or non-dominant members of the general population. Most importantly, students indicate that the diversity and service experiences increased their level of understanding of diverse points of view, different value structures, and enhanced their desire to interact with people of different backgrounds in the future. Students have indicated an increased likelihood of volunteering in community service projects and a greater understanding of the value of recreation and leisure services for people of all ages, socio-economic status, racial/ethnic background, and/or levels of ability. Students have reported a greater understanding of the American's with Disability Act and Universal Design. Specific learner outcomes which are reflected in the Diversity Visitation and the Service-Learning Experience assignments include:

- An ability to tell other persons who are unfamiliar with a diverse, non-dominant population (of which I am not a member) about the characteristics of the group.
- An ability to describe the leisure behavior of one diverse group (of which I am not a member) related to the characteristics, culture or heritage of the group.
- An ability to communicate information on at least five different specific leisure resources in my state of residence regarding services offered to meet the needs of people with a different socio-economic status, racial/ethnic background, and/or levels of ability than myself.
- An ability to use People First Language when communicating with people with a disability or from a different socio-economic status, racial/ethnic background, and/or levels of ability from myself.

Considerations and Variations/Recommendations

While undertaking a new educational design is always exciting, instructors must be prudent and intentional with how and where they apply service-learning, site visits, interviews, or various other outside activities to an online course. The following are recommendations and considerations for implementing such activities.

- One precaution is to be aware of students' perceived workload in the course. Collins and White found that students reported the workload of an online course to be greater than a traditional class (2004). Instructors may want to identify specific outside activities, a flexible schedule, and the time requirement associated with the requirement in the course description available at registration and the first day of the course. This courtesy will afford students adequate time to plan their course schedule, find an alternative course, or find another student to work with during the community service. The sharing of the experience is often useful in overcoming the fear of a new experience as well as lessening the perceived workload.
- Select types of offline activities that match the course level and purpose. Whereas, introductory level courses may focus on knowledge and comprehension, upper division or advanced level courses often require students to apply, analyze, and synthesize concepts (Bloom, 1984). Undergraduate students are not typically ready to apply or practice the theories and concepts learned, but they are able to observe and reflect on them, or suggest how the use of a theory might influence the situation they observed (Bennett & Green, 2001).
- Collaborate with an on-campus organization or community agency that can help students find appropriate sites for service-learning. Students may not know where in their community they can volunteer, or what type of service is needed and appropriate for the course. Offering assistance through the colleges' student services center, the United Way, or a similar matching agency will present students with a first step to take in completing the assignment. Additionally, the instructor can ensure that agencies are prepared in advance for the students with appropriate activities, aware of the questions that the students may have regarding the application of the course concepts learned in the course, and provide relevant information.
- Consider the use of outside activities for any online class; it gives the students a real-world experience in they can anchor the concepts or practices learned online. Site visits, facility tours, or observations of any human activity, is possible in all disciplines. Examples might include students enrolled in a youth development related course observing an after school recreation program, tourism students volunteering at a visitor information center, human

resource management students observing staff training or staff meetings, or students evaluating the safety and potential risks present at a community center for a site and facility class.

- The service and diversity visit must occur within the semester they are enrolled in the course. This will allow the students an opportunity to embrace the experience in light of the knowledge they have gleaned from the class.

Conclusion

The challenge of integrating experiential and service-learning activities in to an online course designed to assist in teaching diversity and leisure behavior concepts has been well received by the students. The Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism offer two online sections of this course each semester. These sections typically fill to capacity on the first day of registrations in this extremely popular undergraduate general education course. The measurement of learning outcomes indicates that the course has had a positive impact on the enrolled students attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, we would recommend that other institutions consider integrating experiential learning and service-learning activities into their online courses with particular attention to those courses attempting to teach diversity or other social values and skills.

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