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Service learning in communication: Why?

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At a 1993 convention session honoring his work, Howard Giles recounted his attempts to introduce his students in a more practical way to accommodation theory. He would send them out from campus to visit nursing homes, where they would interact with elderly residents, paying particular attention to their own and their interlocutors' speech patterns. Such cross-generational discourse opened their ears to the accommodation normal in everyday speech. Seen in this way, communication should strike most people as a natural academic area for service-learning.

Service-learning — "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby 1996:5) — systematizes Giles' insight by regularly connecting the students to the community beyond the boundaries of school and academy. As in Giles' case, many others have recognized service-learning's value as a pedagogical device (see Droge and Murphy in this volume). As a pedagogical device, service-learning provides a particularly apt instrument in the communication teacher's tool chest. In addition, it enriches the communication student, the communication department, and, one hopes, the community.

Benefits for Faculty, Students, and Departments

Despite an impressive growth in theorization by communication scholars, communication study remains a fundamentally applied area. By its very nature, every kind of human communication, whether interpersonal, mediated, or even through the mass media, retains essential connections to practice. All communication students talk, interact nonverbally, act in groups, exist as family members, use the telephone, and consume the products of the mass media. The distinction between a "pure science" and an "applied science" simply does not fit communication study, for we can never divorce ourselves from our communication practice.

The first benefit of service-learning is that it makes the connection between theory and practice explicit. Within communication study, service-learning takes a variety of forms — ranging from students helping local girl scout units to working at homeless shelters, from visiting AIDS patients to tutoring children, from producing community video to translating in legal clinics. Some would even include internships at nonprofit organizations
(Cohen and Kinsey 1994). In every case, the communication student works not as a community volunteer but as a learner, seeking knowledge from the community and through reflection on experience, as well as from more traditional textbook study. This approach helps the teacher overcome the theory-practice divide by guiding the student to see practical communication both as worthy of study in its own right and as material that illustrates theoretical concerns. The approach helps the student by showing communication study as a unified area, with equally important poles of theory and practice. Finally, this approach helps the department integrate theory and practice in each course rather than erecting walls between the “theory courses” and the “hands-on courses.”

For departments that grew out of disparate foundations — speech, radio-television-film, journalism, and so on — the divide between practitioners, theoreticians, and researchers can seem troubling. The integrative power of service-learning works to bridge gaps, moving the student from classroom theory and classroom practice to community experience and back to classroom reflection. This pattern helps departments come to grips with their own heritage and can lead to greater integration within the curriculum.

Second, service-learning is a corrective to both theory and practice. On the one hand, it adds concrete experiential practice to the theory-driven courses; on the other, its structured reflection on experience adds a theorizing step to a primarily technical course. More than this, it corrects both perspectives by anchoring them in the community, with its time constraints, unpredictability, human error, and conflict. Service-learning moves students to consider others and their needs as part of their education. All too often the educational experience focuses only on the student, leading to a kind of self-indulgence. By placing the student in the community, service-learning corrects both a potential disciplinary confusion and a personal temptation to self-centeredness.

Third, service-learning offers faculty and departments an important opportunity to teach communication research methods in an indirect fashion. Giving students the opportunity to reflect on their community experiences cultivates an ethnographic attitude. By taking the role of participant-observers, the students can develop a taste for empirical observation. Here, too, they begin to bridge the theory-practice divide.

Looking at the situation in another way, a service-learning placement can provide the students a fourth benefit — a realistic place of practice, especially in more applied cases. Through service-learning, students in journalism or public relations often find opportunities to write, conduct campaigns, and apply their own skill to the problems of the placement sponsors.

Fifth, service-learning benefits faculty, students, and departments by
keeping us honest. As we have become more sophisticated in studying communication, we have honed critical skills through cultural studies, critical theory, varieties of deconstruction, and other valuable tools. But it is not enough for departments and faculty to see how communication works; we should also look for contradictions and manipulations. As students of communication, we should be skeptical and suspicious if we wish to avoid a naive acceptance of messages produced by economic, political, and cultural powers. What better deconstructive opportunities than those afforded by the mass media or by corporate communication? Yet at the same time faculty and departments happily send graduates off to these very industries, having taught them the skills they need to produce the very messages we criticize. To deal with tensions like this one, service-learning balances critique with participation. In other words, it changes a sequential experience in which most students move from study to critique to graduation to work in industry into a different experience, one that is more concurrent, in which they create messages and criticize them simultaneously. Service-learning gives students the chance to see how and why communicative contradictions occur by placing themselves in applied settings.

Finally, as many of its proponents suggest, service-learning facilitates the growth of students as citizens in a democracy (Cohen and Kinsey 1994). Students' community experience connects them at an early age with their fellow citizens, usually from a more diverse population than they would experience at home or in school. This encounter seems fitting for an academic tradition that traces its roots to Plato's and Aristotle's studies of rhetoric and government, to the long tradition of political persuasion, and to journalism's role in building and defining a community of citizens in the United States. Communication students particularly (though one hopes all students) should represent the ideal of the citizen-scholar, the one who sees knowledge in the context of community and political responsibility.

Service-learning, then, benefits faculty, students, and departments of communication by providing a connection between theory and practice, an integrating principle in our curricula, an introduction to empirical observation and reflection on experience, a corrective to an overemphasis on criticism, and an introduction to citizenship. Though it often goes without saying, service-learning also benefits schools and communities by drawing them together in possibly mundane yet new and significant ways.

**Practical Benefits**

Even beyond these broad benefits to faculty, students, and departments, service-learning appears especially useful to communication study in a pragmatic way that addresses course content. This point will emerge more
clearly if we look at the close fit between service-learning opportunities and the content of many communication courses.

Every service-learning placement requires some human interaction, and most require quite a lot, whether that consists of visiting the elderly, tutoring the young, talking with the homeless, answering phones at a crisis center, or teaching English as a second language. All of these experiences clearly relate in a concrete way to various communication theories: for example, accommodation, interpersonal development, interviewing, gender, persuasion. The chapters in this monograph represent a wide variety of introductory and advanced courses in which service-learning can be fully integrated.

Furthermore, many service-learning sites place students in contact with a much more demographically diverse population than they encounter on campus. Students have the opportunity to work with refugee groups, with documented and undocumented immigrants, with the elderly, and with the very young. Each of these experiences offers a chance to consider a range of communication theories and practices: intercultural communication, language and culture, minorities and media, representation, and identity formation. For most students, putting a human face on what they study changes their basic understanding of such theories.

Finally, many community situations give students the chance to utilize and sharpen already acquired skills in nonschool settings. Some tutor younger students and practice their own speaking skills. Others have the chance to write, design page layouts, do audio or video productions, or prepare websites. Some work on narrative construction and performance. Still others participate in local campaigns for fair housing or environmental protection. These campaigns are good places to practice argument and advocacy, test persuasion skills, and do applied research. Each community placement can offer students both learning and a sense of community participation.

Other Benefits

Beyond its usefulness for communication teachers, students, and departments, service-learning also holds out many possibilities for communication researchers. Faculty doing the same kinds of community service as students can discover new research opportunities and methods. Adelman and Frey (1997), for example, used a community placement to develop research methods and analysis techniques needed to examine group interactions in a residential facility for people with AIDS. The setting — so different from campus or corporate research sites — offered them a privileged window into human interaction and community-making. They examined how communication constitutes community in a repeated way, as communities change over time,
as people renew community in times of crisis and loss, and as people choose to stay together. To conduct research not only for the sake of theory development, not only for knowledge's sake, but for the communities in which we live and work adds a new dimension to our own self-understandings and commitments.

Several service-learning projects at my own institution have involved both student and faculty participation. In one, students and the instructor collaborated on a documentary on the homeless in downtown San Jose, California. The resulting video was shown with some success at local festivals. In another instance, several students worked with faculty to conduct research on behalf of a local school district, which wanted to increase its use of educational technology. In a similar project, another student carried out an assessment of the potential of a multimedia lab for a grammar school. In each case, students gained valuable experience in the community, benefited from close work with faculty, and saw communication study in a new light. They also came away from the term with a much better sense of grounded research.

Service-learning provides a great resource for communication study. Its imaginative use adds a great deal to the basic communication curriculum; its continued use prepares students well for later life. Its place in our departments makes them and us, the faculty, stronger and more understanding of our communities, our students, and ourselves.

References


