Connecting Historical Issues to Contemporary Problems with Service-Learning—Kim Warren

Service-learning experiences helped students understand that the race, class, and gender issues that existed decades ago often still exist today.

BACKGROUND

I believe service-learning adds these qualities to a course:
• Makes learning more relevant.
• Helps students to understand that the world is much bigger than their own experience

The pyramid (see JPEG) visually presents the gains that I believe come from this methodology. As this research suggests, the best way to learn something deeply is to teach somebody else, which is what I have my students do with the results of their experiences. The next best way to retain learning is to practice by doing, a phrase that epitomizes what happens when students engage in service.

In order for service-learning to be useful, it is critical that students engage in reflection during their service and after it has been completed. Students need the opportunity to step away from their service experiences in order to think about the meaning of those experiences. When students confront problems in the community that are new or challenging to them, it is important to encourage them to not only think about solutions for these problems, but to think about why the problems exist in the first place. I encouraged my students to engage in this kind of reflection through writing.

Background Notes
• Course Syllabus (PDF)
• Service Goals (PDF)
• Learning pyramid (JPEG)

IMPLEMENTATION

In order to prepare students to implement their projects, I organized a service-learning workshop, pre-service maps, and service-learning packets that included forms and deadlines. These materials helped students organize their service-learning projects before they started volunteering.

I think if a teacher is using service-learning, it is very important to prepare students for their projects through a service-learning workshop. The first step that I took to prepare my students

was to invite a community development colleague to present a workshop in my class. She explained to the students what service-learning is and why it is a helpful learning method. I believe that adding an outside voice from the community about the importance of service-learning lent more credibility to the pedagogy. Although students had a choice about whether they would do service-learning or a research project in my class, I had all the students attend the workshop. I argued that even if they did not choose to do service-learning now, they would probably have an opportunity in another class. I wanted all of my students to gain more knowledge about service-learning in order to make informed decisions about how to connect classroom learning with community issues.

As an outcome of the workshop, I asked students to fill in a pre-service map and determine learning goals for themselves. These exercises were meant to get students to think about their service in both abstract and concrete ways. I wanted them to think about contributions that they might give to the community or places where they might learn from their experiences, but I also felt it was important to help students think about the logistical and practical nature of volunteering. For example, I required students to set up a schedule with their service site and come to an agreement with their site supervisor about expectations of the students and the agencies.

In addition to the workshop, I prepared service-learning packets for each student. The packets included tips on how to contact service sites, a service contract for the student and volunteer supervisor to sign, time sheets for tracking hours, reflection questions that asked students to relate their experiences to the course reading, and a set of due dates so that they could organize their service. This material, in the scholarly notes section, is not copyrighted as I want to make it available for others.

Implementation Notes
Service-learning mapping
Service-learning checklist
Service-learning worksheet
Service-learning options
Service-learning packet

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

When I look at the student test grades for the semester, I do not think that I can distinguish between those students who did the service-learning project and those who did research. Instead, the test grades appear to reflect whether or not that individual did the readings. The overall grade distribution suggests that service-learning students performed at a slightly higher level than the research-track students.

However, I do believe that students who chose the service-learning tract were more engaged in

ways that historical issues connect to contemporary problems. Their experiences in the community helped them understand that the race, class, and gender issues that existed decades ago often still exist today in some form. For example, they could not only discuss the wage gap between men and women, they could also discuss some of the non-economic factors that lead to discrimination and devalued wages in work force. Their deeper understanding of this issue came from meeting women in their service agencies, who were trying to raise children, maintain their jobs, and attend school.

Student Performance Notes

Student reflections papers
This section highlights the work of three students. One file, the entire service-learning packet for this student, from the pre-service map to the supervisor's evaluations. The "Power Point Image" is part of this student's presentation to the class. I think it's noteworthy because of its good graphic design that adds to the overall excellence of this student's service-learning project. This packet serves as an example of thorough, insightful work on all portions of the service-learning project. In particular, please note the "final reflection" segment, as the other two files only present this part of the service-learning work. Of those two files, the "A" level paper reflects exemplary work in this area, and the "B" level paper, while a good example, contains less reflective depth as well as more surface level errors such as spelling and grammar; that is, it fails to be as commendable as the "A" paper.

Check PDFs for samples of student work:
• Student service-learning packet
• Student PowerPoint images
• A-level paper
• B-level paper

Check PDFs for a copy of the rubric used to evaluate students' final reflection papers.

Final grade distribution for History 531:
17/41 students opted for service-learning (rather than research). A higher percentage of students who earned grades in the A-B range completed the service-learning tract. These scores included exams, participation and written assignments.

Grade distribution of service-learning students:
A   12/17   70%
B   3/17   18%
C   0/17   0%
D-F   2/17   12%

Grade distribution of research students:
A   16/24   67%

B	3/24	13%
C	2/24	8%
D-F	3/24	13%

Service-learning link
Link to Rockhurst service-learning page. Rockhurst University, where I did my initial work in service-learning, maintains a page that highlights their offerings in this area of teaching. It's of interest because it highlights the way that another higher-education institute presents the opportunity and benefits that come from joining a service-learning course.

REFLECTIONS

The use of service-learning was successful and worth repeating. I liked giving students the option of doing service-learning, and I was pleased that half of the class chose to do it. In my opinion, it makes the work more meaningful if students are allowed to decide whether or not to participate. I will use it in a new course that I will teach, "Women and Reform," a 600-level seminar course in history that includes both graduates and undergraduates. This course differs primarily because of its size: it has 30 students and will be discussion based, compared to the 50-person lecture format of "Women's History."

I believe service-learning helped students to realize that different populations exist even in a small city like Lawrence, Kansas. I do not believe that all of my students had this understanding before they did their projects. They also made assumptions about gender equity that were then challenged by their service-learning experiences. For example, when this student population was growing up, males and females had relatively equal access to educational and athletic opportunities and they also expected to earn equal wages as adult workers. The reality is that inequality continues to exist, as does a gender wage gap. If we only talk about wage gap in class, the students do not get it—disparity does not seem real to them. The service-learning experiences helped them engage with people who are living with inequality in more pronounced ways than students are. For example, students who volunteered at agencies that offered childcare developed a deeper understanding of the intersections among race, class, and gender. They saw parents drop off their children, and they began to note such particulars as the gender of the parents (most are single moms), and the length of day for the child. These observations helped them understand that inequality is not just about money alone. Rather, compounding issues create barriers to equality, such as control of one's money and time, access to modes of transportation, and kinds of flexibility one has with his or her job.

I want to change the course calendar so that students have an opportunity to talk about their service-learning projects earlier in the semester instead of waiting until the end. I also think it will be helpful in class discussions to ask students to discuss more about service when we are discussing readings.

I put the students in groups according to their topic, and the groups included students doing both research and service-learning. I like that combination; however, I think it will be helpful in the future to add an outline for the final presentation that will encourage the research students to present background history, the service-learning students to discuss present-day issues, and a third segment of the class that explicitly links the two areas.

Reflections Notes

Student responses
Student responses in their reflection papers fell into two categories. The first category was "My life has changed," an emotional or personal reaction. The second category was "Here's how what I did can relate to larger cultural issues," a response that offers links to readings, studies or historical information. At the beginning of the semester, students primarily used personal reflections in their writing. When I noticed that trend, I encouraged them to them to make connections to course-related issues. As the semester progressed, their work was increasingly directed to the issues raised through the readings. I think this is in response to both my guidance and their learning.

After the service-learning experience ended, some students continued to volunteer at the agencies where they served and some even got jobs there. This demonstrates to me that they connected to the service, and I think that it also indicates service-learning was a positive learning experience that had meaning for them.

Final grades and service-learning
Although the service-learning students in this course did not engage in formal research beyond readings assigned for class, I do believe they gained as much understanding of the historical past as research-tract students. The fact that the service-learning students performed at a slightly higher level than the research tract students on their writing, participation, and exam assignments suggests that service-learning pedagogy contributed to the course goal of learning about women's history from 1877 to the present. (70% of service-learning students earned As; 67% of research students earned As.)

The quality of reflection assignments improved over the course of the semester. There were four reflection assignments that were due at different points in the semester. The first few sets tended to focus more on individual service experiences than on larger issues. Students initially struggled with connecting their service experiences (the present) to course readings (the past). Through written feedback on individual papers and oral feedback in class, I helped students understand that if they could not make connections, they were simply engaging in volunteer activities rather than in service-learning. In the final reflection papers, all but two students were able to demonstrate their ability to connect the present to the past at an A or B level by drawing from specific readings.