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Seven Simple Strategies to Setting Up a Service Learning Project

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Seven Simple Strategies To Set Up A Service Learning Project:

Natalie Jolly

My Impetus for bringing Service Learning into Women's Studies:

I began to implement a service learning component in my Introduction to Women's Studies course in part to engage students' opposition to basic feminist concepts such as oppression and inequality in society. In the general education courses that I teach for the Women's Studies Department, students are often resistant to feminist critiques. Integrating service learning into the Women's Studies curriculum helps students, particularly those who may be unfamiliar with feminism or critical thinking, ground the theoretical concepts that we cover throughout the semester to lived experience.

General Course Overview:

I choose to structure my service learning as small group projects that last the length of the semester. Each of the 50 students in my classes are presented with 9 different campus organizations and community agencies and are permitted to choose a service project based on the general project description and her particular area of interest. Groups are then established and are required to select a contact liaison—only one individual within the group serves as the contact between the group and the agency in order to prevent miscommunication or email inundation. Groups are given a time-line for the service project and the project liaison is required to set up an initial group meeting with the service agency representative. Students have several assignments throughout the semester as well as regular postings on our service learning discussion board. The project culminates in a Women's Studies Forum, where several of the Introduction to

Women's Studies classes gather in the Student Union Building to present projects to the University community.

Seven Steps to Service Learning:

Step 1: Brainstorm project ideas.

It is essential to develop potential projects BEFORE you begin contacting possible service agencies. Many of these agencies are short-handed, and expecting them to develop a project that meets your particular pedagogical needs puts an unnecessary burden on an already taxed agency. Instead, draft three or four generic projects that would fulfill your expectations as well as serve an agency's potential need. Would it be helpful for students to develop an advertising campaign for a local agency—updating a pamphlet, designing a PowerPoint presentation and creating other promotional material? Would a charity drive be more suited to the needs of a particular organization? If so, the students could organize an event to be held at a table in the Student Union Building to collect necessary supplies. Having a variety of possibilities will demonstrate to service agencies that you are willing to invest in the project and are willing to do some of the work associated with getting a project off the ground.

Step 2: Develop strong community connections before the semester begins.

Investing time networking with various community and campus groups will pay off ten-fold once the projects begin. Unfortunately, several of the agencies I initially contacted were hesitant to get involved with a service learning project—in the past they had been burned by poorly designed projects/ absent instructors/ lazy students and were reticent to

sign up again. This is where having a variety of clearly outlined projects comes in handy—being able to demonstrate that you have contingencies in place to mitigate the effects of negative situations will encourage agencies to reconsider service learning. Most importantly, establishing patterns of regular communication ensures that service agency partners are not left feeling “stuck” in an awkward or dysfunctional situation and disconnected from the project. Routine emails to check student progress as well as the status of the project help to keep the lines of communication open and keep the instructor informed of potential problems—both with the students and with the service agencies themselves. Growing these relationships has long-term benefits as well; as we have been able to develop future projects once we had weathered the maiden voyage.

Step 3: Get students invested.

From the first day of classes, I let my students know how fortunate they are to be part of a course that incorporates a service learning component. I encourage students to see this as a unique opportunity in their college career—one that very few students get to experience. I speak in a language that they can understand—namely that of letters of recommendation and resume references. Working with a service agency (particularly one affiliated with a Women’s Studies course) will certainly stretch them in new ways, but few of them realize that these connections may hold future possibilities as well. I tell them of students who have gone on to work part or full-time with their service organization once the project has ended and of those who have earned stellar letters of recommendation from service agency representatives. And for those who cannot muster the effort to invest in service learning, I alert them early to the strict penalties of apathy:

general poor performance can jeopardize their entire course grade and students risk failing the course if I receive a negative complaint from a service agency representative. So far, I have only had one negative complaint against a student and I attribute this success to creating an environment that promotes student investment.

One student writes:

“I have benefited from this project in ways I can't even explain. If someone told me at the beginning of the semester that my views would change so much towards the LGBT community I would have never believed them. [...] Looking back I find it very hard to believe that I ever possessed such views.”

Another student's remarks:

“I think the AIDS project and feminism in general have a lot in common. They are connected in that people who are not directly affected by either AIDS or woman issues think they should not have to do anything about it. Many people who do not believe they are connected to these issues take the luxury of not caring. I know that I am even guilty of [this].”

Step 4: Allow students to shape the project.

While the service projects are generally fixed before the students begin the course, it is still possible to encourage them to incorporate their own areas of expertise and interest. As a result, students often exceed the assignment requirements because they have been able to connect the project to a personal interest or skill. I am regularly amazed by the creativity and innovation demonstrated by students participating in service learning. Once students are presented with the general project overview and meet with their agency representative, they are required to submit a detailed project breakdown—including a list

of who is responsible for which aspect of the project. In this project breakdown, they are expected to incorporate aspects that reflect their own proficiency and integrate their personal skills into the service project. Because the projects are structured around a small group, there is often enough flexibility within the project to accommodate the diverse interests that the students bring to the project.

A student notes:

“It's a chance for me to incorporate something I love, theatre and drama, into this project so I think my part of it will be that much better than if I were in charge of doing something like the research on how HIV is transmitted.”

Step 5: Encourage regular reflection.

I incorporate a web-based discussion board for students to reflect on their service work and make connections to the course material. A web discussion board allows students to read each other's reflections and helps the entire class learn from each of the service projects. Students' regular journaling on the discussion board is structured around weekly questions that I pose to the entire class. Each student is responsible for answering the questions in a way that connects her service project to the guided prompt. The discussion board is also a place for them to share insights that fall outside of the scope of the guided conversation and many post to other students soliciting help, announcing events, requesting donations, etc. Each group also has a private discussion board space to brainstorm, set up meetings and otherwise collaborate on their particular project, and folders such as 'Service Learning Funniest Moments' helped keep the morale up when the projects became daunting. Overall, the discussion board is instrumental because it

documents the progression of the learning and demonstrates to the students how much has been accomplished—both in terms of class collaboration and individual effort.

A student posts:

“I don't think people really understand how the problems that women face in our society have so many root causes. I considered myself very knowledgeable about women's issues, but after taking this class I realized that I was only looking at the most obvious things; I wasn't even thinking about patriarchy, gender roles, etc. [...] Learning this stuff really helps you tie together the concepts from class and the content of the service project. I don't think that people would have as much of an appreciation for the work they do with their project had they not learned about the issues that surround their service projects.”

Step 6: Have students present their service project.

I am fortunate to be part of an ongoing forum that regularly showcases the work of undergraduate students in Women's Studies. My students are able to present their projects to the University community and are encouraged to produce innovative displays with which passersby are able to interact. Even without this orchestrated event, I believe that students would gain a great deal from sharing their service work with others in a group environment and strongly encourage instructors to incorporate a student presentation component into the course curriculum. Not only does the presentation encourage students to take ownership of their project, it also gives them the opportunity to become teachers themselves. By the end of the semester, the students know more about the project than I do, and many of them take great pride in teaching me about the service agency they worked for, the project they completed, the hurdles they overcame and the presentation they developed. Students in the past have put together a variety of

fascinating presentations—from an elaborate ‘guess who’s gay’ game to debunk stereotypes about homosexuality and raise awareness about our campus LGBTQA center to an info-igloo that chilled the viewer with facts about ‘chilly climate’ (regarding the unfriendly treatment of women) on campus. One group assembled an info table behind a wall of protesters (complete with taped shouting and yelling!) to simulate the experience of crossing the protest line to enter our local women’s health clinic. Teaching their project often solidifies the service experience and many students report feeling fulfilled and satisfied after spending just three short hours talking about their service work.

A student remarks:

“The most meaningful part was a lot of people came up to me and talked about their experiences with their friends of the LGBT community and asked what they could do to help them or talk to them about it - and this was the most significant to me.”

Step 7: Use the web.

I have recently begun teaching an entirely web-based course and continue to incorporate service learning into the virtual curriculum. Students enroll in the course from all over the country, so community-based service is no longer an option. I have begun to use sites such as www.volunteermatch.org or <http://www.servenet.org>, which are excellent resources for locating potential service projects. Instructors in rural areas who do not have access to local agencies or campus organizations with which to affiliate may find a web-based service learning project more feasible. As learning becomes digital, students will increasingly appreciate the flexibility that attends web-based service work.

In Conclusion:

Service learning holds much promise for the feminist classroom. Within the discipline of Women's Studies, it is an important pedagogical resource that can certainly enrich learning and empower students. A curriculum structured around service not only helps students connect theoretical concepts to real world events, but can even mitigate the resistance that sometimes accompanies feminist or other critical concepts. Service work that focuses on women encourages a more active and engaged style of learning and may even challenge the complacency that can occasionally characterize today's learners.

A student concludes:

“When I first learned about the service learning requirement for this class, I couldn't really see how it fit with a women's studies class. After all, I had taken a women's studies class before and we read chapters from a textbook week after week, took quizzes, wrote a few papers, and designed a website about women in the military. I didn't understand what I would learn about women from doing a service project. But now that the project is over, I've learned a lot. I've learned to see how much of an impact you can have on one level of society, even by starting at the bottom. The Second Mile in particular starts with helping the kids who will one day be the future of this country. The other projects start at the bottom too, but look at the impact each one made. Between videos, rallies, petitions, service, and informational pamphlets, each service project has been able to accomplish so much more than we as a class could have by simply listening to lectures and applying our knowledge for a grade. Service learning should definitely be a part of the college curriculum as a required class. In the end, everyone will benefit.”