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CHAPTER I: SERVICE-LEARNING IN PERSPECTIVE

This book (excerpted') offers you, the student, an introduction to the idea and practice of service-learning. It is our hope that after reading this book you will understand the idea of service-learning, know how to go about it, and be enthusiastic about your potential service-learning. This may be your first introduction to the term service-learning, you may have participated in a previous service-learning experience. Either way, we hope to offer you a chance to better understand the practice of service and offer you some practical suggestions on how to go about it. The first question we address is the most basic: what is service-learning?

The Definition and Goals of Service-Learning

Service-learning is a term that has evolved to describe a set of practices that involve students in various interactions with the community. Service-learning as an educational concept has roots in many educational traditions. Since the early 20th century educators have called for education that involved students in their communities. Educators in various ways throughout the century answered the call for education that involved students in the community. Some of the movements that arose in response include civics education, experiential education, internships, co-ops, and life experience credits. While you may, or may not, have heard of these movements, the movement we now call service-learning started in the 1980s. The movement started in response to the general impression that college students were disengaged from their communities, self-centered, and unprepared to participate in the civic or social life of their communities (Ehrlich, 1999; Hepburn, 1997).

Whether justified or not, these impressions caused college administrators and others concerned about the decline in civic participation to establish the service-learning movement. Others who joined the movement included those whose primary concern was the quality of education and educational reform and advocates for social causes and volunteerism. This coalition advanced service-learning as a solution to the disconnection between the experiences of college students and the world around them.

College students were also often seen as academically prepared but with little real knowledge or concern about their obligations as citizens. For many, this also translated to the general feeling that students were unprepared for the "real world." They felt that students, though often academically excellent, made little connection between the theoretical concepts learned in the classroom and the application of those concepts (Campus Compact, 1999). The theme of student apathy converged in the late 1980s with a concern for practical learning and experience, resulting in what we currently call service-learning. It is important for you to understand the background of service-learning since there are many types of experiential education that are similar. Because of this, we will spend some time defining service-learning.

Defining Service-learning

Because of the diversity of service-learning practices it is difficult to provide a simple definition of service-learning. Service-learning is practiced and defined in many different ways by many different people. In a recent article, researchers (Shumer & Belbas, 1996) identified 26 separate forms of service-learning. This leads to a bewildering array of individual interpretations of what constitutes service-learning. However, definitions of service-learning do share some common qualities.

The most obvious thing that the various definitions of service-learning share is the need to define a term that is made up of two words, service and learning. While this may seem simplistic, the difference in the various definitions results from how the terms are treated and the varying emphasis on one term or the other. Some definitions concentrate on service, others concentrate on learning. Most, however, focus on what the learner gains through the experience. Here is an example of that type.

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1 This document is an excerpt from the book. Sections have been deleted and, in some instances, emphasis is added.
Example 1.1

Service-learning is the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The interaction with knowledge and skills is key to learning. Learning starts with a problem and continues with the application of increasingly complex sophisticated skills to increasingly complex ideas and increasingly sophisticated skills to increasingly complex problems.

This definition focuses on the benefits of engaging in service-learning. These benefits, though there are many, are not the whole picture. Service is just as, or more important to some, as the learning. Here is an example that focuses on the service aspect of service-learning.

Example 1.2

"...service is the application of one’s gifts, skills, and resources to provide something of value, to enhance the quality of life of people who articulate a need or desire for service."

In this definition you can clearly see the focus on service as the most important aspect of community service. Most definitions mention both aspects of service-learning. However, most definitions are written by academics. Academics, not surprisingly, usually focus on the learning aspect of service-learning. Despite these differences, some basics about what service-learning is about can be derived from the definitions.

What Service-learning Is

The first area of agreement between the competing definitions of service-learning is that for an activity to be called service-learning it should include an element in which students offer their services to a community-based group. What this means is that service-learning is always community service. While this is not the whole of service learning, it is an important element. It means that students, as part of their course responsibilities, are expected to perform work off-campus at the direction of community groups. This service should directly benefit the community and originate in the expressed needs of a community group. There are many forms this service can take, and they will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 4.

The second factor that the various definitions agree upon is that the service should be connected to a formal learning experience, in most cases, a class. The service should allow the students to either, apply the concepts from the class, or to gain a deeper insight into the nature of class material. The emphasis should be on what is learned rather than on simply documenting what was done. This means that students will be given the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned from the experience. Here is an example of this type of connection of this type of connection from a course.

Example 1.3

It is particularly important that this journal not be merely a description of the events of the simulations. Your journal should reflect what you have learned in the course as applied to the events of your negotiation experience. The focus should be on learning rather than on the chronicling of experience. However, description can, and must, be used to describe an event which you wish to theorize and reflect upon.

The opportunity to learn reflectively is the third element of service-learning. A service-learning course should feature assignments or class-time that allow students to make sense of their experience in a reflective manner. In other words, students should have the opportunity to think about their experience and, in either words or writing, try to understand what they have learned from what they have done. When you are fully involved, service, like communication, can be totally consuming. Often, it is only after you have finished an event that you have the time to go back over the experience in your mind. This is illustrated in Example 1.3 and 1.4.
Example 1.4
You will be expected to write about your actions and the possible implications of those actions for your future involvement in community service. This journal is best accomplished using a two-step writing process involving the immediate writing of impressions concerning the experience and the later reflective modification of those writings. This is not an exercise in style, rather in substance. Write for understanding.

In trying to make sense of your involvement you are engaging in a reflective process. In the reflection stage of service-learning this sense-making process is directed at your service experience. Often, instructors will offer questions or course material that will help you frame your reflection. The final characteristic of service-learning is one that is not mentioned by all those who have defined service-learning. However, a significant number of definitions mention that a goal of service-learning should be to foster civic and societal involvement. It is hoped that students will gain insights into their place within, and the nature of, society. From this perspective, successful service-learning should motivate the participant to continue in service. What is hoped is that experience with service will awaken within you a sense of civic responsibility. While not all programs aim specifically at this goal, some, like Camp university presidents, aim explicitly for this objective.

As we have explained in this section you can recognize service-learning by four characteristics. These four factors are:

1. Service-learning is an activity where students offer service in the community.
2. In service-learning, service is connected to course learning objectives.
3. In service-learning, learning is based upon structured reflection.
4. Service-learning often has the capacity to motivate the student to be more engaged in the future.

These four characteristics describe what service-learning is about. The next section talks about the difference between service-learning and other forms of experiential education.

What Service Learning Is Not
Much of the confusion over what community service is and is not occurs because service-learning is a form of experiential education. Experiential education is a term that refers to education that uses experience outside of the school setting as part of the learning strategy. While service-learning falls into the broad category of experiential education, it should not be confused with other forms. Some common forms of experiential learning are internships and cooperative education.

Service-learning is not an internship. Internships, while valuable experiences, are not service-learning. Internships share with service-learning an orientation towards applied learning. However, internships rarely are reflectively structured. Service-learning placements feature service from which the community benefits or which motivates students to future service. Even when internships are performed in service organizations, the focus is almost entirely on performing specific skills outside of a class experience. Service-learning, in contrast, is directly connected to the content of a particular course. The term "intern" suggests that the goal of an internship is professional preparation, an apprenticeship of sorts.

A service-learning experience is also not the same as a cooperative education experience. Co-ops can be extremely useful for preparing students for a career or to investigate a particular occupation. However, they are not service-learning. Co-ops feature actual work experience that, like internships, is often unconnected to particular course content. In cooperative education there is usually a greater emphasis on adding an academic component to the work, such as a final paper or a co-op report. However, co-ops clearly do not satisfy the four requirements for service learning.

Service-learning is sometimes confused with community service. While service-learning is community service, community service is not necessarily service-learning. We know this sounds confusing, in practice it is really pretty simple. Service-learning is considered community service since service-learning involves serving the community. However, all community service is not service-learning. Only community service activities that feature a connection to course material and formal reflection qualify as service-
learning. Community service is an integral part of service-learning, but service without an explicit and formal expectation of learning is a very different thing than service-learning.

We hope at the end of this section you have a better understanding of what constitutes service-learning, what it is, and is not. We have provided a brief synopsis of the history of service-learning, what service-learning is, and what it is not. In this next section, we will discuss the benefits and possible costs of service-learning.

The Benefits of Service Learning

Service-learning is one of the fastest growing teaching trends in the nation. The reason for this is that service-learning seems to offer benefits for students, teachers, the university, and the community. As the service-learning movement enters the new century and its third decade, the benefits of combining service and learning are just now coming into focus. The first area where service-learning offers benefits over traditionally structured education is for students.

The Benefits of Service-learning for Students

Service-learning clearly provides benefits for students that traditional courses cannot by promoting enriched and enhanced learning (Gray et al, 2000) Students report that service-learning helps them to understand course material much better than courses not featuring this component. Confucius expressed this idea with "I read and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Service-learning allows students to do, in other words, to apply the skills or concepts from a course in practice. This learning by doing is the basis for an increased understanding of course concepts.

Enjoyment of learning is another benefit derived from service-learning. Students report that they enjoy their service experience and are often motivated to accomplish more than they do in traditional courses. This is an example of what one student reported about a service experience.

Example 1.5

I think that having to go every week on a set schedule has been good for me. I usually am the kind of person who procrastinates a lot. I wanted to go every week though; it is fun. It doesn’t seem like school. Since this is my last journal and I’m getting ready to write the final paper I realize that I learned a lot though. Probably more than I would have any other way because it didn’t seem like I was learning, it was fun.

This example illustrates a benefit cited in student reports of their service—they like it. It is a comment on traditional education that students often state that community integrated courses are "not like learning." This would seem to indicate that students often view learning – often class – as boring and a chore.

Students also report receiving a professional development benefit from service-learning. A student in this author’s public relations course commented:

Example 1.6

They loved the campaign we came up with. We pitched it to them and they said they are going to do everything we suggested. Am so psyched! They even gave us a budget. I really think that I can do a PR campaign for anyone now.

Through service-learning students gain skills, experience, and confidence in their abilities and skills. Not only do they gain skills; they also gain the ability to demonstrate those skills to prospective employers. The experience of the student cited in Example 1.6 allows her to offer a future employer concrete evidence of skills and a valuable reference. She compiled a portfolio of her work that included press releases, press kits, budgets, and a brochure produced for the organization. These materials will demonstrate her competence and experience to a future employer. She also used her supervisor in the organization as a reference that could speak to her work ethic, reliability, and talent.

Students also state that their service has prepared them to work in an increasingly diverse world. The nature of service means that you will often work with people who are not like you in some way. Often
students remark that learning to deal with differences is one of the central things they learn in their service. An example of this can be seen in this extract from a student's service-learning journal.

Example 1.7
I was so scared when I started... I think that the biggest thing that I learned is that people are people. I also learned that people have differences and it's important to talk about and work out those differences... I think I am going to volunteer there now that this class is done, I will miss everyone there too much if I don't.

This example illustrates that learning takes place when people are put in situations of service. It is not unusual to have the opportunity to work with people that differ from you in significant ways. Service offers a way to bridge those differences and learn valuable lessons about the world and diversity.

Finally, as the examples in this chapter aptly demonstrate, Service-learning offers the possibility for personal growth. If you view your time in college as an opportunity to learn and grow, to emerge better able to function in your local community and job, then service-learning offers an important opportunity for personal growth. All of us grow when we do demanding tasks that force us to stretch to reach our goals. Service-learning offers the chance to enter new situations and stretch our capabilities. When we speak of capabilities we are not just referring to technical skills or course-related ideas. Performing service gives you an opportunity to reflect on yourself as a person and respond to life's challenges. Your ability to handle strange situations, to deal with diverse people, and to accomplish tasks, result from a committed service placement. These personal attributes make you better equipped in every aspect of your life. Becoming a better person should be one of your goals. Like students, teachers derive specific benefits from service-learning. In this next section we will talk about some of those benefits.

The Benefits of Service-learning for Teachers
Like you, your instructor receives tangible benefits from participating in service-learning. The primary concern of instructors is that you (earn and understand class material. Teachers and researchers report that students who commit to, and fulfill their service responsibilities, learn more and retain it longer than do students who learn by traditional methods. Instructors find this very appealing.

Teachers also enjoy having students in class who have concrete experience with the concepts and skills addressed in class discussion. This enables students to contribute to the discussion and help others learn. It also promotes more in-depth class discussion due to the increased knowledge of real contexts. This makes the instructor’s job easier and more satisfying.

Instructors have also discovered service-learning has the possibility of transforming student attitudes towards learning. Through service-learning assignments students often realize that they are in control of, and responsible for, their own learning. This change in at learning and demanding to be taught. For many instructors this is the ultimate reward. It is clear that students and teachers get benefits from their service-learning experience. It is also clear that universities and colleges derive benefits from service-learning.

The Benefits of Service-learning for Colleges/Universities
The institution also derives a clear benefit from encouraging engagement in service-learning. One of the missions of most universities and colleges is to serve their local community. Unfortunately, most institutions of higher learning have historically neglected this mission (Campus Compact, 1999; Wutzdorff & Giles, 1997). This has caused what is called the "town gown" division. People in local communities often see schools as almost parasitic, definitely paternalistic, and often uncaring. Service-learning is one way in which universities and colleges can break down the barriers between themselves and their surrounding communities. This is attractive to administrators at your institution. Service-learning allows institutions to serve the community directly while simultaneously performing their central mission of educating students. It is clear from the last fifteen years of experience that properly conceived and executed service-learning improves the relationship between the community and the college/university. So far, we have discussed the clear benefits to students, instructors, and institutions. The final player benefiting from the service-learning equation is the community.
The Benefits of Service-learning for Communities

The community benefit may seem obvious in service-learning (Gray et al., 2000). After all, the community gains the service of the learners. While this is an obvious and tangible benefit, it is not always the main benefit to the community. A community organization integrating service-learners into its program requires the agency's effort, money, and time. The benefit the community gains from the work performed by service-learners sometimes does not equal the effort that the organization puts into training and supervising their activities. We do not imply that the efforts of service-learners are without net value. In some instances, the participation of service-learners makes programs possible. But it is important to point out that organizations make considerable investment in student learning. If this is true, then why do service organizations continue to almost universally welcome service-learners?

Besides the free labor that the service-learners provide community agencies there are long-term benefits that service organizations receive from service-learners. This is because organizations have a vested interest in student learning. Students are members of their communities. As community members, whether communities are defined geographically or in some other way, students are both the clients and shareholders of community organizations. Service organizations in contemporary society are searching for interested and committed community members to help them realize their mission. Service-learning is one way in which service organizations can educate people about their missions and recruit their support.

Service organizations also realize that the act of participating in service can be tremendously satisfying. They know that students who serve and learn are more likely to establish long-term relationships with community service groups. Because of these factors, service organizations support service-learning as an important part of the educational process (Rocha, 2000; Teske & Brown, 2001).

As you can see, service-learning provides clear benefits for all those involved: students, teachers, colleges/universities, and communities. Service-learning is a classic win/win situation. All the parties receive some tangible benefit. While we do not claim that all parties obtain equal value from the experience, all involved satisfy some of their needs.

A word of caution, our experience with the world echoes that of Will Rogers who was fond of saying "there ain't no such thing as a free lunch." We find this saying to be true of community service. While service-learning provides benefits for all parties involved, it requires commitment and work. …We should make it clear in the beginning – service-learning does not require less work than other ways of learning. It is our opinion, however, that the benefits of service-learning far outweigh the effort required.

A Natural Fit with Communication Studies

As communication students you may wonder what do I have to bring to a service placement? In a recent survey of community service professionals, the skills most in demand for volunteers or community service professionals were communication skills. Researchers (Brown et al., 2000) found that out of the thirteen skills identified by community service professionals as most useful, the top two ranked skills involved communication. Overall, the study found that communication and conflict skills were ranked as twice as important as any technical skill. A look at the want ads will confirm that communication skills are in demand. Ad after ad lists "good communication skills" as one of the most desirable characteristics for an applicant. As students of communication, your training in communication makes you a valuable asset to a service organization. These skills are so important that the National Communication Association is one of the nation’s leaders in promoting and practicing service-learning.

The need for communication skills in community service is one aspect of the ideal fit between communication and service-learning. The second aspect is the universality of communication to the accomplishment of service. It does not matter where you chose to serve. Your primary skill will be your ability to communicate. This is true throughout the private sector. No matter what technical skill people in community service organizations use, their primary task is a communicative one.

Service as a Career

Another dimension of your service is the potential of your placement to develop into a career. Community service occupations are one of the fastest growing sectors of our economy. Due to changes in
our society, contemporary Americans are less willing to devote their time to joining and managing non-profit and civic organizations (Brown et al., 2000; Wuthnow, 1998). This does not necessarily imply that Americans are now less concerned about their communities, only that the pattern of involvement is different. Americans now volunteer as much as ever, but the nature of their service activity has changed.

Americans are less willing to commit to long-term relationships with service organizations. While Americans are no longer making lifetime commitments to service organizations, they are increasingly willing to do episodic volunteering. Episodic volunteering is short-term in nature. Volunteers tend to not take part in the planning or management of events; rather they arrive, "volunteer," and leave. This trend is also combined with the increase in giving to non-profit and community service organizations. The result of these trends is that service organizations now hire people to fill the roles committed volunteers once filled. This means that a clear career path for community service professionals has emerged.

Since communication skills are vital to success in community service, communication students are ideal candidates for community service jobs. The changes in how Americans express their concern for their communities have made community service a rapidly growing occupation. This author's institution now offers a community service major and degree to meet this demand. In summary, your service placement may also lead to a career in the emerging field of community service.

This chapter is designed to be an introduction to the practice of service-learning. Throughout the rest of the book we will show you various ways in which service-learning occurs, help you achieve a positive service-learning experience, give you ideas about specific service-learning courses and goals, and help you identify potential resources for your service. We hope as you learn more about service-learning you will share our enthusiasm and commitment to serving while learning.

References


CHAPTER 4: SERVICE-LEARNING ACROSS THE COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM

(This excerpt focuses on Service-Learning in Public Speaking and the Hybrid Course, Group Communication, and Interpersonal Communication courses. The book also discusses service learning in other courses, such as rhetorical criticism, organizational communication, intercultural communication, mass communication.)

Service-learning entails communication with others in many contexts. You may be…

- Answering phones at a crisis center
- Preparing and serving meals at a soup kitchen
- Observing the staff of a YMCA to suggest improvements in communication with members
- Teaching immigrants cultural norms in the United States
- Helping to oversee an after-school day-care for low-income children
- Working as a group to create a public relations campaign for a local women’s shelter

Regardless of the type of service or setting, you will be afforded daily opportunities to consider the usefulness of communication theories, research, and concepts from almost every type of communication class. Whatever your course topic may be, it is likely you will engage in more than one communication context. For example, although you may be in a group communication course, you probably will engage in interpersonal communication that will include differences in gender and culture. Or, in a public relations class you may be working as a group to improve the media relations of a non-profit organization. Such service projects will provide concrete, personal experiences to make the class more relevant.

Given the complexity of service-learning and communication assignments, students commonly begin a project feeling a little confused or uncertain about what they are undertaking. Everyone has had to write a research paper for a class, but fewer have had to do something for others and make sense of their experience from the framework of a theory and practice.

It is one thing to synthesize others’ ideas and experiences into a report, and quite another to take lessons from a textbook or lecture and apply them to your own experiences. This chapter should help you feel more comfortable tackling the service-learning assignment. No matter what communication course you may be taking, this chapter illustrates how other students have successfully undertaken service-learning projects. It includes advice and examples for doing service-learning projects in:

- Public Speaking and the Introduction to Communication (the hybrid) Courses
- Group communication
- Interpersonal communication
- Rhetorical criticism
- Communication theory and communication research
- Intercultural communication
- Public relations
- Organizational communication
- Mass communication

Although this chapter does not discuss all of the possible communication courses that could include service-learning (for example communication law and ethics, gender and communication, argumentation and advocacy, business and professional communication, language and discourse, etc.), the concepts discussed here can prove useful for doing a service project in almost any communication course. For example, the section on service-learning in groups, especially the tips for success, could be applied to any service project being tackled by a group or even an entire class…. To avoid confusion we recommend you read only the parts of this chapter that relate to the type of course you are taking and/or the nature of the
service-learning assignment undertaken; for example, if it includes elements of group communication or public speaking.

**Public Speaking and Introduction to Communication Courses**

Service-learning projects in public speaking and classes that introduce students to the communication discipline often require you to play an active part in the community where your school is located. You probably will do research on a topic of relevance to a non-profit agency, organize and adapt information on the topic for a specific audience outside the classroom, and then deliver a presentation that will directly benefit the audience. The projects can call for individual speeches, or group presentations or symposiums (multiple individuals presenting speeches on a common topic). Such presentations will give you an excellent opportunity to polish your communication skills in a "real world" setting. For example, students in public speaking classes at Bently College operate as a speaker's bureau to inform their community about important topics. Students discuss "Rape and Rape Prevention" before audiences in residence halls, or "Getting To and Through College" for prospective college students in local high schools, or "The Healthier You" for fifth and sixth graders studying diet and exercise (Weintraub, 1999). Similarly, you or your group might contact directors of residence halls or administrators of local schools to see what topics they would like to have presented. Some colleges and universities also have students lead tours of the campus for prospective students. You might volunteer to critique the student's presentations, to write or revise the speeches, or to become one of these public speakers/guides.

But service may reach far beyond student issues. As Cheryl Hamilton notes in her book, *Essentials of Public Speaking*, you can learn much about public communication while benefiting democratic institutions. Because our form of government depends on citizen participation, opportunities to speak are almost limitless. You may speak to local neighborhood associations about crime watch programs. You might address a city council meeting to share your concerns about local government, such as safety problems with rental housing for students, or problems with police harassment, or the dangers of racial profiling. Student government offers you the chance to speak about controversial actions taken by the administration, or to protest a faculty member's dismissal, or to start a campaign to keep the library open for longer hours, or to request to expand student parking.

Often, to receive course credit you must create presentations that have been researched, outlined, delivered and videotaped for class credit, and, at the same time, you can have a positive impact on the community. For example, four physical therapy students taking the same public speaking course at the University of Missouri put together a group presentation in which they argued for changes in their program to make admissions fairer. The group practiced the presentation in class, then repeated it for administrators of the physical therapy program. The students reported the administrators found the presentation persuasive and made some changes they recommended. These students were rightfully proud of their improved and persuasive communication skills.

For a hybrid course you might organize a social action as a class project. For example, at New Mexico State University, a communication class built its primary course assignment for a semester around a campaign support of "Take Back the Night," an annual national event to raise awareness about sexual assault. The group did fundraising, media relations, campus relations, and promotion of the event in the community. Students working on this project had plenty of opportunities to reflect on, and apply varied communication theories, from group to interpersonal, to mass communication, as well as public relations concepts (Crabtree, 1999).

Each year, students in a fundamentals of speech course (an introduction to the discipline) taught by Kelly Herold at Winona State University, work in teams on a service project they determine. Before choosing a project the students must develop group policies and rules to ensure accountability to the group and to the organization they serve. Collectively, students in each group put in a minimum of 40 hours on the projects, doing much of the work in class. As part of the assignment develop a plan to address a problem, execute the plan, create a press release for distribution to the campus and local community newspapers, and, finally, perform a 20-minute group presentation based on the project. The presentation must include five sources about the social issue they address and use PowerPoint for visual support. Their team speech includes a discussion of the interpersonal, group, and public speaking concepts they encountered during
the project, which are discussed in one of the texts used for the course, Julia Wood's Communication in Our Lives, or Rudoph Verderber’s Communicate! Service projects for this class have included: tutoring children with special needs at the YMCA, cleaning up a polluted lake, working with people with Alzheimer's, raising money to give to the university to plant more trees on campus ($500 for 18 trees), and hosting a music festival of campus bands that raised $300 for a local animal shelter.

The project really helps students see the difference between a group and a team, notes Herold. They see that the service project leads to team building. They put in more time, going beyond what is required, and help each other out in other classes. Many become friends rather than merely acquaintances. Doing a group presentation on their service project also lessens their communication apprehension when it comes to public speaking. For most people the support of the group helps calm fears.

Whether you are in a public speaking or introductory communication course, your efforts on behalf of others will provide you a chance to practice your public communication skills in a “real world” setting. And, just as importantly, you will be doing good. As communication scholar James McCrosky stated, "If the communicator seeks to improve the well-being of his audience through his act of communication, he is committing a moral act" (Verderber, 2000).

Service-Learning in Group Communication

Working on a service project with a group or team can be a part of almost any communication course. Because many different communication courses often include group service-learning projects, this section presents advice for working as a group in general, rather than solely discussing service projects for group communication courses. Service-learning and group communication courses make a perfect match. Paul Yelsma can prove it. He has been teaching group communication at Western Michigan University for more than 15 years. During that time he has coached students who completed more than 200 service projects. He found that 92% of his pupils choose service-learning over library-oriented, problem-solving experiences because the assignment makes the course concepts more relevant for students.

Service-learning projects are particularly valuable learning experiences in group communication classes, Yelsma says, because students become aware of concepts, theories, and principles, they have opportunities to apply these in their group interactions and with the people for whom they provide services. When faced with real challenges that affect group members and people in the community, students seem more compelled to learn methods of working together as team members. Although service-learning projects vary from group to group, the amount of academic learning that occurs in the problem-solving class remains substantial. (Yelsma, 1999)

He outlines important guidelines for effective service-learning in groups, whether students are taking a group communication class, or another course that requires them to work as a team. His advice, as well as that of the authors and other communication scholars, appears below.

Put Teamwork First

Getting the group to work together effectively is central to providing service. People with little experience working with groups can find the assignment difficult — they are used to doing things on their own and thinking individualistically. That mindset can hinder a group’s success. John Cragan and David Wright emphasize in Small Group Communication that project groups like those working for a service organization must generate cohesion and group morale to achieve their goals. Therefore, group members need to learn how to collaborate and put aside individual agendas. Remember that this is more than an in-class assignment. People “in the real world” will judge your effectiveness. Your project can improve other’s lives and will reflect on you, your peers, your instructor, and your school.

Empower Your Peers

Students in your group may find a service project intimidating. Sometimes they do not see how the group can make a difference when facing a real problem or need. One or two may not feel their own input will help the group. Still others are used to having a teacher or coach provide answers to problems rather than looking to a group or peers to solve problems. Such members need positive reinforcement from you and other members of the group. You can help others overcome these obstacles by assuring uncertain
team members that they can contribute and that the group can tackle the service project. In *Communicating in Groups and Teams*, authors Gay and Donald Lumsden stress that everyone on a team has a responsibility to help lead the group. You can help your group visualize success on the project just as you can image yourself as a successful group leader.

**Find Your Roles**

Groups that utilize each member's strengths are generally the most effective. Using the talents of every individual requires members to know what they can best contribute. "An effective combination of previously learned communicative roles, such as those of initiator, gatekeeper, devil’s advocate, harmonizer, information giver, helps problem-solving groups utilize the resources of each member," Yelsma states (90). Two communication talents necessary for small groups to be highly effective are task skills to achieve desired objectives and personal relationship skills required for working well with others. If these are not your strengths, now is a good time to work on them. *Communicating in Groups* suggests that using dialogical styles of communication can help you improve on relationship skills that enhance performance. Also, Cragan and Wright's *Small Group Communication* devotes a chapter to how to build interpersonal trust in teams.

**Stop Social Loafers**

Groups sometimes have problems with social loafing, also known as "slacking off." This tends to happen when people think there is low accountability for each member's actions, and the instructor is not present to take note of loafing. *Communication in Small Groups* (Cragan & Wright, 1999) discusses deviant personality behaviors and roles that might be harming your group and suggests how the group can deal with problematic behavior. If peer evaluations are not written into the assignment, it might help to suggest to the course instructor that she or he include evaluations submitted by group members when determining final grades for individuals. Or, your group might even do individual evaluations as part of the final group report, if not required. Some groups also create rules, or codes of behavior, that help increase member's accountability. Many instructors also allow groups to "fire" a member who continually breaks group rules and norms. This last resort follows a number of meetings and discussions with the offending member, and seldom leads to termination.

The fact is, your group may have a slacker or two just like groups in most organizations. Now is a good time to learn how to cope with a co-worker who does not pull his or her fair share of the load. You will find yourself forced to deal with similar co-workers for the rest of your life.

**Protect Your Peers**

Small groups working on service-learning projects find "lieutenantning" useful. Lieutenantning, which is similar to the buddy system, is a term used to describe protecting and assisting a partner in a group as he or she communicates (Yelsma, 1999). Yelsma explains:

> Lieutenantning is a process of interpreting, explaining, extending, critiquing and defending the communication practices of another person. In small groups, where errors of expression or lack of expression may frequently occur, lieutenantning greatly enhances the effectiveness of small group communication. Within service-learning groups, where team structure is less likely to be imposed by outsider 'leaders' or teachers, the assistance of lieutenantning can be invaluable. Group members are more task-effective and have higher group satisfaction if each person has his/her lieutenant in the group. (92)

This approach may prove useful for your group, especially if it includes less assertive members.

**Make Praise Public, Express Negative Feedback in Private**

Talking about each other's communication skills while undertaking a service project is an important element of learning. Supportive feedback usually improves the climate in the group, and, Yelsma notes, "Providing effective feedback to group members is one way of enhancing their communication skills and helping them successfully reach their goals" (92). So make your praise of other's actions known. However, it is usually best to keep negative criticism private. Few people enjoy having their faults pointed out in
public. Additionally, it is best to limit negative talk about the group’s past. Such discussion often adds confusion and interferes with effective future communication.

For example, one service-learning group had a member who made promises to do work and show up for meetings, yet regularly failed to do both. The group refrained from addressing this problem until one member finally blew up during a meeting attacking the “slacker” for her lack of effort in the past. She became defensive, counterattacked, and the group spent most of the meeting trading barbs with the offender while replaying past problems. The members finished the project under great stress and with less success than they might have. A more productive approach would have been to have an appointed spokesperson for the concerned members speak privately with the student earlier in the project to express the group’s concerns. Later, if necessary, the entire group could confront her with criticism.

Take Small Steps

Complex problems faced by a client can be difficult to confront. Successful service-learning projects tend to be incremental; that is, groups divide the work into small tasks. Start with smaller problems and issues before moving on to more complex tasks. Your team will become more confident as you build on early, simple successes. For example, a group of communication students working for a YMCA in Radford, Virginia, which needed to increase enrollment, focused first on helping Y staffers improve their interpersonal communication with the public. After receiving praise for this task the group moved on to create a larger public relations and marketing campaign.

Avoid Group Think

Doing service, doing good for others, can lead people to become complacent about the quality of their work. This may be in part due to the absence of pay. Students providing service must remember that they may not have to live with the consequences of their work, but someone else will. Ineffective decision making, poorly done work, tasks left incomplete at the end of a semester, these are signs that the members engaged in group think and sloppy work. One group of students in a public relations campaigns course promised the client materials that they failed to deliver. Members assumed others in the group had taken care of the uncompleted tasks after they presented their project to the class. When the client later complained to the instructor about this failure the teacher filed change of grade forms for each member, dropping their individual final grades. Don’t let this happen to your group! Communicating in Groups and Teams and Communication in Small Groups both discuss how to identify and reduce group think.

Speak With One Voice

To avoid confusion, groups should generally appoint one member to communicate with an agency member or client. The same member, speaking on behalf of the team or group, might also be the spokesperson for the group when communicating with the course instructor. Naturally, the spokesperson may not be the only member who speaks with the client or instructor, but she or he should do most of the coordinating of tasks. She or he may or may not be considered the primary leader of the group, yet having one spokesperson reduces confusion.

Service Learning in Interpersonal Communication

Service-learning in the interpersonal communication course very likely will expose you to more uncertainty than a traditional assignment. You may be dealing with people very different from yourself, one-on-one, in a setting you’ve never encountered before. Consequently, opportunities will abound for you to examine your communication interaction through Uncertainty Reduction Theory, Social Exchange Theory, communication in the life cycle of relationships, and a host of other IPC concepts. The experience also will afford many opportunities to develop and test interpersonal communication skills, such as holding conversations, effective listening, responding with empathy and understanding, using self-disclosure and feedback, and possibly, managing conflict. Such skills can improve your relationships in service, at work, among friends, and with family and partners.

However, doing service in an interpersonal communication course does not necessarily mean you will “go it alone” on a project. For example, Julie Simanski, who teaches at Des Moines Area Community College, has her interpersonal communication class divide into groups. Groups then choose a community
project to support, often by finding a service option on the local Web site for the United Way. Everyone in
the group must work on the project at the same time for a minimum of four hours. One group sponsored an
on-campus coat drive that generated more donations than their client agency could use. Some students
joined Habitat for Humanity and built a home for a low-income family, and another cooked a meal for
families staying at the Ronald McDonald house while their children received treatment in a local hospital.

Simanski’s students kept a log of every group meeting to help ensure accountability and a shared
workload. Each member also evaluated others at the end of the assignment, giving them points, 0-25, for
their interpersonal communication skills, effort on the project, and contribution to group’s report on the
assignment. This confidential evaluation was averaged by the instructor to help assign individual grades.
Groups also must present documentation from the agency they served that indicates what they
accomplished for class presentation. The groups created an object to represent their project. For example,
students who helped Habitat build a home decorated the outside of a paint can with photos of their work.
They filled the can with symbolic “tools” that stood for communication theories and lessons learned doing
the project. In the group’s final paper they described their experiences by using their textbook and lecture
notes to compare their interpersonal communication and relationships with course concepts.

Often the students have a lot to say about conflict management, Simanski notes. They have to apply
the information from the text because I tell them I will not serve as a referee. They must identify the
type of conflict, then manage the conflicts individually and as a group. They have to recognize and
talk about their options. Many times they learn that to effectively resolve conflict in this culture you
have to be direct with people.

As Rudolph and Kathleen Verderber note in Inter-Act, people commonly choose the easiest way to
deal with conflict—withdrawal—which often leads to mulling and resentment. Conflicts with others rarely
disappear if left alone.

In the papers they must stress the integration of what they learned, analyzing interaction with each
other as well as with clients and representatives of agencies, says Simanski. I’m more interested in
learning about the processes of their interpersonal communication than the outcome of the project.
Judging from students’ comments, service-learning has been a truly successful project for the class.
Most say it was one of the high points of the course, that they learned in a concrete way. They really
got something out of it, the project wasn’t just another assignment.

Whether working alone or in a group on an interpersonal communication service project, these are
a few guidelines to make the assignment more productive and meaningful.

• As you read the textbook or review lecture material, make notes in the margins or on note
cards of interpersonal communication concepts that you would like to employ or have observed
in your service project. Actively seek ways to integrate what you are studying with your
interactions related to the assignment.
• Compare notes and observations with others working on the project. Working alone can make
it difficult to connect course concepts with your service work interaction. By learning about
other’s insights you can take inspiration and guidance from their work and make connections to
your own.
• Take the initiative to begin conversations with people you meet through the service project. If
you find it difficult to speak with strangers, know that you have a lot of company. Your
education, economic class, and status as a college student may intimidate some people you
serve. Break the ice with them. Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen’s discussion of
conversation in Interpersonal Communication can teach you ways to initiate talk, keep
conversation flowing, and how to more gracefully close the interaction.

We hope you find these suggestions useful. One final note on interpersonal communication and
service – this course, perhaps more than any other, provides opportunities to learn much about yourself.
Self-reflection can be a challenge. Occasionally, the lessons may be disconcerting. If you find the
assignment requires you to reconsider your self-concept and life ambitions, again, you are in good
company. More than a few students have changed the way they relate to others, as well as their career aspirations, after concluding this project.

References


