Creating Quality Service-Learning Syllabi

Faculty Guide Series

ASU Service-Learning & Community-Based Research
University College | Appalachian State University
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Syllabi set the tone for any course. In the case of service-learning courses, it is especially important for faculty to create a quality syllabus. Students are often unsure about what they are getting into when they sign up for a service-learning course, and the syllabus needs to reduce this uncertainty. Also, community partners benefit from knowing your expectations, vision, and goals for the course. The following five sections present key concepts that need to be addressed in SL syllabi, and include practical advice on how to do so.

Engagement

Conceptual
For a course to deserve to be called “service,” it must answer this basic question affirmatively: “does the service component meet an identified public good?” Engaging with the community goes beyond simple service. Faculty must work with community partners collaboratively to discover what the needs of the community are, and how students in a particular course can help meet a particular need.

A basic principle of engagement is the need for reciprocity. As Jacoby defines it, “reciprocity suggests that every individual, organization, and entity involved in the service-learning functions as both a teacher and a learner. Participants are perceived as colleagues, not as servers and clients” (1996, p.36). This collaborative approach means that community partners should be involved in the course in as many ways as possible, or that they are willing/able. Faculty could include partner representatives in discussions about the design and goals of the course (see, for example, the faculty/community partner worksheet from the ACT Office). During the semester, the course schedule should provide ample opportunities for faculty, students, and partners all to remain focused on serving the identified goals.

As the project nears its conclusion at the end of the semester, faculty should consider the need for public dissemination (if applicable to the project). Is service work presented to the public and/or does the community have the opportunity to enter into public dialogue? For example: Are the oral histories students collect returned to the community in some public forum? Is the data students collect on the saturation of toxins in the local river made public? How does the community benefit from this information?

Practical
A strong SL syllabus should describe:

➢ the public good being served by the course and how students will meet that need;
➢ the process of collaboration involved in setting up and completing the projects, and how all three parties (faculty, students, and partners) will work together;
➢ times and processes for feedback from all parties;
➢ criteria to determine if a project has become unviable (and what will be done in that case);
➢ and how the project results will be shared with the community.

Rationale

A well-designed service-learning course should not simply tack on a community service requirement to an existing course. Instead, the service component must be integrated into the course work as thoroughly as possible. In addition, the service component should serve a pedagogical purpose. For example, laboratory sections are used because they are an effective way to teach scientific practices and principles. Similarly, service-learning is used because it is (in the instructor’s opinion) the best way to teach course-related practices and principles.

This integration needs to be carefully considered by the faculty member during the construction of the course, and clearly articulated to students on the syllabus. Students need to be aware that they will not be doing “volunteer work,” but that the course will include a service-learning component that is directly tied to the course, just like all other assignments. This integration can be made obvious in a number of ways: explaining early in the syllabus why service-learning is a part of the course, including service-learning concepts in the course objectives, and noting on the course schedule days that the service-learning component will be specifically dealt with. One possible way to emphasize the connection between course content and the service-learning component is to specify on the course schedule what students ought to be doing both in class and out of class for each class period.

A strong SL syllabus should articulate:

➢ the relevance of the service-learning component to the course (preferably early in the syllabus);
➢ how service-learning is the best way for students to learn certain aspects of the course content;
➢ the course objectives and outcomes that are met through service-learning; examples could include:
   o understanding of the diversity found in the world in terms of values, beliefs, ideas, and worldviews.
   o sensitivity and respect for personal and cultural differences.
   o self-awareness and self-esteem about one’s own identity and culture.
➢ an obvious connection between in-class activities, readings, and out-of-class experiences on the course schedule;
➢ how the course will develop critical and comparative thinking skills, including the ability to think creatively and integrate knowledge, rather than uncritical acceptance of knowledge;
➢ what additional specific skills the students will need to develop to complete the assignments;
➢ how students will develop awareness of the complexity and interdependency of events and issues.
Preparation/Execution

Conceptual
Students in service-learning courses often need special preparation before engaging in activities in the community. For example, if the project is to collect life-stories from area residents, some instruction in such areas as interviewing, life-story theory, and the social/historical context of the Appalachian region would be appropriate. This “harvester training” is important both for the effective execution of the project, as well as for fruitful reflection. Faculty will need to determine for themselves what preparation students will need, but presumably some readings, class discussions/reflections, and practice exercises would be a good place to start. Such materials should be noted on the syllabus to alleviate concern among students, who otherwise might fear they will be put into a situation without adequate preparation.

Community partners often express concerns that students are not adequately prepared for their placement in agencies. A large portion of this concern comes from unmet expectations. Faculty members should discuss with the community partner what expectations they have for students (such as timeliness, follow-through, communication, etc.), and pass those expectations on to students in the syllabus and class discussion.

For projects that run longer than a one-time event, the course schedule should clearly spell out what activities will occur, and when. Course-long projects should be broken into smaller stages, with important deadlines noted for each of these steps. As much as possible, these details should be worked out before the start of the semester. A particular challenge of service-learning courses is that since the projects take place in the community, the best laid-plans don’t often work. Faculty should inform students that while every effort will be made to follow the course schedule, it is likely to need to change due to circumstances in the “real world.” Flexibility is key!

Practical
A strong SL syllabus should detail:
- what readings and class periods will be used to prepare students;
- the knowledge base and skills students will develop before engaging in the project;
- the class assignments students will complete that are related to the project;
- what students will do at the community site;
- what expectations the community partner will have of the students;
- what days/weeks of the semester will be spent on the service-learning component (with a caveat where appropriate that the schedule may be subject to change);
- the stages and corresponding deadlines for larger projects;
- when the Service-Learning Project Agreement Form is due (if applicable).

Reflection

Conceptual
We learn very little from experience—plenty of people make the same mistakes repeatedly. We learn from reflection on those experiences. Service-learning recognizes that reflection is the most important component of the course, since that is where learning occurs and can be evaluated. Faculty must include mechanisms that encourage students to link their service experience to course content, course objectives, and learning outcomes, and to reflect on why the service is important throughout the semester. Examples of reflection activities include journaling, reaction papers, poems, class discussions, and/or other creative activities. The methods and means of reflection are limited only by the creativity of each faculty member, and faculty are strongly encouraged to use multiple methods within a course. The ACT website and the Service-Learning Faculty Resource Handouts are great resources for reflection ideas.

Reflection should serve as the evaluative/graded measure of students’ performance in relation to the service-learning experience. In other words, the reflection activities are graded, not the service itself. Such activities ideally would be spread out over the course of the semester, to allow students to grow in their understanding of the social issues involved, develop more sophisticated vocabularies to explain what they observe, and demonstrate the connections they make between course content and the service project. A combination of group and individual reflection exercises is useful, since this allows students to share their insights with others while also making them responsible for developing their own understandings.

Practical
A strong SL syllabus should include:
- a schedule of reflection activities spread out over the course of the semester;
- clear connections between the reflection activities and course content;
- diverse modes of reflection;
- clear objectives or topics for reflections;
- openness to learning and a positive orientation to new opportunities, ideas, and ways of thinking;
- tolerance for ambiguity and unfamiliarity;
- sensitivity and respect for personal and cultural differences;
- empathy or the ability to take multiple perspectives;
- self-awareness and self-esteem about one’s own identity and culture;
- and an explanation of the importance of reflection.
**Evaluation**

**Conceptual**
Like any other course, service-learning classes must include an evaluation of student learning. This can be more challenging than in traditional courses, since service-learning projects are often “messy,” with non-standard outputs, real-world problems that can cause significant alterations in plans, and many more factors difficult to plan for in advance of the semester. For these reasons, it is particularly important that faculty strive to make the criteria for the assignments and reflections as clear as possible. Students need to be reassured that their grade will not be capriciously assigned, nor will it be based solely on a number of hours served, but that it will be based on demonstrated learning. Faculty should explain to students what they are looking for in reflections, and what differentiates poor reflection from good and outstanding work.

Faculty are also encouraged to ensure that students complete the standard evaluation that will be online on the ACT website at the end of each semester. This can be done by making it a graded assignment (with credit given for completion), extra credit, or even using a computer lab to have all of the students complete the evaluation in class.

**Practical**
A strong SL syllabus should specify:
- percentages that assignments & reflections will be worth of the overall grade,
- criteria for service-learning assignments & reflections that clarify how they will be graded,
- expectations for student learning outcomes, e.g that students should demonstrate tolerance for ambiguity and unfamiliarity or the ability to understand multiple perspectives,
- and how (if) the ACT assessment survey at the end of the semester will factor into the course grade.

**Further Readings on this Topic**

