Information literacy + Service Learning = Social Change

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Abstract:

In the evolution of information literacy from a competency based set of standards to one that is more holistic and reflects current trends in higher education, it is critical to evaluate the role of information literacy in social change. One of the key purposes of a university is not only to help students gain critical thinking and applied skills for the workplace but also to instill a sense of responsibility and desire to make a difference in the world around them. More than just focusing on data collection, it is important for academic libraries to, “shift our thinking to include affective (emotional) learning outcomes that address self-efficacy, student confidence, attitudes, motivation, and valuing what is being learned.” (ACRL Standard Review ACRL AC12 Doc 13.1). These key areas are all embodied within the learning outcomes of a service learning curriculum. The focus of this paper is two-fold: to examine how information literacy complements a service learning focused curriculum and how service learning projects can be embedded in any course regardless of the discipline.

Keywords: information literacy, service learning, communication studies, affective learning, experiential learning, social justice pedagogy.

Introduction

One of the key purposes of a university is not only to help students’ gain critical thinking and applied skills for the workplace but also to instill a sense of responsibility and desire to make a difference in the world around them. The use of information for empowerment has been illustrated by the importance of social media in modern protest movements. Access to information has helped improve the lives of people who have been disenfranchised due to race, gender or social class. In the evolution of information literacy from a competency based set of standards to one that is more holistic and reflects current trends in higher education, it
is critical to evaluate the role information literacy plays in social justice education. More than just focusing on data collection, it is important for academic libraries to, “shift our thinking to include affective (emotional) learning outcomes that address self-efficacy, student confidence, attitudes, motivation, and valuing what is being learned.” (ACRL Standard Review ACRL AC12 Doc 13.1). These key areas are all embodied within the pedagogy of social change. Service-learning, a cornerstone of social justice education is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience. (Learn and Serve America, 2009). “By challenging standard lecture-style education practices in higher education, service-learning pedagogy is a unique opportunity to confront important questions about the relationship between higher education and the community; thus providing a focus on social justice” (Doerr, 2011, p.78). Research has found that service learning and student levels of civic engagement last beyond the college experience. Likewise, lifelong learning through social justice pedagogy may have similar effect on the use of information literacy skills beyond the classroom. The focus of this paper is two-fold: to examine how information literacy complements a service learning focused curriculum and how service learning projects can be embedded in any course regardless of the discipline.

Literature Review

Standards to Framework: the evolution of Information Literacy

After the revision of the AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner, it became apparent that the ACRL Standards needed to be revised to better address the affective side of learning rather than a set of perfunctory skills. As searching for information in a digital environment has become a routine experience for most college students they continue to have difficulty interpreting and engaging with information. “Without guidance, they tend to approach the research process as a simple collecting and presenting assignment that leads to copying and pasting with little real learning” (Kulthau, 2013, p.95). The idea that student attitudes and feelings play a role in the research process has been evident in studies that examine information seeking behavior. In 2004, Whitmire found a connection “between epistemological beliefs and reflective judgment and information seeking behavior” (p.97). Likewise findings indicate, “Information seeking is a highly subjective process, one which students approach with prior knowledge, strongly held opinions, and differing levels of cognitive development.” (Weiler, 2005, p. 51). The most direct pronouncement regarding the role of affective learning in the information seeking process is from Schroeder and Cahoy (2010) where they propose a sixth standard of information literacy in the Standard which explicitly addresses affective learning. One of the goals for revising the ACRL standards is to capture the emotional aspect of learning in an information gathering setting. As Kulthau notes, "Internalizing the holistic process of learning from multiple sources of information is learning how to learn in an information rich environment..." (p. 95). While Kulthau (2013) has addressed the role of affective and cognitive domains in the Information Search Process (ISP) the revision of the standards goes beyond her initial connections between the impact of library anxiety and personal meaning.

The most recent version of the revised ACRL Standards is simplified greatly, removing the hierarchical arrangement and presenting skills in a structure of threshold concepts with defined knowledge practices (abilities), related metlitracy learning objectives, dispositions, self-assessments, and possible assignments/assessments (ACRL draft 2014). Threshold
concepts are a framework that has existed in higher education as a way of defining a core set of traits unique to a discipline or knowledge domain. The threshold concept in the revised standards that most closely aligns with service learning is Research Inquiry which is defined as "understanding that research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex questions whose answers develop new questions or lines of inquiry in any field" (p.13). Similar to service learning pedagogy, "this process of inquiry extends beyond the academic world to include instances such as evidence and data collected by groups and individuals in communities and the public at large, and the process of inquiry many also focus upon personal or professional or societal needs” (p.13). This also directly addresses the concept of social change innate to service learning pedagogy by addressing the impact of information on society. At CSU Long Beach, the service learning assignment for communication studies 132 demonstrates how information literacy can be incorporated into any course.

**Experiential Learning: Nexus between Information Literacy and Service Learning**

One of the primary interrelations between the theoretical folds of information literacy and service learning is the belief that both emphasize the importance of information gathering and critical thinking skills in the context of experiential learning. Evidence of the relationship between information literacy, service learning and experiential learning theory is present in both education and library science literature. Chan found that, “the community service type of experiential learning is particularly effective as such learning connects students’ emotions and empathy towards the subject matters besides the usual cognitive linkage.” (p. 413). Similarly, Devasagayam, Johns-Masten & McCollum (2012) found that “Experiential exercises that demand involvement, engagement, application, and reinforcement through repetition are one of the best ways to teach information literacy through pedagogy” (p.13). It can be argued that students are more engaged with learning when it has meaning. Although, the cycle can be started from any point, for service learning the experiential cycle begins with the cognitive process which utilizes research skills. Students are then moved to the actual experience and reflecting upon the entire service learning project. It has long been held that information literacy is best cultivated by employing active learning and engaging interactions with resources. Based upon the cycle of experiential learning, information literacy by definition should be incorporated into the initial stages of a service learning assignment. While the current ACRL Standards incorporate performance indicators that are affective in nature, they do not explicitly relate information literacy to the emotional aspects that are experienced when engaging in service learning. The value of information literacy can be demonstrated to students by connecting information to real world situations and social responsibility.

With evidence of the importance of experiential learning present in both information literacy and service learning literature, it is surprising that there is such a small body of research regarding the role information literacy can play in a service learning course. Service learning in the context of library instruction has been presented with the library as both a client organization or as part of the service learning process. Students have provided service in libraries to teach other students or the community basic information and tech skills (Meyer and Miller, 2008). As part of the curriculum, the literature has given emphasis on the role of facilitating service learning as well as being integrated into the curriculum and service learning assignments. Some advocate the library take an active role by building community partnerships and facilitating service learning opportunities for students (Westney, 2006). Defining the role the library should undertake in the wake of a growing service learning curriculum has been discussed in depth as well (Herther, 2008; Riddle, 2003).
Published studies on the results of integrating information literacy into the service learning curriculum have found a positive impact. Nutefall (2009) found that students responses indicate an increased motivation, use of resources for problem solving and a greater sense of engagement with research. Barry (2012) demonstrated the impact by providing narrative evidence of increased student engagement in an information literacy course.

Service Learning and Communication Studies
For the last two decades service learning has gained popularity in communication studies courses. In the past, service learning has been integrated into communication courses in order to engage students in social issues and teaches them the value of community and citizenship; enhances the in-class learning with out-of-class experiences, while at the same time improving critical thinking, written and oral communication skills (McKay & Rozee, 2004). Likewise, communication studies faculty also saw service learning pedagogy as a way to learn civic responsibility and duty and help students understand they are making a “difference” in the world (McKay & Rozee, 2004). Communications courses can develop an entire course around a service learning project or add a smaller service learning component to an existing course. Quintanilla & Wahl (2005) make recommendations for incorporating service learning into communication courses. They explain it is valuable for university students to engage in service learning projects because “it allows them to apply and learn course concepts by having them solve authentic, real world problems with tangible outcomes” (p.67).

Service Learning Project in a Small Group Communication Course
Service-learning “combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content” (Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse). Meyers (2009) argues that communication theory and social change are powerful tools for encouraging civic engagement, "College faculty members who are committed to social transformation can use service-learning to encourage students to become agents of change in their neighborhoods and beyond" (p. 377). Accordingly, the service learning project emphasizes (1) actual participation in a service capacity, (2) learning how and why such service is beneficial, (3) the difficulty of the problem-solving and decision-making process, and (4) the importance of establishing criteria for solving problems.

Comm 132: Small Group Discussion (Case Study)
The learning objectives/outcomes for the course
Small Group Discussion is a three unit general education course that is described in the course catalog as “covering basic principles and techniques of discussion which addresses the relationship of discussion to democratic processes and contemporary society including a study and practice of critical thinking and problem-solving techniques in various group discussion settings” (CSULB Catalog 2014).

Group Communication is a unique class because the students need to work together to succeed. The emotional learning or affective learning outcomes are often hard to assess. For Comm 132, the introduction of service learning pedagogy allows for assessment of the affective outcomes listed in the standard course outline. The “Service Learning Project” emphasizes (1) actual participation in a service capacity. Feeding the homeless, giving aid to a women’s shelter, cleaning up our beaches, giving attention to foster children, etc. are all
ways students participate in helping our community. However, just doing service does not create a lasting memory. This project enables the students to, (2) learn how and why such service is beneficial. They learn how the service is beneficial through researching the extent of the problem and they learn why the service is beneficial through the actual hands on experience at the soup kitchens, shelters, parks and beaches. In addition, the “Service Learning Project” forces the students to deal with (3) the difficulty of the problem-solving and decision-making process. The students in the small group class are required to find a socially significant problem and an organization all on their own. They need to contact organizations, which has its challenges. Sometimes, the students find it difficult to agree on a “socially significant problem” they want to address. For example, some students want to help the homeless while others want to do a beach clean-up. The students need to come up with problem solving and decision making strategies so the group can come up with a solution and get started on contacting the organization they wish to help. Lastly, the students learn (4) the importance of establishing criteria for solving problems. The successful groups establish criteria for solving their problems. They have goals for what they want to accomplish and deadlines that they keep. They are also held accountable by the other members of their group to meet the deadlines.

Each content area addressed in the course is directly applied to the service learning project. For example, in week 12 the topic of the course was creative problem solving. They needed to creatively problem solve in a group and the task was selecting their organization.

The results of this assignment is reciprocal in that the organization gains assistance while students learn how to deal with conflict, solve problems, think creatively, and work with different personalities. Although this service learning project is not assigned in every section of Comm 132, when it has been incorporated into the curriculum it has had beneficial effects. The service learning project requires students to research the organization they wish to help and to research the socially significant problem they address. Service learning projects teach the students lessons about working in groups, while at the same time helping out the community. While the service learning project is assigned during the last 5 weeks of a 16 week class, the students are given a very brief overview of the assignment the first week of class. Introducing the students to the project early in the semester encourages them to start early on the project. Students are allowed limited time in class to meet with their groups to make sure everyone agrees on the service they want to do. Groups need to reflect on problems that arise in our society. One student group, The Maniacs, wrote “On the day we were assigned with this project, we thought more deeply into the organizations for homeless people and thought we should help pregnant homeless women”. They began researching various shelters leading them to the Precious Life Shelter in Los Alamitos, CA.

The assignment

For the service learning project each group selects an established organization (i.e. Salvation Army, Precious Life Shelter) that addresses a socially significant problem (i.e. homeless; poverty) and endeavors to address the problem via community service. Members actively participate in the group’s chosen organization, spending a minimum of 2-3 hours completing a specific community service task. Each group creates a two-fold oral presentation (approximately half on the community organization and service aspect of the task and half on the group’s dynamic in successful completion of the entire project) and a comprehensive portfolio. The narrative of the entire process allows groups to reflect upon the entire process including the individual roles they played.
To begin, each group must contact a chosen organization. The organization itself often offers a wellspring of information on its organization, formation, outreach/projects, public awareness programs, fundraising venues, and much more. Groups can choose any organization they wish to help. This allowed the project to have more personal meaning and also fit service hours into their schedules. In the past, groups have chosen organizations such as (but were not limited to) *Save Our Beach* which conducts monthly beach and wetlands cleanups in Seal Beach and Long Beach (saveourbeach.org), *Children Uniting Nations* who are dedicated to reshaping the lives of at-risk and foster youth through positive mentoring and academic advocacy ([http://www.childrenunitingnations.org](http://www.childrenunitingnations.org)), and *Precious Life Shelter* which offers “residential supportive service programs for the homeless, pregnant, adult women” ([http://www.preciouslifeshelter.org](http://www.preciouslifeshelter.org)). Group members need to work together to come to a consensus on what organization they want to help serve.

The second step to this project is to research the organization and the socially significant problem. Students begin the research process in a library instruction session. They are taught how to formulate questions and how to develop appropriate keywords. Each group must research the chosen organization and socially significant problem addressed. For example, one group agreed to do their service learning project at the *Precious Life Shelter* in Los Alamitos, CA. While in the library workshop the students found an article “New BuildingMeans Shelter for Pregnant Won't Have to Turn as Many Women Away” in the *Los Angeles Times*. These types of articles give evidence of the organizations ties with the community. Students must find a minimum of *two* credible sources to support the validity of the organization and/or its contribution to the community. Furthermore, student thoroughly investigate (and subsequently report upon) the socially significant problem being addressed. They are also required to find a minimum of *two* credible sources about the social problem and cite them in the oral presentation. For the students helping at *Precious Life Shelter*, they researched homeless pregnant women. Through their research this group found scholarly articles regarding the population of homeless pregnant women, why and how they become homeless, as well as how the shelter assists pregnant women when in need of emotional support.

The last step in completing the service learning project is to select and complete a service task within the organization. This includes making contact with a liaison from the organization as to possible community service tasks needed and select one to complete. At the *Precious Life Shelter* various groups helped by cleaning the facility for the Christmas Open House, while other groups helped sort clothes in the Thrift Store. Each member obtains an official letter of task description and service hours completed. The groups also take pictures of all group members carrying out their service task must be included as part of the visual aids in the oral presentation (copies of which are in the portfolio).

After groups complete their “service” with their organization they then create a thirty minute long presentation. The presentation includes a description of the socially significant problem (i.e. homeless pregnant women) with the use of research to demonstrate the scope of the problem. After each group explains to the class the problem, the groups then share with their audience (class) what they did to serve the groups in need. The integration of the research about their socially significant problem with their service learning experience takes empirical research and translates it into real people. The result had a profound impact on students in the course. In the case of the *Precious Life Shelter*, presenters were moved to tears when describing their experience. A research paper on the same topic would not have had the same impact.
The assessment (student narrative/student presentations)
Assessment is an important aspect in service learning pedagogy. There are varying forms of assessment embedded throughout the project. The narrative included with the outline of their presentation is primarily focused on group dynamics and the roles students took on within the group. Reflection on how their group functioned was a self-assessment of their success communicating and working together and with the organization.

In addition, students were evaluated on their presentation and on the completion of the portfolio folder submitted. The presentation of the portfolio provides a more reflective piece of the assignment. The presentation covers the elements of presentation and the peer to peer evaluation with a justification for the grade also allowed for reflection on the elements of the project. The graded portions of the portfolio included, the narrative, slides of the class presentation, peer to peer evaluations and a reference page of their sources in APA format.

How this assignment can be adapted/modified for other disciplines
Service learning, although time consuming, is extremely beneficial for students. There are five principles for incorporating service learning into Communications courses which can easily apply to any discipline (Applegate and Morreale, 1999).

1. **Integration into the curriculum.** As with any other assignment, it should be carefully tailored to meet specific learning outcomes in the course. In this case, the assignment which was developed by another faculty member mirrored many of the outcomes listed in the standard course outline. The primary method for inclusion is to ensure that the service learning informs the content. Reflective inquiry is a pivotal tool for connecting problem solving with service learning and applying data and research to help develop strategies and approaches. This was easily seen in the Comm 132 project, as students applied group dynamics to their partner negotiation and information about the organization and the population to approach service learning from an informed perspective.

2. **Administrative support and resources.** Buy-in for developing a service learning assignment is an added layer to ensure its success, whenever possible external funding and support when approaching organizations should be sought. However, for comm. 132 there was no financial or direct administrative input which may often be the case when a course is not designated as service learning. The Communication Studies department is supportive of student service learning as a pedagogical tool and there has been extensive research published by faculty members Kirin Moss and Valerie McKay.

3. **Assessment of impact and outcomes.** When developing a service learning assignment, it is important that the assignment is incorporated into the curriculum but even more important to assess the affective learning and changes in behavior attributed to the service. This is where using reflection to measure the experience is a great tool to incorporate. The assignment in Comm132 is introduced the first week of class and throughout the semester is encouraged to start thinking about how they can select a population to work with. Additionally impact on the community is also a useful assessment of the assignment. Work done by students is documented by the organization and the organization ultimately decides where the students will be most beneficial to their organization.
4. **A sense of Partnership**: Ensure that a portion of the assignment emphasizes students taking the time to learn from those they meet. In some cases, students did not interact with the populations they were serving. The research portion of the course is the area which informs the students of the population they are working with as well as the organization. The” Maniacs” felt a sense of partnership with *Precious Life Shelter* through their service. They interacted with the organization by helping get the thrift shop ready for Christmas sales. The students learned that by helping the organization, they also served the community. The money raised at the thrift shop helped women and children have a safe and healthy environment to live in. In the end, they “helped out at the thrift shop to organize all the clothes” and wrote that “this was important because the thrift shop gave advantages and benefits to the homeless pregnant women that live” at the shelter.

5. **Dual Goals and Reflexivity**: The dual goals of personal learning and increased social action should be specifically stated. Reflection on an individual basis should be encouraged during and after the service learning. As the semester continues, groups began meeting more out of class and discussing how they can help out the shelter. By this point in the semester, groups are more comfortable and cohesive, but also more honest.

Throughout the introduction of the service learning project, the students continually reflect on how they are helping out the community. After the “service” is done, the students then begin working on their portfolio where they reflect on their experience of helping out in the community, as well as, reflecting on how their group managed conflict, challenges and problems that arose while completing the “service” to a group in need.

**Lessons Learned**
Each of these principles can be applied to any course in any discipline. In the implementation of this assignment over multiple semesters, these are some of the tips which will make creating service learning projects run smoothly:

- Get the students started early. This is one of the biggest challenges. Encourage them to call the organization, and keep calling if they do not hear back. Another challenge was when a group wanted to help out with organizations that needed previous training or background checks.
- Scheduling Time restrictions - students only have 5 weeks to complete the project. This is because it is not a traditional service learning class.
- Give the students a list of suggested organizations to contact. This saves time and gives them enough time to focus on the project rather than scrambling to find a group at the last minute.
- Get testimonies from former students who already did the Service Learning Project. Year after year I asked previous students to come to my current class and explain what organization they helped and share their experience with the organization. This helped each class hear first-hand how much work and reward there is to completing the project.
- Incorporating a research component is vital. This informs the students and prepares them for the future community service activity.
- Librarians should research the organizations used in the service learning course in order to better understand the types of information that will most inform students (Nutefall, 2009)
Librarians should examine the final projects submitted by students and examine the sources students selected in order to evaluate the research portion of the assignment.

Conclusion

The service learning assignment in Communication studies 132 follows the cycle of experiential learning. Information literacy is embodied in the cognitive and planning process while the service learning encompasses the culminating experience and application to the real world. Students are then able to reflect on the entire process and translate it into personal meaning. Additionally, the portfolio assignment integrates many aspects of the ACRL threshold concept of reflexive inquiry. Chan (2009) notes that, “According to Kolb, a learner is able to gain deep understanding and achieve the best learning outcomes when he/she adheres to all four components of the learning cycle.” (p. 413). Students "conduct research through the lens of inquiry in order to enhance the impact of their work, communicate effectively with collaborators in shared spaces and learn from multiple points of view" (Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education Draft p. 13-14) The revision of the ACRL standards to the new framework more aptly reflects the pedagogical principles of service learning and social justice education. Incorporating a research component to service learning does more than expose students to social action. It is used to understand a vulnerable population via problem solving, while reflection allows students to critically think about the process and bring personal meaning to the entire experience. Crabtree (1999) notes, "Through service-learning in communication-related endeavors, our students will learn to do relevant research while also providing related and needed service to the community." (p.125).

Likewise, similarly to the results of students at George Washington State, students enrolled in communication 132 demonstrated, “increased motivation, use of numerical data and primary sources, increased knowledge in approaching and limiting topics, and the potential for bias.” (Nutefall, 2009, p.259) The use of inquiry to inform service learning can only further enhance the learning experience of the student regardless of discipline.

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