Service Learning:
Liberations, Lamentations and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Taking a casual look at the practice of using service learning in the classroom, most would agree that student requirements and efforts are certainly different and often more diverse than in a traditional classroom setting. But on closer look, what surprises many, is the amount of extra time, planning, effort and energy required of faculty, resulting in many faculty wondering if the efforts are worth the results. In this paper, I provide definitions of service learning. I discuss ways service learning can be liberating and give three real-world examples that occurred in the classroom. That discussion is followed with an explanation of why service learning causes faculty distress and reasons they lament. Three true-life examples of lamentations are detailed. Based on many years of using service learning, lessons learned are shared with the hope that faculty will find reasons to continue to use the challenging practice in the classroom.

I. **Introduction**

In the last few years, service learning in the classroom has been promoted by administration and tried by many faculty members. Faculty have had mixed results and mixed reactions. Some have had successful experiences and have chosen to implement the practice every semester, others have had frustrating experiences and have permanently deleted it from their curriculum, while others have had mixed experiences and therefore have not committed to either keeping or dropping service learning.

I began using service learning in the classroom long before the term was made common. Having supervised more than 30 different projects in a Big 10 school and a well-respected liberal arts university, I have had a variety of experiences. Most have been positive, but some were painful. In this paper, I will discuss why service learning can be liberating and why the practice can cause faculty to lament. I discuss several examples of projects that I have implemented in junior- and senior-level marketing, especially those focused on the topic of promotions and campaigns. I conclude with valuable lessons learned along the way.

II. Defining Service Learning

Service learning in the classroom is not a new concept but enhanced emphasis in higher education classrooms began to gain traction in the late 1980's with discussion and adoption of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d.).

There are many published definitions of service learning. Through the years, I have found Heffernan's (2001), definition most useful. Her definition is actionable and focuses on the role of faculty related to the student. Heffernan states that service learning is pedagogy that:
- Connects structured student activities in community work with academic study
- Decenters the teacher as the singular authority of knowledge
- Incorporates a reflective teaching/learning methodology

Service learning in the classroom requires considerable commitment. Efforts and results become very personal as the lives of the students, faculty and community served are impacted. Before implementing service learning, I suggest faculty create a personal definition of service learning that meets the unique needs of the higher education institution, the faculty member's classroom, and the community served while incorporating the concepts developed by Heffernan. I address this point again in the concluding Lessons Learned section

When I incorporate service learning in the classroom, students are tasked with researching a problem of import to the community. Once a significant need is determined students develop a project (usually an interactive workshop) designed to educate their peers about the problem and as appropriate, causes, symptoms and prevention. The students then create a comprehensive

promotion plan for their event, build a wide variety of promotional tools, implement the plan, host the event and then analyze the results.

III. Liberation

As stated above, one of the characteristics of service learning is that the teacher is decentered as the singular authority of knowledge. This can be liberating for students. Students must learn to use their own abilities to gain new knowledge through research, interaction with their client and faculty, and peer-to-peer collaborations. Through service learning, students develop abstract thinking skills that help them be successful in the work place.

Through service learning, students are liberated to practice and experiment in a safe environment. They have an entire semester to develop a project from the beginning to the end. And in between, they have freedom and significant autonomy to make their own path, changing directions if needed. If one promotional strategy does not work, they can try a different strategy. If a client does not show up for a meeting, learning how and where to get needed information elsewhere becomes critical for success.

Service learning can also be very liberating when students realize that their projects can be transformational for both their client and for themselves. Students become much more cognizant of their unique abilities and personal belief systems. How they make sense of the world around them often changes dramatically when working with clients who have needs much different than their own.

Through service learning, students are liberated to become more self-aware. Through this experiential learning process, they learn as much about what they know as about what they do not know. Those who are curious seek to learn more.

Faculty are liberated as their role changes from being the primary source of knowledge to serving as a mentor and facilitator. Their job is to listen, observe and guide students when they need help or get off-track. Faculty do not need to prepare a lecture or class-length lesson for each class period but instead learn to be flexible with their time and talents, helping students improve their efforts at every stage of the service learning project.

Some elements of a traditional classroom remain the same. It is critical that a syllabus is created articulating the components of service learning, the expectations, and the academic objectives. It is important to monitor the student's progress throughout the term and to give feedback. Developing an evaluation method and incorporating student reflection is essential. To successfully teach and evaluate service learning, faculty, most generally, have written rubrics for assignments and grades. One useful online rubric, "Office of Service-Learning," (n.d.) provides a very helpful outline of potential pitfalls, interventions and preventions.

While a grade at the end of the semester is inevitable, the grade does not have to be entirely based on a predetermined end result and perhaps should not be. The grade, instead, can be partially based on evidence of showing willingness to change when circumstances dictate, of showing flexibility in a fluid environment, of being able to make, acknowledge and recover from mistakes and showing ability to think and act strategically. In the following section, liberating examples from my classroom are described.

Liberation Example 1: Hope, Prevent, Vaccinate
One of the most successful projects involved a student group that developed a project based on current research that reported an increase in Human Papillomavirus (HPV) on college campuses. The members called themselves **H**OPE, **P**REVENT, **V**ACCINATE. Their guest was a medical doctor who specialized in Obstetrics and Gynecology (OB/GYN) who talked about the seriousness and prevalence of the disease, informing the audience that 1 out of 3 women in their lifetime will have HPV, that HPV is a cancer causing virus, that men are the primary carriers and that men rarely show symptoms. A student, diagnosed with the virus, gave personal testimony to the seriousness as well as treatment of HPV. More than 50 students attended the event. Soon after the event, the Journal of Clinical Research reported on a huge spike in the number of head and neck cancers linked to HPV over nearly two decades. This caused alarm concerning sexually contracted infections in a whole new population: men. Those cases were almost always attributed to oral sex. This new information was then passed on to the entire student body by the members of the service learning group.

In this example, service learning was liberating in many ways. Students built from their own knowledge and experiences. They learned from an OB/GYN and their peers. The faculty member was not the singular authority of knowledge. They were empowered and cared enough to continue learning and teaching after the semester was over and the grade book was closed. These students were transformed when they became self-aware of their own abilities to impact other's lives.

Liberation Example 2: Financial Planning for College Students
Another successful group hosted an event for seniors, helping them with financial decisions they would need to make as they transitioned from being a student to a member of the professional work force. More than 45 students attended this event and learned from a speaker who specialized in personal financial planning. This event was very well-received with many questions asked. The event lasted long past the planned ending time.

This group experienced liberation in a different way. Initially they had trouble picking a topic and finding the motivation to take ownership of their learning. The semester was nearly half over before they began to see the power and potential of their workshop. When they conducted primary research with their peers, they found graduating seniors were scared. Seniors had many important questions and concerns about financial decisions they would need to make immediately after graduation. These concerns became personal to my students and their motivation to do a quality job increased. When the speaker extended his stay because students were hungry for information, my students were proud of their efforts. This group came close to failure through lack of action. Because of the environment I had fostered, they were liberated to learn to not give up as they were practicing and experimenting in a safe environment. They recovered from their mistake of inaction and in the end showed the ability to think and act strategically.

Liberation Example 3: Dangers of Gambling
My third liberating example is about a student group that hosted a workshop on the dangers of gambling. The event was held close to the NCAA finals. Attendees and my students were shocked to learn how much college students spend on illegal gambling and the enticements used by the gambling industry to seduce new gamblers and gain hold of their time and money. A

speaker from the Choices Treatment Center (a recovery and treatment center committed to helping individuals overcome problems related to gambling), spoke to the group and stated that nearly 29 percent of all college students will gamble on sports ranging from football to horse races. A gambler, who was fighting a lifetime of addiction, told his personal story. He began gambling when he was a teenager and continued through his married life and the birth of his children. In that time he quit college, lost his job, was arrested for stealing to pay his debts and nearly lost his family through divorce. His speech was part of his treatment. In his speech he told stories of the horrors of addiction, stories even his wife, who was present, had not heard before.

This project was liberating in many of the same ways already mentioned. In addition, as the audience listened to the gambler tell how his life had transformed from one of prosperity to being on the verge of indigence, students recognized how quickly this could happen to them. Some of the students responsible for this project later told me that they were gamblers. Listening to their own speaker caused them to become more self-aware of their actions causing them to quit or curtail their gambling. They were liberated to become aware of their own ability to cause change.

IV. Lamentations

Service learning has a great deal of value, but it is difficult to put into practice. Reflecting back on the entirety of service learning projects, faculty often do so with a giant sigh and some lament. Many different issues may negatively impact the process and outcome. For example, students are not always willing to put in the required effort; clients do not always know exactly what they want students to do or the outcome desired. Students may need more out-of-classroom time than the faculty member has and/or is willing to devote.

Research shows many faculty members across the nation have lamented as I have. The number of articles written on service learning pitfalls and concerns is immense. In each, the primary concern seems to be if we, as faculty, are doing the right thing by requiring service learning and if it is in both the students' and faculty member's best interest to do so. Dipadova-Stocks (2005), asks "What are the continued consequences of such inaction on our ability to prepare students for the responsibilities that face them in an unscripted future? What are the consequences or the responsibility of higher education to cultivate public conscience?" She expresses concern about actually implementing service-learning and what would happen if it is done wrong. Would there be consequences of these actions for our students and their future?

DeCarrico Voegele and Lieberman (2013) list common and familiar challenges of service learning:

- Difficulty anticipating the unknown
- Responsibility to community need
- Reliance on others whom you do not know
- Conflicts with students and/or community
- Flexibility in the face of rapidly changing conditions
- Unexamined assumptions about the role of failure and success

One of the oddities of service learning is that, by nature, the processes of providing a service and of learning are simultaneously structured and very unstructured. Structure is a key element of

service learning. It is the easy part. Predicting and responding to unstructured elements is much more challenging. This contributes to the laments. DeCarrico Voegele and Lieberman (2013) call this 'difficulty anticipating the unknown.' In real life, the environment continually changes. How does one anticipate and deal with uncertainty and unknowns?

Lamentation Example 1: Curbing Underage Drinking
Members of a local county organization, with a mission to curb underage drinking, asked if my campaigns class would take on a county-wide project. After many conversations, an agreement was reached about the parameters and definition of the project.

Before achieving buy-in from my senior-level class, we talked about this difficult topic, as some students in the classroom had consumed alcohol while in high school and/or before they turned 21. As this was reality, it was important that the class members were able and willing to convince younger students that this was a negative behavior. Students were confident this would not be an issue.

During the first class period, students learned that the project would require considerable amount of work outside the classroom. Students were asked to find an alternative class if they did not have time to dedicate to the project. Two students dropped the course. The remaining 18 said they would dedicate the time needed.

Before the semester started, one-on-one meetings were conducted with the class members. We dialogued about designing class much like a marketing communication agency. We discussed jobs each would feel most comfortable with and those they were uncomfortable with. Students were challenged to reach beyond their comfort level and take on unfamiliar responsibilities and they agreed. During the semester, an alumna, employed by a marketing agency in Omaha that had just been named the national Advertising Age Small Agency of the Year, made an in-class visit and helped mentor the students. Our client, from the local county organization, made himself easily and frequently available for student consultations. Rubrics were introduced to guide expectations and to evaluate outcomes.

So, what happened? My expectations were not met. The client's expectations were not met. And the majority of students knew that they had not met expectations of me, our client, or of themselves.

Why were expectations not met? It turned out that the project was not a good fit for the class. Verbal buy-in was not demonstrated through actions. Asking a class of 18 to organize like a marketing agency, did not work. Primary research was stymied when superintendents of schools did not return phone calls. Our client felt hurt when my students suggested the organization's logo was not appropriate to the target market. University funding had either dried up or moved on to something else. Students did not put in the time they committed and they were unwilling to help those with a different job description.

While I lament the outcome of this service learning project more strongly than others, occasionally other projects have also given me reason to pause and ask myself if I should continue using service learning in the classroom.

In this lamentation example, before the project began, I personally met with local superintendents, telling them about the project and garnering their support for working with my students. When my students called our targeted school, the superintendent had passed on the responsibility to a principal who would not take or return their calls. Other questions about the unknowns include: When students indicate buy-in, what can be done when they do not put in the time and effort needed to complete the project? How do students learn to offer solid advice without hurting the feelings of a client? What incentive does a faculty member have for trying something new? What happens when the client wants to dictate the process? In essence, what rubric can be devised ahead of time to guide and evaluate the inevitable, unplanned, unstructured components?

How to balance structure with need for flexibility becomes a conundrum-and one not for the faint of heart!

Lamentation Example 2: Filled Seats Does Not Equate to Success.
One of the challenges of service learning in the classroom is for students to understand the meaning of a successful project. Projects often culminate with interactive workshops. Students sometimes believe "butts in the seats" at the workshops equate to success-no matter how the seats are filled. On a couple of occasions, student groups, who showed little motivation for service learning, spent most of the semester finding ways out of the project. With the end of semester looming and the grade book opened, both groups decided that something had to be done and done quickly! In both cases, few, if any requirements stated in the syllabus were met but the activity was well-attended. Attendees were able to learn something of value but the students in the classroom learned little other than how, at the last minute, to cajole their friends (not their target market) to attend a one hour session. When final grades were posted, even though course requirements were listed in the syllabus and stated many times in class, students argued that "butts in the seats" should equate to A's in the grade book.

I lament that a few students lack motivation to find a community need and are disinterested in civic responsibility. My hope is that the experience and the opportunity to witness more successful groups in the classroom someday sparks greater interest and inspiration.

Lamentation Example 3: We Don't Always Get What We Want.
Most often student groups are required to develop their own service learning project. During my early years I traditionally led a long discussion with students defining topic parameters. In the discussion, we brainstormed what was acceptable and what was not. As I left the classroom, I felt confident that expectations were stated clearly and that students had a clear understanding. I did not anticipate a couple of issues. The first was how far and how strongly students would test the limits. I also, early on, did not anticipate the value of including a written list of unacceptable topics in the syllabus. Once I added this list, issues such as the one following became non-existent.

One semester a student group, comprised mostly of football players, spent considerable time trying to find a need on campus that they were interested in, willing to learn about and develop a project based on. After much time, they pitched the idea of promoting a non-FDA regulated commercial supplement to fellow athletes interested in growing muscle mass. This project did not meet the requirements of service learning and I suggested they either amend the idea or find

a new one. After much persuasion, I spoke to their coach who agreed with me and even stated that he did not recommend the supplement. From this moment forward, the students, who had shown little interest in committing to service learning, lost any interest remaining.

I believed our beginning-of-semester discussion clearly defined acceptable and unacceptable projects. I lament that I do not always anticipate places students will push boundaries far beyond where they are established. I have learned comprehensive lists and clearly defined policies, published in the syllabus, have helped clear up any confusion resulting in much more appropriate topics and less dissension among the students.

I lament that some students have not reached self-actualization, realizing their own talents and potential, using both to give back to their community.

V. Lessons Learned

Through the years, I have seen some amazing transformations in the classroom. Students bought into the idea of service learning and accomplished great things for the communities served and learned many skills they will use throughout their lifetimes. I have also witnessed some not-so-positive outcomes. Through my experiences, following are seven important lessons I have learned to help set faculty up for success when using service learning. These lessons can liberate faculty from the laments of service learning and provide the motivation to continue on.

Lesson One: Embrace Uncertainty
The first lesson is to create your own definition of service learning. My personal definition incorporates the definitions given above. Additionally I add:

Service learning is pedagogy that:
- Acknowledges and embraces the reality of ambiguity and uncertainty in real-world projects.

In the real world, there will be uncontrollable environmental shifts. Recognize this, talk about reality with students, clients and your university support. Spend time discussing what this means and dedicate time to anticipate how circumstances might change and how to respond. Discuss what a successful project looks like. When circumstances begin to detour, talk about what is happening and whether or not the group needs to get back on track or if a different direction makes more sense.

Lesson Two: Teach that it is OK to be Uncomfortable
The second lesson relates to teaching uncertainty. Many of our students in capstone service learning classes have been with us for three or four years. Build some uncertainty into your curriculum to help students learn to make adjustments and decisions on the fly. Get students used to the reality of vagueness and uncertainty as well as client indecision. Teach them that being uncomfortable is part of life and that successful people learn to adapt and manage uncertainty with confidence.

Lesson Three: Create a Safe Environment
A third lesson is to remind ourselves of one of the most fundamental reasons we attempt service learning, and that is to give students an opportunity to practice professional skills in a safe

environment. What better place to experiment, fail, succeed and ultimately learn, than in a classroom?

Lesson Four: Review the Benefits
A fourth lesson is to focus on the benefits of service learning. Many service learning practitioners have developed long lists of hoped-for service learning benefits. "Center for Community-Engaged Learning ," (n.d.) has a particularly useful list of potential benefits divided by categories of benefits to students, faculty and community partners. Read the list. Make your own. Ask your students, clients and university which benefits matter most. Return to those during the duration of the project, celebrating when some are achieved, reevaluate or readjust when others are not.

Lesson Five: Give Yourself a Break
The fifth lesson is to give yourself a break. Using service learning in the classroom is hard, it is time consuming, sometimes it is exhausting and it nearly always requires more effort than teaching in a traditional classroom setting. If you need a break, take one. But, remember why you implemented service learning in the first place and the value of the pedagogy. When you have given yourself some needed time-off, bring service learning back to your curriculum.

Lesson Six: Embrace and Validate Personal Learning
As a faculty member, I continue to learn unexpected lessons each time I incorporate service learning in the classroom. I learn more about interesting topics ranging from HPV to on-campus gambling. I learn how hard it for many students to balance the requirements of a major project with their hectic, multifaceted life. I learn more about how to teach, guide and mentor service learning projects and how important it is for me to be flexible as each project has its own idiosyncrasies. Even when students do not learn as much as I think they ought, I learn and can make changes the next semester to improve the learning environment. We tell our students that learning is a life-long process. When we emulate this process by sharing with our students what we have learned, we demonstrate the validity of that truth.

Lesson Seven: Take Time to Reflect
The last lesson is to remind each one of us to liberate ourselves from laments. Many times I wonder if the outcome of service learning is worth the extra effort so I ask my students that question. At the end of each semester, students are required to reflect on their service learning experience. Here is what they say:

- The class taught me it was ok to take chances.
- This class really helped boost my confidence in leading people.
- I learned that you cannot do everyone's job so you have to trust that they will do their job.
- I learned from my peers to have confidence and trust myself and them because that is the only way you are going to be successful.
- I learned that to do great things, considerable time has to be spent outside of the classroom.
- I learned that it was ok to make mistakes, as long as I learned from them.

VI. Conclusion

Reflecting back and looking forward, service learning provides a wonderful opportunity for students to grow in ways that are much more difficult when sitting in a classroom. Service learning provides life lessons to students, preparing them for the reality of careers. Service learning offers a safe environment to experiment, to stretch and grow.

The words of our students perhaps tell the story best. Service learning has a valuable place in the classroom. Service learning can enhance textbook materials in powerful ways. Results may not always be exactly what the professor, students, client or even university communities hoped, but student testimonials tell us we need the courage to continue. There are many valuable reasons for incorporating service learning in the classroom. There are also many reasons for not using service learning. Ultimately, I believe that the liberations of service learning far outweigh the lamentations.

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