Designing Service-Learning Course Syllabi

The single most important act of a faculty member in launching a well-designed service-learning course is the construction of the course syllabus. Such a syllabus illustrates and explains the connection between course readings, lectures, other assignments, and community service work. It offers clear information to students about their service and learning obligations so they can make an informed decision about planning their schedule to integrate the service assignment.

Despite the rapid growth of service-learning courses over the past few years, we see few really stellar examples of course syllabi. Typically, the service-learning component is described at the end of a "regular" syllabus with far too little explanation of how the service is connected to the course and the details of student engagement. We believe that a good service-learning syllabus should contain the following elements:

1. A clear <u>connection</u> between the academic content and the service component.
2. Stated <u>course objectives</u> – including objectives/outcomes directly related to the service component.
3. A description of the <u>service requirements</u> - is service an option or is it mandatory, how many hours a week are involved, what is the general nature of the work, the anticipated timeline, etc.?
4. Specific information about <u>placements</u> - where, how, when?
5. Clear information about requirements for the <u>reflective process</u> - how often, what format, oral or written, feedback process?
6. A concise description of the <u>evaluation structure</u> - what will be evaluated and how will service-related evaluation be weighted with the rest of the course?

1. A Clear Description of the Connection between the Academic Content and the Service Component – It is important to be absolutely clear at the very beginning of the syllabus about the role of service-learning in any particular course. If students aren't familiar with service-learning, be sure to explain what it is and why it is part of this course. What will students get from their community work that will support and enhance their readings, research and in-class experiences? How will this service experience enhance their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for their education role? Three general ways have been identified in which community service provides support for more traditional learning:

- **Participant Observation** - Often students trade their services for entree into a community. If students are studying the sociology of organizations, working with an organization provides them with a first hand account of one particular organization and how it does business. If students are studying diversity, working at a school in an immigrant community will offer them some personal glimpses into the lives of immigrants.
- **Practicing Newly Acquired Skills** - Through their work in the community, students put to use newly acquired skills and, in so doing, deepen their understanding of the complex links between theory and practice in the work-a-day world. Students in a database course can work as teams to develop database applications for agencies that can not afford technical expertise. Students studying Spanish can use their Spanish in classes with immigrant children. Students in an environmental studies class can conduct a study of pollutants in a local stream.
- **Learning through Teaching** - This approach is probably used the least by educators but is one of the favorites. Students have been known to struggle to understand abstract concepts,

like the laws of supply and demand, in order to teach them to children at a local elementary school. Teachers at the school especially loved the science mini-courses where teams of students teach about earthquakes, marine studies, and biology.

Whatever the approach, it is critical that students be informed through the syllabus, as well as in the opening verbal description of the course, about how service is connected to the learning of course material. The more specific this information is, the better the students will understand their responsibilities as experiential learners. Some faculty members use written learning agreements which detail the specific learning outcomes that are anticipated through community service.

Stated Course Objectives - When offering course objectives to students, faculty members will want to be very explicit about how work in the community will be connected to course content. These objectives can be:

- **Performance-based** *(Teams of students will develop data-base programs for community agencies that are responsive to agency needs and make use of the most current data-base technologies)* or
- **Knowledge-based** *(Students will submit end-of-semester papers which analyze some specific social problem from both a theoretical and applied perspective, citing personal observations, texts, and contemporary media publications).*

A Description of the Service Requirements - Once students understand why they are being asked to engage in service, they need to know the particulars about that service. This description should include the following:

- **Is community service optional or mandatory?** If it is mandatory, what are the options for students who can not fit community service into their schedule? Must they drop the course or are there some alternative paths? If it is optional, is the service extra credit, does it work in lieu of a paper or some other requirement, or is it merely an alternative way of gathering data for an end-of-semester paper? The point of view is that a faculty member who integrates a well-developed service-learning assignment into a course should clearly describe it as an alternative way of learning. Just as they should not have to explain why they require term papers or class projects, they should not have to justify student work in the community as long as they can justify the learning that ensues.
- **What is the total number of hours of service that is required, or how many hours per week for how many weeks?** If students are to make informed decisions, they must understand the commitment in relation to their other requirements. This has become ever more important as we have seen a growing percentage of students working large numbers of hours to help cover the increasing costs of higher education. The estimate should include service hours and approximation of time needed for reflection.
- **What does the timeline for the semester look like?** What is the deadline for finding a work site? When should community assignments be completed? When are the various reflective papers due? To the greatest extent possible, these elements should be integrated into the flow of the syllabus so that for any given week, students can see what their readings are, what their service requirements are and what quizzes and exams will be occurring.

Specific Information about Placements/Projects - What sorts of service placements or projects are students expected to take on? Will the entire class work with one community partner that you have selected? Will they find their own placement/project and, if so, what are the requirements?

Will you provide them with an approved list of possible sites? Will the list include a brief description about the agency and the type of work that students will be doing? Will the Center for Service Learning be needed to help students find a project? All of this information not only helps students get started, but it gives them greater piece of mind about something that many students find more than a little threatening.

If students bear the responsibility for finding their own site or must pick a site off a list, how do they go about informing you about their selected site, their specific assignment at the site, and the name and contact information of the person responsible for supervising their work? Many faculty members use **contracts or work agreements** that students fill out with their site supervisor. This allows the student, the faculty member, and the site supervisor to have copies, and increases the likelihood that there is common understanding.

Again, it is important to set a specific **deadline** for students to arrange their service-learning assignments. Students can and will take half of the semester getting located, resulting in little time for service and/or the concentration of service hours in the latter half of the semester or quarter, thereby reducing the time available for reflection. Sixteen hours of experience in the community spread over eight weeks is far more educational than sixteen hours done on two successive Saturdays. Each trip to the community provokes new thoughts and promotes deeper understanding.

Clear Information about Requirements for the Reflective Process - Nothing is more central to the experiential learning process than the process of reflection. Another section on this web site discusses the reflective process but here it is important to note that a faculty member's expectations about reflection should be conveyed in the syllabus. To what extent will regular and routine written reflection be required? Will there be an oral reflective process and how will that take place?

It is suggested that reflection questions are embedded in the syllabus to help students integrate new concepts with their observations and experiences in the community. They may be questions requiring a written response, or may be topics for oral discussion in class or in discussion sections. Some faculty members ask students to do semi-formal or formal presentations based upon their service work. The reflection activities should be structured to help students glean the maximum learning from the service experience.

Some faculty members prefer to develop their reflection questions/activities each week rather than include them in the syllabus. This option gives you more flexibility to respond to the assets and needs of each class and their individual service experiences.

A Concise Description of the Evaluation Structure – Describe how each of the intended learning outcomes will be evaluated: the knowledge, skills, and attitudes. How are the service and the learning to be evaluated? Will reflections be graded? Try to include a scoring rubric* for the reflection papers. This will guide your students' growth toward more critical analysis and deeper thinking. Who will evaluate the work done in the community? Will the community partner evaluate the students' effectiveness in their service roles? What is the relative weight of the different components of the course? What percentage of the grade is the service-learning component? Students want and need clear information about how all of these pieces fit together if they are to accept full responsibility for them and weigh their importance with other things in their lives.

*Definition of "scoring rubric"- *Rubrics* are rating scales that are specifically used with performance assessments. They are formally defined as scoring guides, consisting of specific pre-established performance criteria, used in evaluating student work, projects, reflection papers, participation in a task, portfolios, etc. ,