Online Teaching: Incorporating Service-Learning

"Online learning is not a barrier to service-learning; rather, it can be a facilitator."
(Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012, p. 145)

Although the alignment may initially seem ill-suited, service-learning can be a fitting and rewarding teaching approach in an online environment. Faculty who are committed to service-learning need not abandon this commitment once they are asked to teach an online course. With the right amount of resources, creativity, and institutional support, engaging students in service-learning activities from a distance can not only be accomplished, but can add unique and meaningful value for student learning and surrounding communities.

First of all…

What Constitutes Service-Learning?
- Incorporates the integration of *academic course material*, *relevant service activities*, and *reflection* (Bringle & Clayton, 2012)
- Built on *reciprocal partnerships* that engage *all constituents* (students, faculty, staff, and community) to *achieve academic, civic, and personal learning objectives* and to *advance public purposes* (Bringle & Clayton, 2012)
- Distinct from co-curricular volunteerism, which focuses mainly on service

A Couple Key Approaches
- *Traditional*: service goals connected to course objectives and ongoing reflection to develop new knowledge (Mitchell, 2008)
    - A potential concern surrounding traditional service-learning is that, "*Without the exercise of care and consciousness, drawing attention to root causes of social problems, and involving students in actions…addressing root causes, service-learning may have no impact beyond students' good feelings.*" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51)
- *Critical*: service-learning focusing on social justice
    - Social change orientation
    - Redistribution of power
    - Developing authentic relationships (Mitchell, 2008)

Types of Service-Learning
- *Direct*
    - Students have direct contact with the community partner they are serving
    - Direct impact
- *Indirect*
    - Students do not have direct contact with a community partner
    - Project may be broader in scope
    - May benefit more than one group
- *Research-based*
    - Information-gathering, analysis, reporting on needs
    - Presenting information to stakeholders
- *Advocacy*
    - Creating awareness of community problems
    - Stimulate action to address social issues ("Types of Service Learning", 2017)

Connections between Service-Learning the Principles of Online Teaching
- Learning in an online environment can:
  - bolster the depth of connection to academic content
  - facilitate more immediate interactions between instructors and students and offer more in-depth discussions and feedback
  - foster the development of students who become more connected to a global community
  - help students explore values and ethics in unique ways (Merryfield, 2003)

- Important components of engaged, comprehensive online learning include:
  - students developing learning goals
  - collaborative group work
  - exploration of a wide variety of resources
  - students being provided with well-aligned multidisciplinary experiential activities that connect students to communities
  - continual performance-based assessment (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012)

Online Service-Learning
- E-service-learning
  - Learning and/or service occur online
  - *"…an ideal marriage of sorts because it overcomes limitations of both service-learning and online learning. [It] frees service-learning from place-based access or geographical constraints [and] overcomes what some consider a key limitation to online learning—a perceived lack of interaction."* (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012, p. 126)
  - Can engage those who may not ordinarily be able to participate (rural populations, those with certain disabilities, those who don't have relevant organizations nearby)
  - Perceived weaknesses of online learning (lack of personal connection, engagement, practical experience, etc.) may be mitigated when service-learning is added as a key component (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012)
- Types of E-service-learning
  - Often employs a hybrid model, with some component of instruction and/or service occurring in the online environment
  - Four types:
    - **Hybrid Type I** – service on site; teaching online
      Example: Onsite service with local/regional organizations with initial connections made by the instructor and/or student; follow-up online assignments including reflection, structured discussions, assessment, etc.
      Example: Intensive onsite service-learning experience after the conclusion of an online course (e.g. a week-long project with an international partner)
    - **Hybrid Type II** – service online; teaching on site
      Example: Face-to-face course with online service including web design, social media development, development of marketing materials, etc.
    - **Hybrid Type III** – blended: instruction and service both partially online and on site
      Example: Online and face-to-face mentorship roles, teaching, consulting, etc.
    - **Extreme e-service-learning**— all instruction and service is done online
      Example: Program evaluation followed by presentation in online discussion forum
      Example: Online marketing, business plan development
    - *Example*: Public service announcements, public health campaigns (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012)

Potential Challenges
- Technology
  - Lack of reliable technology; malfunctions
    - Have relevant IT support contacts handy
  - Unique tech problems may affect students and instructors
    - Training and anticipation of these issues (inasmuch as possible) is critical
- Communication
  - Issues with responsiveness
  - Problems with accountability due to online format
    - Virtual face-to-face sessions can help to clarify and ameliorate
    - MOUs can help to clarify expectations
- Course Design
  - Instructor workload – be sure project time commitment is feasible (adjust project components as necessary to ensure quality) (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012)

Best Practices to Mitigate Challenges
- Technology
  - Appropriate training *(for faculty, students, and community partner, if applicable)*
  - Pilot any technology prior to using it
  - Utilize instructional design team
  - Coordinating asynchronous with real-time learning
    - Online students benefit from the integration of virtual "face-to-face" discussions
- Communication
  - Clear expectations for students and community partner (utilizing an MOU can be helpful)
  - Establish clear communication paths between students and community partner
  - Prompt feedback
- Course Design
  - Service has clear connection to learning objectives
  - Use of reflection
  - Ensure time commitment is suitable for course
  - Incorporate feedback loops (including student input) (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012)

Service-Learning and Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a key piece of the service-learning process that serves to deepen student learning and connects the service experience with academic concepts. They can act as a "course embedded assessment" to assess student learning outcomes connected with service-learning activities in a course (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). Reflecting on service-learning with a deeper focus also fosters an examination of one's personal beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes within the larger context of social responsibility. Although relevant for all types of service-learning, critical reflection is particularly useful with critical service-learning activities in which power imbalances and social structures are examined in an effort to mitigate social problems (Mitchell, 2008).

"*In the critical service-learning classroom, developing authentic faculty and student relationships provides a model for engagement in the community. This is achieved by a commitment to dialogue, developing self-awareness, critical reflection, and building solidarity.*"
(Mitchell, 2008, p. 61)

Critical Service-Learning
- A social justice approach
    - Drawing attention to the root of social problems
    - Focus on social responsibility and critical community issues
    - As opposed to traditional service-learning in which may serve to highlight the social divide and hierarchies between groups
- Redistribute Power
    - Examining diversity is not enough; must **confront** assumptions, stereotypes, and acknowledge power differentials and seeks to challenge them
- Developing Authentic Relationships
    - Collaborative relationships based on connection, shared understanding, respect, and trust – not just on differences (e.g. You're homeless; I'm not) (Mitchell, 2008)

We All Want to Avoid
"Having the experience but missing the meaning". (Attributed to T.S. Eliot, as cited in Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27)

The Goal We All Seek
"*Designing reflection effectively so as to make applied learning educationally meaningful first requires that we make clear its meaning as an integrative, analytical, capacity-building process rather than as a superficial exercise in navel-gazing."*
(Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28)

Critical Reflection's Role
- Connection to transformative learning
- Forming authentic relationships
- Allows the examination of values, assumptions
- Vulnerability and building of trust can boost the value
    - For example, when using peer feedback and oral sharing (Mitchell, 2008)

When it is Well-Designed
"…*reflection promotes significant learning, including problem-solving skills, higher order reasoning, integrative thinking, goal clarification, openness to new ideas, ability to adopt new perspectives, and systemic thinking*."
(Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27)

Three Steps in Designing Critical Reflection
1. "Determining the desired outcomes: learning goals and associated objectives;
2. Designing reflection so as to achieve those outcomes; and
3. Integrating formative and summative assessment into the reflection process." (Ash & Clayton, 2009)

DEAL Model for Critical Reflection
- Takes students beyond simply summarizing their experiences
- Moves them into meaning-making
- Offers a mechanism for learning, rather than just reflecting on learning after the fact
- Can incorporate higher-order reasoning and critical thinking (e.g. Bloom's Taxonomy)
- Facilitates scholarly work
    - Using applied learning pedagogy to improving teaching and learning

DEAL Model Involves three sequential steps:
1. "Description of experiences in an objective and detailed manner;
2. Examination of those experiences in light of specific learning goals or objectives; and
3. Articulation of Learning, including goals for future action that can then be taken forward into the next experience for improved practice and further refinement of learning." (Ash & Clayton, 2009)

Spotlight on Reflection Method: **Photo Diary**

There are seemingly countless ways in which to engage students in critical reflection, such as:

- Written reflections with prompts
- Video diaries
- Photo diaries or journals
- Portfolios
- Personal narratives
- Experiential research papers
- Guided journals
- Personal journals
- Three-part reflections (incorporating description, analysis, application)

One approach, the use of a **photo diary**, is an incredibly robust method that is highlighted here. This method draws upon the qualitative research tradition of photo elicitation, originated by Collier (1967) in which participants provide a graphic representation of a topic of interest. Typically, in this qualitative method:
- Visual images are taken by a participant and used in an interview as visual cues to deepen the discussion about the concepts represented in them.
- This exercise allows individuals to "show rather than tell" complex personal attributes, feelings, and experiences that might not ordinarily be revealed during a typical interview.

Visual imagery, in a phenomenological tradition, serves as a symbolic representation of a person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences; thus, its use can help an individual convey their reflections about experiences that might be difficult or too sensitive to articulate using words. It follows that this method can enhance the depth, richness and overall exploration of an individual's reflections on a service-learning activity.

The benefits of using visual imagery to tap into one's thoughts, feelings and reflections relate to how our brains process visual versus verbal information:
"…*images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information*" (Harper, 2002, p. 13).

Using this Method
Using a photo diary for student critical reflection has a wide variety of applications. For example, sometimes this approach can incorporated as a photo exercise utilizing "reflexive photography" (Harrington & Schibik, 2003; Larrivee, 2008) whereby the images serve "as stimuli for students' emotions, memories, and senses" (Perlman, 2016, p. 3).

Instructors can provide a wide variety of broad or focused prompts for students to offer direction for how this creative activity can be approached. For example, "Take photographs that tell your story about _____", or "Take photographs that help convey your thoughts and feelings about _____", or "Take photographs of

people, places, things that will help describe how you hope to _____". Depending on the structure of the visual reflection assignment, students may be asked to explain their photographic choices, describe their feelings surrounding the images, and even to reflect back on the reflection experience itself.