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Assessing Service-Learning to Improve Instruction

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Experiential learning has been an area of interest for over 30 years within the field of communication. Service-learning has gained popularity (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Pearson, 2004) particularly in public relations (Panici & Lasky, 2002). This paper presents a discipline-defined framework for service-learning in public relations, suggestions for implementing the assessment measure, and reflection on its use.

Rationale

Assessment in service-learning is a valuable and important practice because the process and the results provide information that can be used to improve course design and instruction. Assessment, done effectively, also assists us in helping students become better prepared for their professional positions. Practitioners add value by using well-recognized, discipline-based criteria in assessing what students learn and produce evidence of learning that can be readily understood and accepted by stakeholders. This paper argues for a framework to assess learning that provides assessment results that are useful, understandable, and applicable. We will begin by looking at why we assess, review some limitations in how service-learning has been assessed, present a practical framework and suggest implementation approaches that address those weaknesses. We will share reflections of our use of the framework, and provide some examples of assessment instruments (Appendices B and C) for implementing this framework.

Service-learning projects may require buy in and support from stakeholders and/or administrators. Using measurement tools based on relevant parameters is more likely to resonate with interested parties. When students and faculty share a common understanding of the criteria, the commonly held expectations enhance the potential for more effective teaching and learning. This common sense notion has not been consistently realized in practice. In a study conducted by Stacks, Botan and VanSlyke Turk (1999), 188 practitioners (42%) and educators (58%) were surveyed to identify what students should be able to do on the job and what they observed in the applicants for four different levels of experience. The survey included 102 items. For entry-level applicants, the educators and practitioners identified 24 out of the 102 items to be desired, having a combined score of 6.0 or higher on a 7-point scale. The 12 top items in rank order were: writing news releases, self starter, organized, critical thinking and problem solving skills, interpersonal skills, word processing/E-mail, knowledge and interest in current events, flexible, understands protocol with the mass media, basic knowledge of the mass media, understands business practices, and takes criticism. The respondents were also asked which of the items they found in new hires. Only 3 out of the 24 desired items were "found" in entry-level personnel. These three items were word processing/Email, good attitude, and typing. The findings seem to indicate that practitioners and educators shared perceptions on what was desired, but they found a gap between what

they wanted and what they found in entry-level personnel. The authors further indicated that:

Top-ranked hiring items included writing skills, ability to communicate publicly, interpersonal skills, and practical experience. The top-ranked hiring problems were writing skills and understanding of business practices. (p. 17)

Service-learning pedagogy may be more likely to address these concerns than traditional pedagogy. Service-learning and experiential learning can help reduce the gap between what is desired and what is found in applicants. Our assessment framework demonstrates how gaps are narrowed by identifying skills expected from students and providing a measure of improvement in those areas. Faculty benefit from a tool that adds new information for use in the process of improving our teaching.

Service-learning and experiential learning projects often help students develop soft skills to make them better prepared for their professional career. By designing service-learning projects and assessment with relevant criteria in mind, we enhance our effectiveness as educators to help students learn and develop appropriate skills.

Assessment of service-learning often followed a framework similar to the one described by Panici and Lasky (2002), in which students respond to open-ended questions at the conclusion of their service-learning project. Reflection is a critical component of service-learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Reflective comments provide very useful information for the course instructor, but the evidence that specific learning took place may be limited for a variety of reasons. The comments may be narrowly focused, which can happen if the prompts are too specific. If open-ended questions are used without prompts, the reflective comments may be vague and broad, especially when students are inexperienced in the process of writing reflections. Some students are verbose and provide a rich description of their experience, while others may be less expressive. The imbalance in responses may cause a distortion when one attempts to analyze the data. Another challenge is that comparisons between groups and within groups are difficult to make when the students gave divergent answers to open-ended questions.

Compounding the issue is that service-learning is a resource intensive pedagogical strategy. Without relevant assessment criteria, we may not have the appropriate evidence to evaluate the cost-benefit ratio. Most of us would argue vigorously to the merits of service-learning and experiential learning as we have tacit knowledge about the benefits for students. Our position is strengthened when we have documented results based on well-defined measures that are relevant to the field, preferably those that are agreed upon by both educators and practitioners.

To address this issue, we proposed a discipline-based framework for assessing service-learning projects (Blomstrom & Tam, 2008). The framework includes assessment parameters in the areas of knowledge, skills, and personal traits including team work and soft skills. In this paper we present an application of that framework. We hope you will find this assessment approach useful.

Many definitions of assessment have been put forth in the literature. A useful definition for our purposes is Popham's (2005), "a process by which educators use students' responses to specially created or naturally occurring stimuli in order to make inference about student knowledge, skills or affective status" (p. 3). This definition fits

well with the recommendations from the National Communication Association, which suggests departments:

...build upon or redesign existing activities and identify comprehensive measures or quality indicators of student achievement in these areas: cognitive outcomes (general and specific knowledge), skills outcomes (basic, higher order, and occupational) and attitudes/values outcomes (personal goals, attitudes, motivational factors)" (NCA, 2007).

We then looked for a set of criteria that represented the intersection of values agreed upon by both practitioners and educators in Public Relations. We surveyed the literature to find the best-practice of outcome assessment using similar constructs in other fields. Informed by the research presented by Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski (2000) for accountants, we proposed a comprehensive framework to assess service-learning in PR courses. The framework is grounded in the November 2006 Commission on Public Relations Educations report, entitled "The Professional Bond-Public Relations Education and the Practice." The report lays out an extensive set of recommendations, which spanned practice, education and research. The items selected from the report are listed in Appendix A.

In this paper we demonstrate how to measure intellectual and personal outcomes using the parameters identified by the PR Commission. A survey instrument was developed to collect quantitative data. We also used some of the items to code the reflective comments in a qualitative analysis. By combining the results from this mixed-method assessment with client feedback and the students' results in graded assignments, we have a rich set of data to present evidence of learning attainable with this pedagogy. Looking at student learning outcomes through this lens reveals shortfalls and opportunities for changes in instruction.

Objectives

The primary aim of assessment in this context is to inform and improve instruction. The framework helps us answer these questions:

- Did the students learn the content and skills stated in the learning outcomes for the service-learning project?
- What content and skills did the students learn in addition to the stated learning outcomes for the project?
- What improvements in the course could be made based on the results of the assessment?

Description of the Activity

To illustrate the application, we offer two examples. The first example demonstrates how the framework can be applied to a public relations course. The second example demonstrates how the instrument can be modified for a course outside of the public relations offerings. In this case we apply the framework in a business communication course. Both courses included experiential learning. Although not all of the items from the first example were appropriate for the second application, several of the items were directly applicable.

The first survey instrument was used to collect responses from students enrolled in a research methods class at a Nebraska state college, which was a required course in the PR emphasis. The students learned about gathering and analyzing data and applied the knowledge in a service-learning project. Their assignment was to help advance a dental health project undertaken by Indian Health Service. The students viewed a dental-care training videotape, after which they designed and implemented a survey to measure content effectiveness. They then gathered data, analyzed the responses, organized and conducted a focus group. Following these activities, they wrote a report with recommendations for the client. At the end of the service-learning project, the students were asked to write reflective comments and to respond to a survey on their own learning. The reflective questions asked what the student did for the project, what the student learned about her or himself, and how the course concepts were utilized in the project. The survey instrument was drawn from items listed in Appendix A.

The instructor introduced the content of the Commission's report to the students, pointing out that the criteria had been generated by practitioners and educators for students in Public Relations. The list provided them a good idea of what employers expected in new hires. The students were invited to ask clarification questions. Following the questions and answers, students were given instructions for completing the survey. They rated their ability on each item using a 5-point scale of poor, below average, average, above average, or excellent. They were then asked to rate their learning from the service-learning project on each item using the same scale. The advantage of this method was that it addressed a broad range of learning outcomes in an efficient manner. The results were readily tabulated and analyzed, and then used to inform practice. See Appendix B for a sample survey that could be used in a PR class.

The second example includes responses from students enrolled in a business communication course, which was required for aviation majors at a private university. None of the students majored in communication or public relations. Students were engaged in an experiential learning project with the admissions department. After learning about research and business writing, the students were tasked with coming up with proposals for the department to increase their effectiveness in recruiting females. The students actively gathered information, developed their proposals and then delivered the proposals including videos and other promotional materials in written and oral formats. They interacted with the admissions personnel and received extensive feedback. In this example, we used the survey as a pre-test to gain insights into the students' self perceptions of their skills, and made instructional changes accordingly. A revised version is included in Appendix C.

Implementation of the Activity

We would like to share our experience in using this framework. The first point that needs to be made is that the students may not share a common understanding of the items listed on the survey. When using this or any survey, please take time to establish a shared interpretation with the students about the meaning of each item in order to get valid responses. The second point is that surveys should be relevant to what you want to find out. You may want to select items from each category of knowledge, skills, and personal traits that best fit the content of the course and the nature of the service-learning

project. If relevant items are selected prior to a service-learning project, you can relate the items to the learning outcomes for the project. To ensure our assessment reveals the treatment effect instead of group differences, we suggest using the selected items as a pre-test and post-test repeated-measure on the same student to determine within subject differences.

When we used the survey in the business communication course as a pre-test, we noticed that students rated themselves relatively low in the area of sensitivity in interpersonal communication. This skill area would be required for their service-learning project, and the results from the pre-test suggested that more instruction was warranted for the topic than originally planned. We gained further insight by comparing the mean scores of the students in the business communication course with the students in the PR course. Students in business communication rated their ability relatively low in foreign language fluency, but the mean score was higher than the score reported by the PR students. A closer look at the data indicated that distribution of ratings was bi-modal with some of the students reporting above average foreign language skills. The university was looking to increase the diversity of the student body, and each group had a member with foreign language skills.

While quantitative findings from the surveys are useful on their own, the results can be complemented with qualitative data. We analyzed the reflective comments, which put the findings from the survey in context. The combination of qualitative and quantitative results provided rich information for improving instruction.

Appendices B and C are different forms for illustrating how items listed in Appendix A can be adapted for implementing the proposed framework. They are offered only as suggestions for how you might format a survey to meet your requirements. Appendix B shows the format we used to obtain both self-report measures of abilities and of learning from the service-learning experience. We chose to show a one-page format, which encourages full participation in the survey. Appendix C shows a two-page format, which focuses on abilities and could be used as a pre-test and post-test measure.

Evaluation of the Activity

The goals of assessment were to evaluate learning outcomes and, to inform and improve instruction. We found this framework to be useful in meeting these goals. In order for research to inform practice in different settings, inquiries using a shared frame with the same or similar learning outcomes make it possible to make between-group comparisons. Our framework allows us to view the reflective comments from students in other classes and compare the learning outcomes under different scenarios. In this section we report the results of the survey of the PR class.

We tabulated the survey data and used some of the items to code reflective comments for qualitative analysis. The intellectual skills criteria that we used to code responses included: research methods and analysis, persuasive writing, technical skills, message production, and public speaking. The personal skills that best fit our situation included: having a positive attitude, creativity, having the ability to work in groups, and taking criticism.

The qualitative and quantitative analyses yielded results answering the three questions posted in the Objective section.

Question 1: Did the students learn the content and skills stated in the student learning outcomes for the service-learning project? In our study, the results indicated that students did report learning in the areas related to learning outcomes for the project. The rated their learning as at least 4.0 out of 5 on four items in the knowledge section and 9 items in the skills section.

Question 2: What skills and/or content did the students learn in addition to the student learning outcomes for the project? The answer to this question was found in the responses to the personal traits items in the survey. On 11 out of 12 items, students rated their learning from the service-learning project as at least 4.0 out of 5. Personal traits were not stated in the course objectives, yet these are characteristics valued by the profession. We thought service-learning provided soft skill development. The students' self-report measures using our assessment framework provided evidence that service-learning was effective at helping students learn traits such as being responsible and having a positive attitude. Documenting soft skill development makes this method useful.

Question 3: What improvements in the course could be made based on the results of the assessment? This is a central question for making assessment in the first place – to inform practice. The combination of reflective comments and survey results along with the graded assignments and client feedback gave us information about what worked well and what could be improved in the course. We were surprised to learn about areas that would not have been visible had we not used this assessment framework. The reflective process revealed how the course could be improved based on the data.

Reflections on the Activity

Structuring reflections can help students better process their experiences, and in the same way a structured approach facilitates reflection for faculty. We chose standards from the rubric put forth by QualityMatters.org (2008) to structure our reflections. The standards are part of a rigorous quality assurance process to improve course design in online classes. The Quality Matters project for continuous improvement has received significant recognition. They provide an extensive peer review process for subscribing institutions to certify the quality of online courses and components of those courses. Part of the detailed process is implementation of a well-researched rubric. When the QM process is implemented in full, 40 specific elements are included in the review. These elements cover 8 broad categories. The categories and elements were selected from a comprehensive literature review. For this paper, we received consent from QM to modify the categories and use them as prompts for reflection.

The categories were selected and modified to apply to a face-to-face course. Course design and course delivery elements were considered. The selection was made based on what we were trying to accomplish with use of the framework. The reflective responses here are written from the instructor's perspective. Reflecting on the service-learning experience was beneficial in meeting the third questions posed dealing with what improvements could be made in the course based on the results of the assessment.

1. Course Overview and Introduction: Based on experience with the tools suggested, I have modified the course overview and introduction to make explicit what I hope the students will gain from the course in general and from the assignments including the service-learning project.

- 2. Learning Objectives: Since I teach courses that are standard offerings, I use the master syllabus provided which includes the course objectives set by the department. From using the assessment methods suggested in this paper, I became aware that I had goals for students that went beyond the course objectives, including soft skill development. Now I make the implied goals explicit and incorporate teaching techniques or lessons that will help achieve those goals.
- 3. Assessment and Measurement: I found the survey results useful in providing information about the students and about my instruction. I saw benefits from service-learning before using this assessment, and my positive perceptions of service-learning were enhanced when I saw the results. I used the information to guide areas in which I wanted to improve instruction. Perhaps the biggest change I made was to be more explicit about learning outcomes and why the ones selected were chosen. Prior to using this tool I thought some learning outcomes such as ones related to group skills were apparent. I assumed groups knew what was expected, so I did not state the group skills explicitly prior to introducing the service-learning project. As a result of using this tool I now develop student learning outcomes for the project with the community partner. When we have a shared set of outcomes, I present and discuss a PowerPoint containing the student learning outcomes intended for the project. This technique builds shared expectations between the community partner, the students, and the faculty member. I also post the file online for students to refer to if they have questions.
- 4. Resources and Materials: Sharing an understanding of what is expected also led to making exemplars available. Presenting the learning outcomes for the service-learning project, going through the instructions, and then showing exemplars or examples of deliverables gave students the information they needed to accomplish the task. Showing excellent examples from groups in previous classes has improved the quality of the deliverables students create.
- 5. Learner Engagement: The reflective comments led me to think that service-learning is an effective pedagogy for student engagement. I have added specific instructions about small group processes and I work with the students to organize roles and responsibilities of each group member. By helping them put together their respective responsibilities within a timeline, the team process is facilitated.
- 6. Course Technology: I have learned that students benefit from receiving additional instruction in utilizing certain hardware and software to prepare their deliverables. Going over instructions for the software during class and answering questions has helped to facilitate the production efforts.
- 7. Learner Support: I talk with the class as a whole about their experiences as we progress through the project. An important part of assessment is getting information from all students. After reflection, I see the benefit of meeting separately with each group as we go along, because I receive information about individuals within that group and the group as a whole. This process of incorporating reflections during the project reveals questions or difficulties a group encountered. Those issues can be dealt with as they arise, which is more effective for all parties involved. Students also let me know in their reflections that they learned from the rehearsals we have about a week before the project will be presented to the client.
- 8. Accessibility: I talk with the students about interim goals and they have progress reports and/or progressive assignments due in the days and weeks leading up to a service-

learning assignment. From the reflective comments, I learned that some of the students for a variety of reasons required more time for assignments. The staged assignments address the problems encountered by students who need extra time, but who work in groups with procrastinators.

I found the results from implementation of this framework to be useful in providing a more complete picture of the learning that took place. The information gave a basis for informing and improving instruction. The advantage of this mixed-method assessment approach is that the two types of analysis complement each other and allowed us to make explicit a broad range of learning gains accomplished through servicelearning pedagogy. We hope you find this technique helpful in improving your instruction.

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Knowledge	Personal Traits Responsibility				
Communication and persuasion concepts and strategies					
Communication and Public Relations theories	Flexibility				
Relationships and relationship-building	Professionally oriented self-managers				
Societal trends	Responsive and adaptive without giving up personal identity				
Ethical issues	Intellectually curious				
Legal requirements and issues	Conceptual thinker				
Marketing and finance	Positive attitude				
Public Relations history	Take criticism				
Uses of research and forecasting	Organized self-starters who take initiative				
Multicultural and global issues	Creative while being pragmatic				
The business case for diversity	Demonstrate integrity				
Various world social, political, economic and historical frameworks	Teamwork skills including respect and empathy				
Organizational change and development					
Management concepts and theories					
Skills					
Research methods and analysis	Managing people, programs and resources				
Management of information	Sensitive interpersonal communication				
Mastery of language in written and oral communication	Critical listening skills				
Problem-solving and negotiation	Fluency in a foreign language				
Management of communication	Ethical decision-making				
Strategic planning	Participation in the professional Public Relations community				
Issues management	Message production				
Audience segmentation	Working with current issues				

Informative and persuasive writing Community, consumer and employee

relations and other practice areas

Technological and visual literacy

Environmental monitoring

sensitivity

Public speaking and presentation

Applying cross-cultural and cross-gender

Appendix B Sample Skills Survey for a PR Class

Name:	I rate my abilities in this area as:				Having completed this project, I rate my learning in this area as:					
Knowledge of:	Poor	Below Ave.	Ave.	Above Ave.	Exc.	Poor	Below Ave.	Ave.	Above Ave.	Exc.
Persuasive concepts and			-							
strategies										
Public relations theories										
Relationship-building										
Societal trends										
Ethical issues in research										
Legal requirements in PR										
Marketing strategies										
Public relations history										
Multicultural issues										
Why diversity is relevant in PR										
The social framework of project										
Organizational change										
Skills in:										
Research methods and analysis			-							
Identify and retrieve information										
Writing in this PR context										
Problem-solving										
Manage communication in group										
Strategic planning										
Audience analysis										
Team skills										
Public speaking										
Applying cross-cultural sensitivity										
Critical listening skills										
Personal Traits										
Responsible										
Flexible										
Professionalism										
Managing time and tasks										
Intellectually curious										
Positive attitude										
Taking criticism										
Taking initiative										
Creativity										

Appendix C: Sample Survey of Skills in a Business Communication Course

In this course we cover several aspects of business communication and address the outcomes stated in the syllabus. Experiential learning is an important component of this course. In order to assess the effectiveness of the course, you are asked to evaluate your skills or ability for each of the items listed. The standard to use for comparison is the level of skill/knowledge/ability that a new hire in the field should have. Please do this by circling the number that best represents your knowledge, skills, or ability in that area using this scale.

1=undeveloped 2=below average 3=average 4=above average 5=exceptional						
1. Knowledge of business communication concepts. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
2. Knowledge of communication theories. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
3. Knowledge of persuasive strategies. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
4. Relationship building skills. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
5. Awareness of trends in society. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
6. Knowledge of ethical issues in business communication. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
7. Uses of research in business communication. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
8. Knowledge of marketing strategies. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
9. Awareness of diversity concerns in business. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
10. Awareness of the cultural context. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
11. Knowledge of organizational change models. N/A 1 2 3 4 5						
12. Knowledge of management styles. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
13. Research skills to identify and locate relevant information. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A						
14. Analytical skills. N/A 1 2 3 4 5						

15. Mastery of language in written communication. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
 Mastery of language in spoken communication. N/A 		2	3	4	5
Please use this scale to respond to the items on this page 1=undeveloped 2=below average 3=average 4=above average 5	e. S=ex	сер	tio	nal	
17. Problem-solving skills. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
18. Informative writing skills. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
19. Persuasive writing skills. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
20. Foreign language fluency. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
21. Teamwork skills. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
22. Listening skills. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
23. Public speaking skills. 1 2	3 4	4 5	5 1	N/A	L
24. Acting responsibly. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
25. Acting ethically. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
26. Being flexible. 1 2	3 4	1 5	5 1	V/A	
27. Professionalism. N/A	1	2	3	4	5
28. Intellectually curious. 1 2	3 4	1 5	1	√A	
29. Thinking conceptually. N/A	1	2	3	4	5

30. Creativity. N/A	1 2 3 4 5
31. Positive attitude. N/A	1 2 3 4 5
32. Taking criticism. N/A	1 2 3 4 5
33. Self starter. N/A	1 2 3 4 5
34. Have integrity.	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
35. Treat others respectfully. N/A	1 2 3 4 5
36. Demonstrate empathy. N/A	1 2 3 4 5

Thank you.