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Service learning and engagement in the academic library

Operating out of the box

Defined as a structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation and reflection,[1] Service Learning (SL) is a revolutionary new type of teaching and learning that combines traditional classroom curriculum with experiential learning and community service opportunities. It is designed to provide an enriched learning experience for students, expanding their theoretical learning into practical experiences through meaningful service projects in the local community.

SL strives to teach civic responsibility, as well, and provides opportunities for students to reflect on these experiences as a part of their formal learning.

John S. Riddle's overview of SL and its implications for library bibliographic instruction (BI) provides a strong argument for developing new models of library instruction and information literacy for these unique academic programs. He points to the potential "synergy" for scholars in both service learning and information literacy to recognize a common ground.[2]

Noting parallels between SL and the agendas for information literacy research attempting to show that genuine learning takes place in library instruction classes, Riddle goes on to suggest models to modify traditional library instruction to fit SL needs.[3]

Although they share a common need for more research, information literacy and SL are very different concepts. Before we can design programs of service and methods of assessment, we need to better understand SL as it is practiced in our institutions.

SL in academe today

SL is, perhaps, best described as a new, and very unique, type of collegiate instruction, derived from a very different philosophical and practical base, which requires very different types of support from libraries including unique programs of information literacy.[4]

Incoming college students increasingly have experienced SL in K–12 educational settings. According to a 1999 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, 64 percent of all public schools and 83 percent of all public high schools provided some type of community service for their students. In high schools, 46 percent of the students participated in SL, where the service was linked with the school curriculum.[5] UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute recently found that 80 percent of incoming students reported to be involved in some type of volunteering experience.[6]

Organizations such as Campus Compact (www.compact.org), a national coalition of more than 950 college and university presidents committed to service learning ideals and implementation, reflect the deep penetration of these programs throughout academe.

SL: Dynamic, fluid, and intense

Clearly, SL courses provide opportunities for a much broader role for libraries in the learning process. However, from teaching these classes, it is also clear that they require far

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more time, energy, and support from librarians than do traditional college courses. Having worked with more than 12 SL classes here at the University of Minnesota in the past two years, I have found these courses to be highly rewarding, invigorating, and intense.

SL courses are well-structured and their syllabi provide an excellent roadmap for understanding the basic flow of learning and potential needs for support. Most SL classes begin with some traditional classroom experiences to cover background and theory to provide context for the learning to be experienced, etc. before the SL component begins. The SL itself is followed by some time for reflection and integration at the end of the term, if only for a few sessions, to share experiences and evaluate the learning. Popular reflective options have included: case studies, personal or team journals, major papers, presentations, interviews, and discussions.

However, even these roadmaps can be deceptive. Assumptions about the types of needs the students will have (understanding the specific natures backgrounds, ethnicities, needs of the communities/clients, needs for skills to be employed during the service learning, students background knowledge of the topic, service work, etc.) may prove wrong once the class meets and the backgrounds/ skills of the actual class members are known. Also, the needs of students will vary in terms of their need for individual support, even when students share a common background.

In one case, I was asked to lecture on resources to support the study of the particular ethnic group that was to be the focus for the SL. Once the class met, I realized that more than 90 percent of the enrolled students were from the same ethnic group as the SL clients, requiring a quick change of plans in terms of my scheduled lecture. Students, instead, asked for information and support on areas related to the types of SL work that they would be involved with.

Classroom-based learning tends to be quite predictable (known time and place, known faculty, same students throughout the class). SL brings significant change. The learning tends to be serendipitous and open-ended. The need for research and information support also rises and falls unpredictably. Partner organizations become learning laboratories: their staffs become facilitators/teachers, just as students find they learn from the clients of these agencies, as well.

Seeing librarians in a new light

SL expands and deepens the librarian s role with both faculty and students in effect creating a new type of social contract between the libraries and our users. Instead of creating a one-size-fits-all scenario, SL deepens the learning experience by giving students far more responsibility for their learning, defining their support needs, and seeking and evaluating potential solutions.

Defined as a part of the instructional team for many of these classes, my work at the University of Minnesota has allowed for deeper, more personal, ongoing contact with students, paralleling the in-depth relationships I ve had with faculty and graduate students. Long after the course is over, I often get e-mails asking for assistance with other classes, advice on job hunting, etc. and even requests for help with such nonlibrary issues as problems with registration or getting tickets to special campus events. Students often tell me that they thought about contacting me as soon as they realized they needed help. Students tell me that they know I can help them (since I have in the past), and that they find me approachable and friendly. Making this type of connection with undergraduates is rare in academic libraries.

The world as the classroom

With SL we have a new, and developing, innovation in academe; one for which faculty (still experimenting with the model) are far more open to library support for both their teaching and student learning needs. For classes that I have supported, BI needs have sometimes been divided into two segments: Early on, a background or practical/skills-based session to help students prepare for the specific clients, tasks, or involvements they will be experiencing; and, secondly, a more traditional

research skills session, later in the term, to cover resources and tools needed for them to complete the reflection exercises required for course completion. In many others, since the reflection piece may offer more options than a traditional paper, I am asked to act as a consultant for students, rather than making a second, formal presentation on research methods to the whole class.

The individual nature of learning in the SL model highlights the need for support programs that not only cover the core basics related to the study, but support the individual needs of learners who are taking on more responsibility for their learning. This not only includes the rational needs for learning (database searching, distinguishing scholarly works from popular, proper citation methods, etc.), but the psychological, supportive needs students may encounter as they work in new areas or take on new roles: The need to feel comfortable and supported during trial and error learning; ongoing personal self-assessment of learning; meeting unforeseen needs and answering questions that come up unexpectedly during the learning; and so on. These needs are not apparent in the course planning process, yet they are critical to each student's successful completion of the learning.

What role for the library?

To date, little research in our field has addressed either this dynamic aspect of learning support or the psychological aspects of this type of learning. Scholarly literature, in virtually every discipline (including LIS) reports the efforts, successes, frustrations and needs experienced by faculty and students who take on these projects.[7] Yet, the professional LIS literature shows little discussion or analysis of existing programs and services for these classes. This crucial information is needed to gauge needs, define and delineate potential roles, plan and guide implementation, and to suggest methods of measuring success and improving service.

Michael Keresztesi theorized a deeper integration of library instruction into academic curricula in 1982: The library's function is being transformed from that of a public warehouse of cultural goods to one of a social dynamic institution of communication and knowledge dissemination.[8] This social dynamic aspect is, perhaps, nowhere as apparent as with SL.

Lynn C. Westney found academic contributions few and far between in this area, both in the United States and in the international literature, as well:

> Academic librarians continue to be conspicuous by their absence within the literature of their discipline and the engagement literature. Academic librarians must forge formal partnerships and coalitions with community and national organizations to ensure that they will possess the necessary ammunition to deserve a place at the table and they will indeed be seated above the salt.[9]

Just as information literacy offers academic libraries opportunities for broader and deeper roles in the structures of their organizations, SL and the broader scholarship of engagement require more of libraries and their staffs than traditional expectations.[10] Librarians can, in effect, become partners with the faculty and community agency in the instructional process.[11]

In many ways, academic libraries are already highly engaged organizations, well-suited to the challenges offered by SL: We have well-established, integrated systems of services and collections; decades of experience in providing information support (class-based and individual); and our historic bibliographic/liaison models for faculty interaction and support, which provide a strong network into the departments throughout our organizations.[12] Academic libraries share a strong, historic tradition of solidarity with our local user communities and, through land grant and other social contracts, with the wider world.

Creating citizen scholars

Toni Murdock, president of Antioch University in Seattle, described the potential social impact of SL in an editorial:

This means far more than volunteering to serve in a soup kitchen and presenting a classroom report on that experience. We must devise a community-based curriculum that not only engages students in discovering why this afﬂuent country has so many homeless citizens and soup kitchens, but also provides opportunities for them to work with the community to solve the root causes of poverty. Connecting studies with problem-solving service in the community deepens, complicates and challenges students learning. It turns them into knowledge producers, not just knowledge consumers. They become citizen scholars who renew our democratic society and actively engage in shaping this nation s future.[13]

Librarians often lament the lack of opportunities to deepen their involvement with classes and students beyond the one-shot BI session or brief encounters over the reference desk. SL provides a wonderful opportunity to expand and broaden our roles on campus; however, it also requires time and energy beyond that normally given to student support.

The question for academic libraries, then, is whether we are ready to take on this challenge: To provide the key assets needed to ensure the success of growing SL programs on our campuses and all this implies for services and personnel or face the consequences of noninvolvement. SL may provide us with a unique opportunity to explore future directions and roles for academic libraries in the 21st century.

Notes

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