

From the Classroom to the Community

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Abstract

Many professors readily embrace the idea that involving college students in community service programs can engender a wide range of personal, social, and political benefits. Educational benefits, particularly in terms of the carefully guarded curricula of their own courses, are far less obvious. Even professors who would like to incorporate service-learning in their courses are uncertain about process and procedure, concerned about student response, and fearful that they would have to cut something from their existing syllabus and/or add yet another time-consuming activity to their current workload. To illuminate and encourage fruitful discussion concerning issues such as these, this presentation focuses on my experiments and experiences during the past quarter-century with a single class: PHIL 206 – *Philosophy of Life and Death*.

Course Selection and Benefits

The concept of community service is a natural fit for a course like *Philosophy of Life and Death*. As illustrated by the syllabus (www.oneonta.edu/academics/philos/206-s07.html), readings focus on a series of complex ethical and philosophical issues, concepts of self and society, the meaning of life, *etc.*

I first proposed *Philosophy of Life and Death* as a special topics course in 1979, based in part on my own experiences and a desire to create the type of course I wished I had been able to take as an undergraduate. Student response was overwhelming; I have taught it on an annual basis ever since. While some may take the class as a matter of curiosity or to fulfill a requirement of one sort or another, many bring with them a huge bag of existential uncertainty, philosophical confusion, and unresolved issues. It is, in short, an intensely personal course. As such, it is a course in which educational benefit is substantially enhanced by anything that promotes: (i) cultivation of a broad, sensitive, and informed perspective and (ii) personal reflection.

From the very beginning I have used various writing assignments (*e.g.* a philosophical journal) to encourage personal reflection. Initially I had to depend on reading assignments and class discussion to cultivate that noble but elusive “broad, sensitive, and informed perspective” referenced above. Fortunately, experiences during the past decade provide abundant confirmation that service-learning helps students cultivate and reinforce a perspective of life and death that: (i) transcends the immediacy

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of their own day-to-day concerns and (ii) illuminates larger philosophical issues concerning self-identity, ethical obligation, end-of-life care, *etc.*

Methodology

Over the years, I have experimented with a series of different ways to incorporate service-learning without: (i) adding an unreasonable burden to my own workload, (ii) adding course requirements that students would find burdensome or objectionable, or (iii) substantially reducing the volume or weight of other assignments.

I conducted my first experiment during Spring semester, 1997. Rather than add a requirement to the course as such, I created a parallel special topics course (*The Communal Self*): 1 s.h. with enrollment restricted to those who previously had taken or were concurrently taking *Philosophy of Life and Death*. Requirements included a 30-hour service-learning project that had to be approved by me as well as the Center for Social Responsibility and Community, a weekly journal, individual meetings with me throughout the semester, a midterm report, and a final report. Additionally, students met as a class on a weekly basis to discuss assigned readings. For some, it was simply too much work: an initial enrollment of 14 dropped to 10. For those who stayed, however, it proved to be a truly unique experience. Without exception, they rated the course as one of the most worthwhile they had ever taken.

Naturally, I knew that I would never be able to add the full requirements of that special topics course to *Philosophy of Life and Death* without violating the workload and academic content desiderata enumerated above. So I began by providing students with a simple option: those who wished could substitute a 15-hour service-learning project for the weekly philosophical journal. Almost immediately, some students asked if they could earn extra credit by doing both. I saw no reason to deny such a request and thus was born an evolving set of parameters designed to enhance the experience as well as preserve student choice.

The syllabus posted with this report represents an incarnation that incorporates a fairly significant measure of student choice and extra credit opportunity. For Spring 2007, I will turn the wheel once again: this time, requiring all students in the class to complete a 20-hour service-learning project that has to be approved by me as well as the Center for Social Responsibility and Community. Students will be given the option of either: (i) keeping a weekly journal or (ii) submitting midterm and final reports.

Community Impact

As a professor, my primary motivation throughout the project has focused on ways to maximize educational benefits for our students. No matter how much value I may personally assign to community service, it has no place in my classroom unless it enhances student learning in ways that are both substantial and relevant. That said, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the nearly incalculable impact that students from *Philosophy of Life and Death* have had on the lives of others. During the past decade, they have devoted thousands of hours of unpaid volunteer service to dozens of organizations throughout our community. Because they have found the experience of helping others to be both satisfying and rewarding, many have continued to volunteer long after the class was over, cultivating what may well be life-long habits that ripple out

in untold directions. Some of the many organizations and activities for which they have volunteered are listed below:

- A.O. Fox Hospital
- Better Beginnings [Child Care]
- Bugbee School [Shoveling, teacher's assistant]
- Chase Memorial Nursing Home (New Berlin)
- Community Connections
- Fox Nursing Home
- Greater Plains Elementary [Rebuilding playground equipment]
- Habitat for Humanity [House painting]
- Hampshire House Adult Home
- Homestead Retirement Home
- Into the Streets [Community improvement]
- The Lord's Table at St. James
- March of Dimes
- The Meadows (Cooperstown)
- Oneonta YMCA
- Robynwood Adult Home
- Salvation Army [Stock organizer]
- Ulster County Office of Emergency Management [Flood-related services]

Resources

Throughout the evolution of my project, our Center for Social Responsibility and Community (www.oneonta.edu/academics/csre) has been a steady and indispensable resource. The current director, Linda Drake, has been especially supportive. Without the center's assistance to match volunteers with appropriate organizations, I would have had far less success – and far more frustration. When I created my special topics service-learning course, Marilyn Nouri provided encouragement and assistance via the Student-Assisted Independent Living (SAIL) program (sponsored by the Foundation for Long-Term Care, Inc.).

In recent years, various organizations have assembled a wide range of materials designed to provide suggestions and answers to faculty who wish to test the waters of service-learning in their own courses. My syllabus has been solicited for a “best practices” website currently under development by Bentley College (www.bentley.edu/service-learning). Another site with a good selection of several hundred syllabi in over fifty different categories is hosted by Brown University (www.compact.org/syllabi). Resource-rich websites with a wealth of materials and reports are sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service (www.learnandserve.org) and the National Youth Leadership Council (www.nslexchange.org). Finally, what perplexed novice could pass up a website titled “The Big Dummy's Guide to Service-Learning” (www.fiu.edu/~time4chg/Library/bigdummy.html)?

A Few Statistics

The Corporation for National and Community Service recently released a report titled *College Students Helping America* (available online at www.learnandserve.org and www.nationalservice.gov). Key findings include the following:

- The number of college students who volunteer has increased significantly in the past few years. In the three year period between 2002 and 2005, the number increased by 20% (from 2.7 million in 2002 to 3.3 million in 2005).
- In 2005, approximately 30.2% of college students performed community service. For comparison, the rate for adults in 2005 was 28.8%. The rate for college students in 2001 (four years earlier) was 27.1%.
- Among college students, the most popular volunteer activities are tutoring (26.6%) and mentoring (23.8%).
- Students who work part time are more likely to volunteer than those who do not. Volunteer rates are highest among students who work 1-10 hours (46.4%) and 11-15 hours (35%) a week. Students who are not employed volunteer at a considerably lower rate (29.8%).
- Volunteer rates in New York lag considerably behind the rest of the country, for adults as well as college students. In a three-year period from 2003 to 2005, the national average for college students was 30.5%. Rates by state ranged from 21.4% (Georgia) to 62.9% (Utah). New York ranked 50th (one spot ahead of Georgia) with 23.4%.
- During the same period (2003 to 2005), the national average for adults ranged from 18.8% (Nevada) to 48% (Utah). Once again, New York ranked 50th (one spot ahead of Nevada) with 21.3%.

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