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Teaching Social Justice: Intergenerational Service Learning in a Digital Media Course

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ABSTRACT

Digital media play an increasingly dominant role in reinforcing and challenging power inequality in social and institutional relationships. This paper describes how a service-learning component engaged students in community-based interactions that not only deepened their understanding of course content but also increased their commitment to diversity, community issues, and personal development. A close look at three case studies shows that integrating service learning into a first year seminar on digital media and social justice had positive outcomes for students when intentionally paired with community partners offering course-related projects.

Keywords: digital literacy, service learning, intergenerational, social justice

Digital media play an increasingly dominant role in reinforcing and challenging power inequality in social and institutional relationships. Access to online information has become critical to social inclusion, raising some of the following questions. Does the new socially connected world, brought about by our uses of the Internet and participatory media, contribute to social, political, and economic justice? While technology may bring greater safety, convenience, and economic opportunity, may it also be used to reinforce inequality, discrimination, and violation of privacy? In this emergent digital context, have prevailing relations of power and authority continued to advantage historically privileged groups?

We posed these questions to John Carroll University undergraduate students in the *Digital Media and Social Justice* sections of the First Year Seminar. A primary course objective is to enable students to articulate the relationship between digital media and social justice. In this paper, by examining several case studies, we explore the effectiveness of different approaches to integrating service learning with a digital media final project. We first review a pilot version of the course that was not effective at achieving learning outcomes. We then discuss changes to the service learning experience to improve student understanding of

the complex relationship between the digital divide, digital literacy, and social justice.

Pilot: Digital Media and Social Justice FYS

The First Year Seminar (FYS) is a discussion-based course designed to introduce freshman to academic inquiry and help them learn to read critically, write persuasively, and communicate ideas clearly. To encourage class discussion, each FYS class section has approximately 20 students. In 2011, 35 sections of FYS were designed around a common theme of social justice, with five sections intentionally designed to focus on the theme of *Digital Media and Social Justice*.

The *Digital Media and Social Justice* sections of FYS examine evolving forms of technology in relation to equity and social justice. The course learning outcomes enable students to:

1. Utilize a suite of Web 2.0 technologies from which digital media can be produced and distributed;
2. Explore critically, globally, and with empathy relationships between digital media and social justice;
3. Participate in a service learning/social action project involving digital media informed by issues of social justice.

Five faculty who would teach the Digital Media and Social Justice sections of FYS created a learning community. The faculty resided in different departments including Education and Allied Studies, Political Science, Mathematics and Computer Science, and Physics. Each faculty member was responsible for preparing and sharing course material for at least one of the major course topics. The learning community met weekly to discuss and refine the course material throughout the semester.

The learning outcomes were assessed through class discussion of required course readings, digital media assignments, weekly service learning experiences, a service project, and a final project. This are briefly reviewed below.

Course Readings

Initial course readings introduced fundamental concepts of social justice (LeGuin 1975; Miller 1999; Weisel 1999). After an introduction to social justice, students explored the topics of electronic waste, technology and social inclusion, civil disobedience and online activism, and surveillance and privacy.

Of particular relevance to this article is the course topic involving technology and social inclusion. The readings focused on an exploration of the concept of the “digital divide,” a term historically used to describe the inequalities in physical access to technology based on social identifiers such as race, gender, age, physical handicap, and socioeconomic class. Through a variety of course readings, students explored concepts of inclusion and empowerment that go beyond the issue of physical access to computers (boyd 2008; Carvin 2000, Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison & Weigel 2009; Smith 2016; Smith, Schlozman, Verba & Brady 2009; Warschauer 2003). The readings were designed

to analyze the technologies, systems, and structures of oppression and marginalization that impede digital literacy.

Digital Media Assignments

FYS is not intended to be a digital literacy course. Rather, it is designed to enable students to explore the relationship between digital media and social justice. To this end, several assignments were designed to engage students to reflect on their assumptions of other's ability and opportunity to acquire digital literacy skills, use social media, and fully participate in society. Assignments include exercises such as contributing to Wikipedia, developing web sites using Google Sites and PBWorks, and exploring collective intelligence in decentralized collaboration through Twitter and Facebook.

Weekly Service Learning Experiences

Beyond the classroom, the students were required to engage in a 10-week service learning experience with a community organization. John Carroll University's Center for Service and Social Action (CSSA) organized the weekly service, which took place at some of the 75 community partner sites that partner with CSSA. The students were required to maintain individual blogs to provide weekly reflection about their service experience and link their experience to the course readings.

Digital Media Service Project

Students could either participate in a workshop to teach digital literacy skills to refugees supported by US Together, a refugee resettlement agency, or they could participate in a food/toy/coat drive to benefit transitional housing in the Cleveland area, using traditional means (paper flyers, word of mouth) as well as social media to advertise the drive.

Digital Storytelling Final Project

The objective of the final project was for FYS students to define and demonstrate an integrative personal philosophy of social justice and digital media. Informed by their own lived experiences, beliefs, and new understandings about social justice and digital media, students were required to produce a self-reflective digital story using online multimedia applications to provide a first-person narrative answering the following questions:

- Does the socially connected world, brought about by our uses of the Internet and participatory media, contribute to social, political, and economic justice?
- What do you really believe; what does it mean for you to live in a complex technological society; what are your responsibilities?
- How do you define a personal philosophy of digital media and social justice?

Course Assessment

For their final projects, the students primarily developed websites on some topic of interest to them that they perceived as an issue of justice rather than social justice (e.g. cyber bullying, animal cruelty, texting while driving, cyber gangs). Furthermore, their personal reflections in the weekly blogs and in the final reflective paper failed to make meaningful connections among the course readings, assignments, service experience, and final project. While the students were able to summarize material from the course readings, they could neither articulate how course materials were relevant to their own lives and community, nor explain the relationships between digital media, digital literacy, and social justice.

Course Resdesign with Service Learning Best Practices

Following the pilot semester of this course, the faculty learning community worked with the CSSA to redesign the service learning experience and final project. The group identified several shortcomings in the course that hindered students' ability to achieve learning outcomes. First, in the pilot, students were free to choose among any of the 75 community partner sites for their 10-week service commitment. As a result, most of the service learning did not clearly relate to course topics, which made it difficult for students to make connections between the course content and the service experience. Choosing service opportunities that clearly reinforce the course content is an essential component of successful programs.

Second, students in the pilot did not demonstrate that they had established meaningful working relationships with workers and community members at the partner sites. Students need to engage with the community members throughout the course of the semester to develop relationships that can truly influence their experience. Failure to do so risks students leaving with only a snapshot image of the people and issues, rather than a more complex, nuanced understanding that comes from engaging with them over time.

Third, the community partners themselves were not involved in any way in the design of the course curriculum or final project. As Gehlert, Graf, and Rose (2014) pointed, it is imperative to engage community partners in the design of the service experience to ensure their needs are met, as well as ensuring their capability to meet students' learning needs.

In the second iteration of the course, a smaller set of community partner sites were carefully chosen to ensure that the service learning experience would relate more closely to the course material. Prior to the start of the semester, the CSSA staff contacted numerous community partners to identify those with interest in working as a team with FYS students who would develop a digital media artifact and/or design a digital literacy workshop that would be of direct value for the community partners. Seven community partner sites were eventually selected, with each community partner assigned a faculty member who would serve as a liaison. Each project involved a team of approximately 3-6 students, with multiple teams working on different projects per community partner.

Ultimately, the role of faculty liaison evolved into project manager. The faculty, students and community partners worked together to develop a proposal that detailed the purpose, required resources, individual responsibilities, and timeline of each digital media course project. This restructuring of the intentional role of service learning in relation to the course project required increased engagement between faculty, students, and the community partners in order to ensure that the community partners were clear beneficiaries of the students' work and true partners in the realization of the course learning outcomes. A deeper understanding of service learning was important to our work together.

Service Learning Best Practices

Service learning is a pedagogical tool that provides students another, richer text for the course: engagement with the community that deepens their learning (Kuh 2008). By taking knowledge from course material into the community to work with people whose lives are different from their own, we challenged students to think more deeply about their classroom learning. For many students, the off-campus experience offers both significant opportunities and challenges for learning from community members and organizations. Yorio and Ye's (2001) meta-analytic review of 57 published articles revealed that students who completed service-learning courses had significant gains in cognitive development and personal insight and increases in their understanding of diversity, culture, ethical issues, and community needs and issues.

Furthermore, students engaged in service-learning experiences can benefit from increased understanding of the course content (Applegate & Morreale 1999; Jameson, Clayton & Bringle 2008; Reising, Allen, & Hall 2006; Souza 1999). Other enefits include increased recognition of the explicit connection between theory and practice (Soukup 1999); increased salience of and sensitivity to diversity issues (Astin & Sax 1998; Boyle-Baise 2002; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan 1996; Vogelsgang & Astin 2000); increased commitment to the community, (Cohen & Kinsey, 1993 Reising, Allen and Hall 2006) and the development of self-efficacy (Cone 2009; Reeb, Folger, Langsner, Ryan, & Crouse 2010; Williams, King, & Koob 2002). Service learning, then, engages students in deeper exploration of course content, inward exploration of the relationship of self-to-community, and outward exploration of local and global issues.

Redesigned Case Studies

To illustrate the differences in student engagement and learning that were apparent in the redesigned version of the course, we highlight students' experiences at three of the seven community partners during Fall, 2012. These include student work at Eliza Bryant Village, Fatima Family Center, and Open Doors.

Eliza Bryant Village is the oldest African-American long-term care facility for senior citizens in Cleveland. Intergenerational service learning experiences serve multiple purposes. First, they help students meet the needs of

older adults who often become isolated, experience a decreased quality of life, and lack social support (Cummings, Williams, & Ellis 2004). Second, reducing students' misperceptions and stereotypes about aging is a desirable outcome (Hegeman, Horowitz, Tepper, Pillemer, & Schultz 2003). Eliza Bryant Village offered FYS students the opportunity to work with a diverse population, challenging not only their assumptions about aging but also about race and socioeconomic factors. Tam found students' not only increased their curricular outcomes through the service-learning but students reported stronger understanding of the older generation, better appreciation of the seniors' life experiences, and enjoyment of interacting with the seniors (Tam 2013). Service-learning engages students in the community by supporting interaction with people who experience varying levels of digital literacy. Through sharing their knowledge and skills in the intergenerational relationships they develop with the seniors, the students apply the course concepts in deeply different ways than if they are limited to a classroom experience.

Eliza Bryant Village has a senior independent living facility, which hosts a computer lab for residents. The students learned that the seniors rarely used the lab due to lack of computer experience. FYS students developed and taught workshops covering basic computer skills such as typing, Internet searching, and emailing. Initially, the students planned to teach the residents how to use Skype and Facebook to allow residents to connect with family members. It did not take very long, however, for the students to find themselves experiencing a concrete example of the digital divide. The residents lacked fundamental computer skills, skills necessary to use Skype and Facebook. In line with Tam's results, the FYS students described struggling to find ways to teach skills, such as moving a mouse or typing an email address, that were for students second nature. Student knew these concepts at such an unconscious level that it was difficult to teach them to the residents. The students quickly realized that patience and empathy, rather than knowledge, were the most critical skills for teaching basic digital literacy to the residents.

There were physical and health obstacles for the residents as well, including lack of dexterity in using a mouse and keyboard and problems reading small print on the keyboard and monitor. The FYS students, however, were creative in finding a way to overcome these obstacles, obtaining funds from the university to purchase new keyboards that contained larger keys.

In their course reflections, the students described their course project as challenging, frustrating, time consuming, and yet also valuable both for themselves and the residents, who were helped in connecting with their families through email. Their reflections described an understanding of the problems and challenges in digital literacy, particularly for the elderly. Some of the students commented:

“Social justice is the idea that everyone has equal opportunity in society, even for something as minuscule as the ability to work a computer.”

“The people I am serving have the full right to be able to access the power of a computer whenever they want, and it is my responsibility to give them the power to do so.”

Realizing that there was still a lot of work to do to meet the needs of the residents at Eliza Bryant Village, several students committed to continuing with the workshops after the semester was over.

The **Fatima Family Center** in Cleveland provides many services and programs, including an early learning center, after school tutoring program, Boys and Girls club, GED prep class, computer lab, and senior program. FYS students' weekly placement at Fatima Family Center involved assisting children with homework in the after-school program. The Fatima Family Center director suggested three projects that related to the course topic that FYS students could develop. They were (1) a training workshop to teach staff how to use a set of newly-purchase NOOK e-readers, (2) a training workshop to teach staff how to use Facebook and Twitter in order to publicize volunteer opportunities, and (3) a marketing video highlighting programs, services, and volunteer opportunities provided by the center.

The FYS students were responsible for developing and teaching the training workshops experienced similar obstacles as those at Eliza Bryant Village. While there were many computers at the Fatima Center, its staff had little prior experience with technology and thus struggled to learn how to use the e-readers, Facebook, and Twitter. Thus, the experience of training the staff exposed FYS students to individuals struggling with digital literacy. In their final course reflections, students clearly related their project experience with the course topics of digital literacy and social inclusion:

“It is hard to teach someone who has no idea how to even sign into Facebook, all of the different aspects.”

“It is almost a second nature to me, and the people my age, so we would accidentally leave points out that the staff needed to know.”

“I was honestly surprised that members of the staff were having problems with the NOOKS that I simply didn't see as problems. I mean even just accessing a search engine for some was a whole new experience.”

“Hopefully, their Facebook page and Twitter will help the Fatima Center get the word out about what they do, and maybe even help financially through donations.”

Open Doors is an after-school tutoring organization that serves schools throughout the Cleveland metropolitan area. Open Doors tutors work with children to develop effective learning, math, and reading skills. Following the formal tutoring, children engage in fun activities such as games or outdoor sports.

For their course project, the FYS students chose to setup Instagram and Tumblr accounts for children at one of the schools in order to allow parents to see and hear what their children were doing while they were in the after school program.

The FYS students found it relatively easy to educate the children on how to post to their individual Tumblr blogs and the shared Instagram account. The Open Doors coordinator was also digitally literate and learned the material rapidly. The primary obstacle, however, was simply obtaining physical access to computers and tablets, which were in short supply and often unavailable for the children. Importantly, the FYS students observed that this lack of physical access affected the ability of the children to do their homework after school. In their final course reflections, the FYS students were also able to relate their project experience with the course topics of the digital divide. Participants noted:

“A couple of students had social studies vocabulary, in which their social studies book is required, but they were not allowed to take the books out of the classroom, nor could they use the computers in the library.”

“The students asked us if they could use our phones to look up the vocabulary, so we let them, but looking up history words on Wikipedia compared to out of the social studies textbook does not do much justice for them.”

“The lack of resources these students have really affects their studies.”

Discussion

In the first iteration of the course, we learned that FYS students struggled to integrate their service-learning experiences with the learning objectives of the course. This outcome was not a result of the students' efforts, but rather reflective of a need to work more closely with carefully selected community partners to develop course projects that would meet the actual needs of the community partners and those they serve. Indeed, adding the requirement that the digital media project serve the needs of the community partner helped address this shortcoming; students taking the course in 2012 demonstrated a clearer understanding of the relationship between digital literacy and an individual's opportunity to fully participate in society, and the subsequent relation to social justice. Implementing these projects required readjustment, flexibility, and openness from the FYS students, community partners, and faculty. It was this fact, specifically, that resulted in the most salient student learning. The projects led them to acknowledge their own positions of privilege and to identify creative ways to meet the emergent needs at the community partner sites. While the FYS students in the course pilot worked in service *to* others, the FYS students the following year positioned themselves to be in service *with* others. This paradigmatic shift represented the realization of an essential aspect of successful service learning experiences and ultimately fostered deep learning about course material, self, and community.

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