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Summer 2011

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Librarians as Partners in
Service-Learning Courses (Part II)

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In Part I, I described two case studies during which I collaborated with service-learning instructors. Here, I will explore how librarian-faculty collaborations for service-learning courses are similar to or different from librarian-faculty collaborations in courses without service-learning and offer advice for librarians who may have the opportunity to support or become a partner in service-learning courses.

Riddle (2003) noted that librarians provide similar information services in service-learning courses as they do in any other course. For instance, both service-learning and non-service-learning students benefit from practicing search strategies including truncation, Boolean operators and keyword generation and information literacy competencies such as evaluating information and using information ethically. Similarly, the librarian's function of creating awareness of library subscriptions and services is equally important in either setting. Finally, as is the case for "typical" library instruction, the level of the librarian's involvement in service-learning courses varies, depending on the research topic and students' skill levels. For example, in case study one (ENG 102), students needed multiple instruction sessions to tackle a question that has not been answered in the literature (the need for a campus food pantry at Wright State University); whereas in case study two (UVC 101), students successfully accessed scholarly literature that addressed the link between comic books and literacy in one instruction session.

While pointing out the similarities, Riddle also recognized that the librarian's role may be different in service-learning courses in that there is a social context for the information problem and the pedagogy may influence the students' learning behaviors (2003). If you relate this idea to case study one, for instance, students may be more likely to experience significant learning as they apply their research and writing skills to solving problems for their peers through the service-learning pedagogy than they would when writing a traditional research paper primarily using source material.

Another key difference is that information needs in service learning classes are often determined by a third party in the collaboration - the community partner. Because the students are conducting research for a broader audience, the community, they may need local data or statistics about very specific populations. As such, I have discovered that the librarian's involvement in service-learning courses can be more intense in terms of time commitment, the amount and variety of sources used and knowledge of the subject. Service-learning students may run into obstacles because some local data may be confidential, if it is collected at all. A librarian may need a high-degree of knowledge about the research topic in order to help the student negotiate sources that **are** available to fit their needs most appropriately. Solving these community-based information problems may also involve more back and forth between librarian, faculty member and community partner.

This wide variety of sources can include statistics from government agencies, local archives, primary sources (e.g., client interviews) and the like. Students in the ENG 102 course, for instance, conducted informal original research about the need for a campus food pantry. The students asked their peers via an informal poll if they had ever skipped a meal to pay other expenses. More than 1,000 students answered the poll and about half indicated that they had experienced food insecurity while enrolled at WSU. Another student interviewed one of her peers on camera to capture her thoughts about the need for a student food pantry and shared the video at the end-of-the-quarter presentations to campus stakeholders. Other examples include some service-learning students who needed to find court cases to understand the legislation surrounding certain social issues faced by the community partner and its clients, while others were required to find news articles in a foreign language about social justice issues in particular countries.

Not only is finding this unique information a challenge, but also students may need to analyze and interpret their findings differently than they would when writing a traditional research paper. Service-learning students must think critically to discover how the information they find might solve a community problem. This task often becomes more complicated by the fact that the students may have been largely unaware that such a problem existed prior to the service-learning experience. Or, if students are aware of the problem, they are often surprised by the magnitude of the problem. In such cases, a one-shot instruction section may not adequately meet the needs of the students, faculty or community partners and an increase in the number of instruction sessions may be necessary.

Advice for Librarians

Based on the two case studies presented in the first part of this article and my own service-learning experiences, I offer the following advice for librarians who have the opportunity to support or partner with service-learning courses.

Ask the Experts

Seek support from your institution's civic engagement or service-learning office. You may not be aware of them, but search around and it is likely that they exist. They can help you understand the unique nature of service-learning courses and community partner needs. Additionally, they can give you suggestions about how to make the partnership mutually beneficial for each stakeholder: faculty, student, and community partner. They can also offer assistance with creating appropriate service-learning assignments and reflection activities. Of course, if your faculty-partner is a service-learning veteran, he or she may not need that support, but you should still approach the experts. At the very least, you have made another connection on campus.

If your institution does not have a dedicated office for civic engagement or service-learning, you could approach faculty members who are service-learning veterans and explore the service-learning literature. Many useful readings are included in the reference list at the end of part I of this article.

Communicate Directly with the Community Partner

In situations similar to the first case study, librarians may be approached by faculty who teach an existing service-learning course, and therefore have already established a relationship with a community partner. In such a case, librarians may have less direct interaction with the community partner. Still, if at all possible, meet in person with the agency's staff members to negotiate their information needs. If it is not possible to meet in person, perhaps some clarification could be made via email or phone. However it is made, this direct contact is important because community partner staff members may have unrealistic expectations about the nature of information available to your students because partners do not typically have a great deal of knowledge about databases and resources available at academic libraries. Or, as discussed earlier, they may need to find hard to acquire statistics about local underserved populations. You will be able to negotiate their information needs with them best if you have direct communication with them just as you would during any reference interview exchange.

Also, it is important that the students' service to the agency fits the learning objectives of the course and the community partner's needs. Without clarification of the course learning objectives from the librarian or the faculty member, the community partners may make incorrect assumptions about what students can produce for them. For example, in an information literacy course, the objectives might be for students to find, select and evaluate information; therefore, it is more appropriate for students to *find* articles that describe successful rubrics than it is for them to *create* a rubric themselves. It is very important to clarify each party's expectations and abilities from the beginning to ensure a mutually beneficial experience.

Be Prepared for Unique Information Needs

Service-learning courses are not the only courses in which students will have unique information needs. Students are also faced with distinct research questions in upper-division courses, capstone projects and so on. But in a typical composition course, students need scholarly articles, statistics and the like to support their arguments. As discussed earlier, service learning courses have atypical needs that tend to stand out – anyone, let alone freshman English students, would be extremely challenged to find scholarly articles that answer the ENG 102 community partner's question: "Why does Wright State need a food pantry?" Although campus food pantries are becoming more and more popular, there had not been much mention at all of them in the scholarly literature.

As with any service-learning project, it is important for faculty or instructors to negotiate the academic assignments such that they are appropriate for students' abilities and cover important course content while simultaneously meeting the needs of the community partner. Asking the community partner "what are your information needs" may not result in a research question that is appropriate for your students. One suggestion is to ask the agency partner questions such as: "What big projects are on the horizon?" or "What changes do you foresee in the next year?" Once you have answers to these questions, formulate some potential research questions and do some preliminary searching yourself to understand what information is available then offer the partner a few viable options for research questions. Another option is to ask the community partner for at least three potential research topics so that you can negotiate one of those information needs into a suitable research question.

Manage your Time

As also mentioned earlier, due to elevated research requirements, service-learning classes typically require

more work outside of the classroom and the librarian should properly prepare. For example, when I was asked to have a required meeting with each ENG 102 student individually to provide guidance specific to his or her topic for their portfolios, I assented to this request as I thought (accurately, it turns out) it was necessary for successful completion of their project. However, I made sure to ask for help from my colleagues ahead of time. Many students procrastinated, so I was bombarded with appointment requests in the last weeks of the quarter. My colleagues helped cover some appointments so it was more likely that students could get their first choice for a meeting time (including evenings or weekends) and also help prevent me from becoming overwhelmed.

Discuss the Benefits of Researching in the Service-Learning Setting

Faculty members at WSU often lament that student reflections written throughout the service-learning experience can be shallow in terms of social issues if you are not careful (C. Sayer, personal communication, June 27, 2011). If you approach a faculty member about integrating a librarian into the service-learning experience, you may suggest that research could help students gain a better understanding of the social issues. According to Riddle (2003), researching the social context of the issues the community partner strives to solve before entering the service-learning experience may help alleviate students' initial shock. Better preparation may result in stronger connections to the community partners and the issues they face, which may also lead to improved reflection assignments (C. Sayer, personal communication, June 27, 2011). Judging from the lack of evidence in the literature about the connections between IL and service-learning, some faculty members probably have not thought about how research can benefit students entering service-learning experiences. Or, the ones who have thought about incorporating research may have trouble fitting this extra component into their syllabus. The possibility of more meaningful reflection assignments may entice faculty to make time for a research component in the service-learning experience.

Be Flexible

Nonprofit agency staff members are often stretched thin, and they operate with uncertain budgets and resources. As such, they most likely have even less time to devote to a partnership than a faculty member might. Program and budget cuts, agency turnover and even weather can affect students' service experiences. For example, one winter, many students in our information literacy course were not able to complete their on-site service with the community partner because the after- school programs were cancelled due to inclement weather. My co-teacher and I were prepared to offer an alternate service project, during which students advertised and recruited runners and walkers for the agency's annual 5K fundraiser. Although students were frustrated by the changes, dealing with these uncertainties prepared them for the uncertainties they will inevitably experience in the workplace. For that very reason, you and the faculty member both should encourage the students to be flexible, as well.

Conclusion

Service-learning courses and projects provide opportunities for meaningful, high-impact experiences. The scenarios described in this article are just two possibilities of the ways in which librarians can become partners for service-learning courses. Whether you are approached by a faculty member or you seek out a service-learning experience yourself, the above advice will help create a mutually beneficial experience for each stakeholder.

References

Riddle, J. S. (2003). Where's the library in service learning?: Models for engaged library instruction. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 29*(2), 71-81.