

ABSTRACT

As the way that the world is evolving, higher education is too. This includes online service-learning which in the past has been predominantly delivered in formats off-line or hybrid. This article describes some best practices to make the online service-learning experience beneficial for all who are involved and accessible to more students, including students that previously did not have access to service-learning courses due to the nature of the delivery and/or format of the course. Best practices to overcome some of the limitations that online courses present include high levels of instructor/facilitator involvement, creative collaborations, and communication, and using different varieties of course material delivery methods. Although teaching online takes time, training, and practice, it is an investment to larger gains in student access and to keep up with trends and demands in the real world.

Best Practices of Online Teaching in Service-Learning

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Introduction

As people of the world evolve into a more global society, increasingly diverse time schedules and modes of communication, which is particularly applicable to higher education, become necessary (Faulconer, 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Resch & Schritteser, 2023). By moving education online, the panorama of students available to participate in higher education exponentially widens. Online education means that students from a variety of experience levels, and various stages of life can learn from one another and benefit from more diverse perspectives than found in a traditional classroom setting (Resch & Schritteser, 2023; Waldner et al., 2012). In addition, potential learners that are different abled who may not have access to physical travel or can afford to be in specific locations, particularly rural populations, may only be an Internet connection away from participating in this educational exchange (Hamilton, 2023; Waldner et al., 2012). Potential learners due to work or childcare constraints would otherwise not be able to participate in expanded learning experiences. The online educational experience can go beyond typical online lecture format courses and include service-learning courses (Cress et al., 2023), Service-learning combines the experience of applied learning with structured instruction, guided by a purpose beyond learning itself, which is better for the community and the student (Faulconer, 2021). Guided firsthand experience that may include but is not limited to presentations, consultations, needs assessments, grant writing, action plans, website content development and online service delivery (Cress et al., 2023; Guthrie

& McCracken, 2010). Service-learning also places a strong focus on problem solving, creativity, and collaboration. Extreme service-learning is when the delivery of the service-learning course and the application of service-learning are both done in an asynchronous online format (Faulconer, 2021). The focus of this paper is on the best practices in extreme service-learning.

Benefits

There are many benefits to online service-learning. Online service-learning adds new dimension to the growing needs of online courses. With 8.5 million students currently online and with a five-year growth predicted from 2020 to 2025 of 200%, higher education will have to make changes to keep up with demand (Hamilton, 2023; Peck Consulting, 2023). Extreme service-learning, also known as Type IV online instruction, has the potential for exponential learning that creates shift perspectives, increases skills and knowledge beyond course materials that may or may not be utilized or applied by the student post-graduation. (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023; Resch & Schritteser, 2023; Waldner et al., 2012). Extreme service-learning has service components that are both delivered online designed to cultivate skills including leadership, collaboration, problem-solving and communication, and to prepare students for careers which may be personally rewarding in the process (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023; Waldner et al., 2012). The relationship exists between the community and the student in an environment that is monitored by a facilitator/instructor which ensures quality and meaningful learning exchanges (Waldner et al., 2012). An essential component of service-learning is self-reflection (Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Resch & Schritteser, 2023) which creates both a deeper understanding of the bigger picture and to expand its meaning. Service-learning requires higher skills which are shared with others for future evaluation of the learning process and experience.

Limitations

Distance learning participation is different from seeing or experiencing the organization or agency in person (Paudel, 2021; Walder et al, 2012). Communication online through message boards and video chat may be less effective. One-way communication can be harder to understand and more likely to create miscommunications. These one-way types of communication in higher education require more details and explanations in order to reach learners at different levels of understanding (Faudi, 2022). Students should have opportunities to discuss the material and ask questions through message boards and direct communication with the instructor/facilitator such as through email or video conferencing. Internet connections must be available and dependable on both ends along with technical support available through the institution. Students, instructors/facilitators, and the community agency will all have to adapt to networking in technological ways (Singh et al., 2022). Upgrading skills may take training and time to implement. However, these skills are more in line with communication that is occurring in today's world and the problem-solving techniques learned through service-learning can transfer to other environments and settings (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023; Waldner et al., 2012).

Research indicates that there are also some concerns with online learning regarding motivation of students, time management, and delay of feedback which have been identified as potential limitations, (Coman et al., 2020; Paudel, 2021). However, these limitations can be addressed by having an instructor that is present and available through responses to students and timely feedback on assignments which also fosters a sense of belongingness (Martin et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Instructors/facilitators will require plenty of opportunity for students to participate and to be engaged with each other, the material, the service-learning agency, and the instructor/facilitator themselves (Brown et al., 2022).

Best Practices

Accessibility means that different learners and learners at various levels have access to resources such as screen readers, alternative text for images, and a variety of communication styles, such as text, video, and voice (Kim & Fienup, 2022). Materials that are presented within the course need to be in multiple formats to reach these different types of learners in order to promote understanding and measure skills development. In addition, service-learning requires not only learning of course material but also the ability to apply it through demonstration of skills and reflection (Resch & Schrittester, 2023).

Course activities need to be geared toward the needs demonstrated by the stakeholders and monitored both by the community agency and by the instructor/facilitator (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016). This collaboration requires a strong relationship and huge amount of communication between the stakeholders and the instructor, and the stakeholders and the learners (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016). Research indicates that the amount of instructor involvement makes a big difference to the quality of the involvement of the students and with the greater presence or interaction by the instructor (Kennette & Redd, 2015; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022). The service-learning collaboration should also include students and organizations that were unable to participate due to time, location, or other limitations. Higher learning needs to be engaging and interactive by exploring resources, having discussions, creating materials such as deliverables to clients, or grant writing where the student is involved in the process. (Arcambault et al., 2022; Waldner et al., 2012) The service-learning collaboration helps the students feel like they are contributing and creates an environment of belongingness (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016). Also, there needs to be strategic continuity of design between materials and service-learning activities and the reflection topics/questions that the students are required to participate in. Instructors need to be trained in communications and course delivery that accommodates the needs of online learners and the difficulties that they may face such as misunderstandings of the material, connection issues, and readability (Hofer et al., 2021; Waldner et al., 2012). Instructors walk a fine line between detailed instructions and written materials and writing too much that might distract from the meaning of the message.

Programs like Quality Matters, EDUCARE, or Online Learning Consortium can help educators develop the skills needed to teach online courses that are more effective, while other models, such as the Context, Input, Process, and Product

Evaluation Model (CIPP) help with course rigor (Baldwin et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2011). Although these programs and methods have been implemented more with lecture format courses than have been transferred to online. The instructor will need to be well versed in how to create dialogue between the learners and to give feedback on a regular basis and expert input on the service-learning activities (Zhang et al, 2011). Instructors serve as facilitators of the relationship between the stakeholders and the students as well as the students and their learning (Waldner et al., 2012). Needs are ever changing within the community and for the students, so it is necessary for the instructor/facilitator to update the materials in the course on a regular basis. (Martin et al., 2019). Updating may include limiting the numbers of students in the course or numbers per work group so that each student is able to participate giving everyone the opportunity to communicate (Waldner et al., 2012).

There is a direct benefit for all those involved in the service-learning process. Service-learning creates more community bonds for the students and the community organizations. It has been found that service-learning may increase a culture of philanthropy in other extracurricular areas in the community and increase a sense of civic responsibility in the student (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016; Guthrie & McCracken, 2010; Zhang et al, 2011). Additionally, the students and the community organizations may even find future employers/employees and volunteer contacts from service-learning collaborations (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016). Finally, service-learning may also help faculty reach service goals, required by the university promotion and tenure policies, in the process (Bringle & Hatcher, 2016).

Future Directions

One of the possible future directions of teaching service-learning may be through artificial intelligence (AI) simulations as this is already being tested in the related human service social fields of education and counseling with outcomes based on performance during simulated tasks (Ledger et al, 2023; Maurya, 2023). Using AI goes beyond just case studies but may fill in the gap before students are ready for hands-on experiences. Sharing AI experiences also may help students learn from other classmates' successes and failures through insights as these simulations can be reviewed and discussed. Because of the high level of involvement of the instructor/facilitator of extreme service-learning courses, it is important not only that these educators have a background in service-learning but also in online instruction (Waldner et al., 2012). It takes time to develop course documents including course map objectives, materials, activities, and outcomes that have an important impact on these courses. The number of students in these courses should be limited so that appropriate instruction and guidance is available resulting in a high level of interaction and involvement in the course (Brown et al., 2022).

Due to the nature of the course and having outside involvement of a community agency, it is necessary that technology is accessible to all students, instructors/facilitators, and community stakeholders (Martin et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2022). Effective technology includes not only a strong Internet connection and technical support, but also accessibility to tools that might be required such as video conferencing, microphones, and text reader software. Instructors should be trained in

teaching online courses and have knowledge of service-learning (Waldner et al., 2012). Students and community partners may also require online training as well as service-learning training (Waldner et al., 2012).

Over the past several years, there have been calls to action for higher education to dig deeper for more enriched learning experiences and to change the mode of education that works for more students and the broader community (Bringle and Hatcher, 2016; Hofer et al., 2021). This call to action can be addressed with a renewed commitment and effort for universities to be involved with service-learning. In addition, these service-learning opportunities need to be available to all (Boyer, 1994; Bringle & Hatcher, 2016; Boyer, 1994).

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