

Maureen Barry

Research for the greater good

Incorporating service learning in an information literacy course at Wright State University

Like many librarians who teach a for-credit information literacy course, I often struggled to engage students meaningfully. My students seemed to lack any real connection to the curriculum and so were often unmotivated and difficult to teach.

One day, while talking to a faculty member who teaches service learning (SL) courses, I saw an opportunity to incorporate an SL component into my course. My class would require students to provide research to a local nonprofit agency. The class assignments would allow my students to develop real-world connections to the community and the curriculum. I hoped it would engage them more fully than anything I had tried before.

A library colleague, Cheryl Lauricella, and I planned to co-teach the information literacy course EDT (Educational Technology) 110, and she was equally as excited about integrating SL. Administrators in Wright State University's College of Education and Human Services quickly approved the necessary curriculum changes; the Office of Service Learning helped us select and add essential SL components like community partnership, service, and reflection to our new curriculum.

When my co-teacher saw an advertisement in the local newspaper seeking volunteers to conduct research for Children's Hunger Alliance (CHA), the pieces fell in place. We collaborated with the director of service learning and a CHA AmeriCorps member to make our vision a reality. Soon, EDT 110: "Community Research Connections" was born.

Addressing community needs through research

CHA is a statewide nonprofit committed to breaking the hunger cycle in Ohio.¹ The latest research indicates that roughly 500,000 children in Ohio are food insecure, or don't know where or when they will find their next meal.² In Ohio's current economy, that number will likely climb. CHA partners with schools, child-care providers, faith-based organizations, and other youth-serving nonprofits to increase USDA child nutrition program participation thereby relieving food insecurity in our community. Our students fulfill the SL component in two capacities: first, they serve at after-school programs that promote nutrition and physical activity, and second, they supply research portfolios to the state- and local-level CHA staff.

We negotiate with CHA staff to choose research topics in an effort to make the work both meaningful for the agency and suitable for our students' time constraints since the course is a 100-level, 2 credit-hour elective.

Assignments and in-class activities

Course content, in-class activities, and homework assignments tie closely to the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards.³ We design the course such that students build the research portfolios progressively throughout the quarter. Final portfolios include 25 to

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50 citations and annotations for relevant Web sites and book chapters, along with newspaper, magazine, and journal articles.

The ACRL standards and related course components are described below.⁴

Standard One: "The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed."

We help the students interpret the topics CHA provides and decide what sources would be most appropriate to address each topic. We often use concept maps to help them understand the topics.

Standard Two: "The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently."

We teach advanced search strategies like Boolean operators, truncation, and keyword generation as the students search for relevant sources. We often observe students' search behaviors in class and make specific suggestions in order to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Standard Three: "The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system."

Students evaluate sources critically using the CRAAP (currency, relevance, accuracy, authority, and purpose) test, developed at California State University-Chico's Meriam Library.⁵ Based on these criteria, they select appropriate sources for the research portfolios. In future classes, we will require students to make recommendations based on the research they find, thus developing their ability to synthesize information.

Standard Four: "The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose."

Incorporating SL gives the curriculum purpose. The students work in groups of three or four and build their final research portfolios, and we remind them throughout the process that the information they find will positively impact the community in which they live.

Standard Five: "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally."

Early in the course, we explain the invisible Web so that students realize that some information is subscription- or fee-based. We begin our research via a search engine, since that is a familiar process, but emphasize some advanced search techniques, such as forced-phrase searches and date or domain limiters. Next, we demonstrate library databases so they may access subscription materials. The students contemplate quality of information as they compare search engine results with database results. We provide citation examples and explain the reasoning behind citing sources in order to address ethical use of information, and the students practice citing sources as they select them for their portfolios.

In addition to information literacy skill-building activities, we also require rubrics, reflection, and, as mentioned before, on-site service. The students evaluate themselves using an attendance and participation rubric each day. They also complete a peer-review process using rubrics to evaluate each other's group performance as well as their research portfolio rough drafts.

Student reflection

Through personal reflection, students tie the service learning experience to their learning.⁶ According to the K–12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice, "Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society."⁷ To that end, we assign written and oral reflections throughout the quarter. During week one, the students answer questions to establish their feelings and expectations before their on-site service experience. Then, they complete a post-service assignment during which they compare their expectations with their experience. During week six or seven, we

lead a class discussion as the students contemplate their research skills and how they apply them to both the agency's needs and to their own lives. Prompts include: "What needs does your research meet?" and "What have you learned in this class?" Finally, on the last day of class we invite CHA staff and an Office of Service Learning representative to reflect with us on the entire quarter. Students answer questions such as: "What are the most important points you take with you after this experience?" and "What have you learned about yourself and your community?"

Community partnership

Building a strong relationship with CHA ensures a successful SL experience for all stakeholders. In addition to frequent e-mail communication, CHA staff members attend class sessions as a means to strengthen our partnership and establish the real-world connection for our students. Agency representatives join us during the first class to explain, CHA's role in our community, and as mentioned before CHA representatives participate in a reflection activity and collect the research portfolios at the final class. Throughout the course, our students maintain contact with the agency and its clients because we require on-site service at after school programs. After playing games and making snacks with the children to encourage physical activity and promote healthy eating habits, our students often experience an important connection between their coursework and the community.

Of course, the relationship with CHA has been challenging at times. Obstacles like miscommunication and agency staff turnover present themselves. However, despite these setbacks, we remain flexible and communicate regularly with CHA to ensure that all stakeholders have the best experience possible.

Course outcomes

Agency staff members use the students' research portfolios to write grants and implement new projects like community gardens. CHA staff members can spend more time

raising funds and executing programs while our students conduct research on their behalf. The partnership also provides the agency with the opportunity to recruit potential volunteers and donors. For example, our class recruited two teams that raised \$300 for CHA's 5K fundraiser last year.

As instructors, we have a meaningful experience as we oversee the students' research portfolios, which ultimately address a community need. We also fulfill part of our institution's mission, which states that Wright State University students, faculty, and staff are committed to "engaging in significant community service."⁸

Our students connect to course material in a way I haven't experienced before. For example, a few students shared in their end-of-course reflections that they applied their skills as they assisted friends or siblings with research. Many students explain in their reflection assignments that they wish they could learn about the resources they discover in our class much earlier during their college careers and seniors often remark, "I wish I had taken this class two years ago."

Students discover that they can help solve their community's problems. They experience a real-world connection throughout the research project, and the on-site service component gives them the opportunity to work directly with the children whose lives they are helping to improve.

The most rewarding aspect of teaching this course is that we help students "confront their privilege."⁹ Many students communicate that they are surprised to witness hunger in their own community. One student's reflection comments revealed that EDT 110 challenged her beliefs about poverty and hunger. She admitted that she previously assumed that hungry people were adults who lived primarily in big cities and were unwilling to work.

Conclusion

After two years and four sections of EDT 110, our students helped CHA staff conduct after-school nutrition and physical activity programs, implement a community garden,

and write grants. Our students help solve community problems while developing and refining information literacy skills they will use throughout their college careers and beyond.

Incorporating SL into our information literacy course gives it a meaningful real-world connection for students and instructors. Non-profit organizations throughout the country could benefit from applying such a model at other institutions.¹⁰

Notes

1. Children's Hunger Alliance: www.childrenshungeralliance.org.

2. Ibid.

3. ACRL, "Information literacy competency standards for higher education" (Chicago, IL 2000).

4. Specific assignments, activities, reflection prompts, and rubrics are available at www.libraries.wright.edu/edt110cr.

5. Meriam Library, "Evaluating information—Applying the CRAAP test" (California State University, Chico 2009). Available at www.csuchico.edu/lins/handouts/eval_websites.pdf.

6. Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. *Where's the learning in service learning?* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999).

7. K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (St. Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council, 2008), www.nylc.org/objects/publications/Standards_Oct2009-web.pdf.

8. The complete mission statement is available at www.wright.edu/admin/mission.html.

9. This phrase is borrowed from personal communication with Sarah Twill, associate professor of social work at Wright State University.

10. The author would like to thank Cheryl Lauricella, without whom this class may not have become a reality. ♪

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