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O.P.E.R.A.: A first letter mnemonic and rubric for conceptualising and implementing service learning

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This article presents a rubric to help instructors conceptualize, implement, and assess service-learning courses. Using a first-letter mnemonic of O.P.E.R.A., the rubric incorporates principles of best practice to provide a framework for enumerating objectives (O), exploring community partnerships (P), identifying the type of service learning students will be engaged (E) in, facilitating reflection (R), and assessing (A) to what extent learning objectives were met.

A number of useful books and resources exist to assist faculty to conceptualise, develop, implement, and assess a service learning course (Campus Compact, 2003; Heffernan, 2001; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). As a director of a university service learning centre, two of my colleagues worked with me to create a scholarly and detailed outline of developing, implementing, and assessing service learning in a faculty manual (Stephenson, Wechsler, & Welch, 2002). As useful as that information proved to be, the volume and complexity can be somewhat overwhelming to faculty, especially as they initially explore service learning. Over time, it has become necessary to simplify introducing and framing that information and process. Consequently, Saint Mary's College of California has broken the process down into 5 fundamental components that can be easily recalled using a basic rubric that incorporates the first-letter mnemonic device: O.P.E.R.A. These letters represent: objectives, partnerships, engagement, reflection, and assessment (CILSA, 2009; Welch, 2009). The mnemonic is chronological and circular to an extent. However, the mnemonic is intended to serve as a rubric that is heuristic in the sense there is also a degree of moving back and forth between the steps. The rubric is used as the fundamental structure and format in faculty development workshops, allocating 60 to 90 minutes on each letter/component to assist instructors conceptualise, implement, and assess their service learning course. On-going one-on-one support to instructors on specific steps is continued after the initial introductory workshops as they work on their own to develop their course. During these workshops faculty are encouraged to incorporate the first-letter rubric directly into their course syllabus as headings to articulate the fundamental nature and structure of service learning to their students.

The components within this structural rubric incorporate and reflect principles of best practice as articulated in the professional literature (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Howard, 1993; RMC Research Corporation, 2008). These include: clear educational goals linked to the curriculum, direct communication with and involvement of community partners, student engagement in meaningful tasks that challenge students cognitively and developmentally, multiple methods of reflection are incorporated before, during, and after the service experience to promote critical thinking, and assessment of student learning as well as the service effort and its outcome.

The remainder of this article provides a basic introduction and description of each step and component of the first-letter mnemonic rubric. Space does not allow for a

comprehensive narrative of specific procedures or strategies for complex components such as reflection or assessment. Readers are encouraged to refer to the extensive resources on these important topics that can be found in the professional literature.

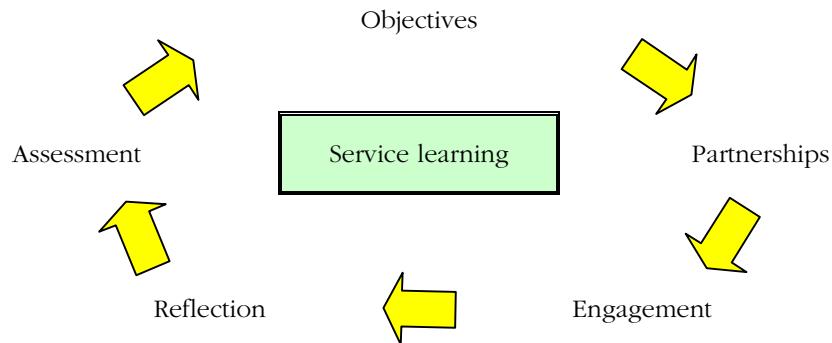


Figure 1: The O.P.E.R.A. rubric for developing service-learning courses

Objectives

The first component in the first-letter mnemonic actually consists of a subset of two related types of objectives. The first is identifying what are the instructional objectives of the course. This is critically important as an instructor can make an informed decision as to whether or not service learning is an appropriate pedagogical tool to incorporate to meet those goals. Faculty are generally adept at articulating what they intend to teach. However, some instructors do not communicate the learning objectives they hope their students will meet. Focusing on instructional objectives turns the teaching paradigm upside down to emphasise a learning paradigm. Likewise, identifying instructional objectives assists faculty as they determine the most appropriate activities and assignments to incorporate into the course. Traditionally, instructors have academic goals that promote cognitive development of a given subject area or acquisition of professionals skills. With service learning, however, these instructional objectives can be expanded to include goals designed to promote students' civic, personal, and even spiritual development. Instructors essentially ask themselves, "What do I want my students to be able to do at the end of this course?" Service learning affords an opportunity for students to do much more than repeat information on papers or exams. At a concrete level, service learning lends itself nicely to providing opportunities for students to actually apply their new knowledge and skill in real-life settings on authentic tasks related to the course content. Thus, an instructional objective can include demonstrating mastery of a skill or knowledge through a product or project through service to a community partner. An instructor may also want students to gain insight into complex social issues as well as identify their role and place in the world with regard to those issues. Another objective may include students exploring their own perception of their values and skills.

The second objective, unlike traditional courses, must also be designed to meet the objectives or goals of a community partner. This reflects the reciprocal nature of service learning. The goals of the agency must be compatible with instructional objectives of this course. Without this mutually beneficial 'fit' the activities carried out by students can easily become a service 'project' that may not reinforce the academic content being taught in the classroom. Determining the community goals and their compatibility with the instructional objectives of the class can only occur through dialogue in partnership with a community agency.

Partnerships

The word partnership is intentionally used over the more traditional approach and practice of 'placements' which reflects a unilateral focus on students' skill acquisition by 'placing' students at a particular site with little or no regard to the agency's goals or needs. Partnership is a joint effort of sharing resources and expertise to meet mutually defined goals. It is at this juncture that a host of questions arise on the part of a first-time service learning instructor: Who are potential partners? How do I find them? How many do I need? What is their role? How many students can they support? What are the goals and objectives of the agency? There are no straightforward answers to any of these important questions; it depends, but this can only be determined through dialogue with the community partner(s). The campus center for service learning places an important role as 'match-maker' in referring instructors to possible agencies.

To carry this metaphor a bit further, a 'courtship' of sorts then begins to determine if this partnership will work. This requires and involves a conversation with a representative from a community agency, ideally on-site, to determine what those mutual objectives are. A site visit not only serves as a gesture of good will on the part of the instructor, but also allows the faculty member an opportunity to see the site first-hand to determine if the location is appropriate. The instructor should bring a copy of the course syllabus or at least an outline of the class to articulate instructional objectives. The conversation moves to the exploration of the goals and needs of the agency and how the students might be useful in meeting those goals. The discussion includes exploration of how many students could be used and managed as well as when and how the students would be utilised. This last point is particularly critical as it minimises the potential of mis-use of students as 'volunteers' doing mundane tasks such as stuffing envelopes that may not interface with the instructional objectives of the course. Another powerful form of partnership worthy of exploration is to invite and include community partners to come to the classroom as guest speakers or conduct reflection discussions. Partners may also be asked to help evaluate student performance and learning.

Partnerships with students

Like the first component of the OPERA rubric, a partnership has a second related subset. In this pedagogy, students play the role of a partner rather than passive recipients of information. A service learning course is often a new concept and experience for students. They are expected to take active participation and responsibility in their own learning through the service experience. In traditional courses, the consequence of not

completing a task merely results in a lower grade. This means the only ramification of not following through on an assignment is generally limited to the student. In contrast, failing to complete the service component can have a detrimental impact on the community agency and the constituencies it serves. There also is the expectation that students will teach and learn from each other through reflection activities. Failing to attend class will have an impact on the reflective process. Similarly, reflection discussions require a commitment to civil discourse and respect on topics that are often volatile or provocative. One way to establish a setting in which students are active partners in the entire learning experience is to use a covenant (Welch, 2009). This is not the same as a contract. The Cornell University Law School electronic encyclopedia, WEX, defines a contract as a legal document that includes commitments that are enforced by the law (Cornell University, 2006). A covenant, on the other hand, is an agreement or promise. Time can be allocated during the first class session to have a discussion on mutually agreed upon expectations. This agreement can be written and later signed or ratified by the class. In this way, students are actively involved in creating a safe environment for discussion as well as committing to be a responsible partner in the entire learning experience.

Engagement

Simply put, engagement refers to what the students will do during their service as well as when and where they will do and with whom. For example, in the case of direct service, students may be asked to tutor children in an elementary school two hours a week for 15 weeks. It is very important to articulate to students that the service is a part of the learning process, just like reading assignments, written papers or exams. For every credit hour of a course, there is an expectation of work outside of class. In addition to traditional homework, service is included in that out-of-class learning. Thus, students are not 'volunteering.'

Engagement depicts an active, rather than passive, process in which participants are actively involved and taking a degree of responsibility for what is learned. In this pedagogy, students go beyond interacting with the instructor in the classroom through traditional activities such as lectures. Instead, they must engage with each other, the community partner, sometimes the constituencies the community agency serves, and even with themselves through reflection. Engagement also means involving community partners in playing a role beyond merely providing a setting. Partners might be asked to participate in or conduct reflection activities with students.

Reflection

Reflection is an important element that defines and differentiates service learning from other methods of teaching and learning. Reflection can be a powerful learning and teaching tool that allows participants to purposefully consider their service experience in the context of the course content and objectives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Schoen (1987) talked of reflection-in-action using the simple and familiar example of an athlete viewing video recordings of a game to analyse their actions to determine why it was or wasn't effective. Schoen (1987) likened reflection to having students moving up and

down a series of ladder rungs with a scholar or researcher acting as a coach, guiding the student along the way. The first 'step' was taken in research and before taking the next, one would reflect on what did or didn't transpire at that step before moving on to the next step. The student would verbalise what they observed and thought with guidance from the instructor. The process was repeated over and over as the student and scholar moved up each subsequent rung on the ladder while they co-created new scientific and empirical knowledge.

Likewise, Kolb (1984) articulated the importance and integration of reflection within various steps of learning. A learner takes a concrete experience and considers what was observed during that experience. Based on that reflection, the individual thinks about the meaning of the experience and creates an abstract conceptualisation of what has occurred. This, in turn, allows the learner to actively apply what has been learned.

It is easy to see why and how this type of thought appealed to social scientists and educators like John Dewey who recognised the value of contemplating experience as it relates to an individual's growth, not only cognitively, but in their development as citizens in a democratic society.

Eyler (2002) provided a useful 'map' to help faculty members plan and conduct reflection. She noted that reflection can occur before, during, and after an experience. Reflection can be conducted on an individual basis as well as with and by classmates and even community partners. Mixing reflection formats and objectives accommodates a range of students' learning styles. One method allows a quiet, introverted student an opportunity to be meaningfully engaged during an in-class discussion. Another method affords analytic students to carefully and deliberately contemplate their experience in writing. Reflection can take many formats ranging from written journals to guided discussions. It is not merely a written log or 'dear diary' entry of what occurs during a service experience. A major and common issue is that reflection is not tied to instructional objectives. Instead, students are asked to 'reflect' often for the sake of reflection with little or no connection to course content. A simple way to conceptualise and conduct reflection for students is to frame the reflection topic around the ABCs of reflection (Welch, 1999). Students are asked to reflect in the context of affect; what they are feeling about or during the service and why. The reflection process includes students describing their behaviours before, during, and after the service experience. Finally, students are required to make an explicit connection to class content to assess cognitive growth.

Faculty members are often reluctant to conduct reflection for a host of reasons. Some instructors argue that spending time conducting reflection discussions during class time takes valuable time away from lecturing. Interspersing reflection within lecture can often enhance the content. Reflection need not always take place during class time. Other faculty members view reflection as emotional testimonials that have little or no intellectual purpose. While it is always possible that students may share emotional experiences, reflection in and of itself can promote critical inquiry. Finally, many instructors simply do not know when or how to conduct reflection or assume it is

limited to one format such as a journal. Others use the term as a synonym for technical written reports.

Assessment

Instructors come full circle through assessment by assessing to what extent learning objectives of the course were met. However, in the true sense of the word, assessment is an on-going process in observing one's performance to make informed decisions as how to adjust operations to meet a specific goal. Consequently, assessment is not merely a post-learning operation designed to evaluate what has taken place as it is often misunderstood to be. Assessment can take place before, during, and following any activity. Assessment results can provide important baseline information to guide or direct subsequent activities. One of the most obvious and useful approaches to assessing the impact of service learning is to determine to what extent students' applied knowledge and skills to meet the community partners' needs.

However, assessment has traditionally been relegated to rather limited operations and use. The most common is some kind of final examination to assess students' cognitive growth. The second most used form of assessment in classroom contexts is students' self report to evaluate the course. While both of these are effective measures, service learning can also be assessed through tangible products or outcomes of students' work with and for the community agency. This demonstrates mastery and application of students' knowledge and skill. Qualitative content analysis of reflection discussions and journal entries is another way to assess the impact of service learning. Students' affective, behavioural, and cognitive growth can be charted and noted (Welch & James, 2007). Finally, the use of pre and post course measures can help determine students' growth in cognitive, affective, and behaviour.

Conclusion

Service learning is an effective yet complex pedagogical process. Effectively designing, implementing, and assessing service learning courses requires considerable time and effort. The presentation and description of O.P.E.R.A. rubric here does not intend to minimise or trivialise the complexity of the process. However, this simple first-letter mnemonic serves as a helpful heuristic to help frame the essential components service learning for both faculty and students.

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