

Chapter 3

Promoting Reflective Discourse through Connectivity: Conversations around Service- Learning Experiences

Kathy L. Guthrie
Florida State University, USA

Holly McCracken
University of Illinois at Springfield, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Connectivity is vital to the creation of virtual spaces in Web-based academic courses which allow for students to reflect on curricular content and personal experiences. This chapter provides a case study of online service-learning courses utilizing technology to promote reflective conversations and the development of emotional bandwidth.

BACKGROUND

Dialogue and discourse are critical to students' successful participation in applied learning experiences. It is through these processes that they develop capacities for reflection, autonomy and critical thought, essential to the process of learning situated in outreach and service. The creation of secure intellectual and emotional spaces within such academic contexts promote the development of a connectedness that enables both cognitive and personal transformation as well as directly impacts positive social change on local levels. Facilitating the development of "emotional bandwidth," the capacity to learn through

structured and reflective interactions, assists in creating such a connectedness among all stakeholders in the service-learning process. These stakeholders include the student, the instructor, and the placement staff and service recipients. The web-based courses presented in this case study were structured in such ways as to provide both the technical and interpersonal means to create such a capacity that extends throughout students' service-learning experiences and beyond. To better understand the case presented background information related to service-learning theory and practice, emotional bandwidth, and a range of pedagogical approaches, including the facilitation of reflective dialogue and the construction of learning communities, will be explored.

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Service-Learning

Waterman (1997) defined service-learning as “an experiential approach to education that involves students in a wide range of activities that are of benefit to others, and uses the experiences generated to advance the curricula goals” (p. xi). Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999) defined service-learning as education through active service using the structure of courses and field seminars attached to curriculum and a grading system. While definitions vary slightly, both authors identified service-learning as tied to academic curricula and credit generation. This connection to academic curriculum and graded requirements make it different from co-curricular community service, often seen in institutions of higher education. Co-curricular community service is completed outside of the classroom, perhaps with a group of friends or a student organization. However, service-learning is completed within a course structure and attached to credit generation.

Service-learning joins two complex concepts of knowledge and community action. Creating true service-learning experiences can prove to be difficult; finding appropriate community service experiences that complement specific academic learning is difficult because of the ever changing needs and demands of the community. The service component, community action, when combined with learning is truly service-learning. The learning in this context is connecting the development that occurs in the service experience to already existing knowledge (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999). This service-learning pedagogy is typically achieved through a structure of courses, field seminars and critical reflection workshops. Structured reflection is vital for learning to be connected to service in this pedagogical framework.

Emotional Bandwidth

Emotional bandwidth is inherent to community service as well as online instructional environments, expressed in unique and interesting ways

that impact both individual and collective learning. Emotional bandwidth refers, in the simplest terms, to the development of trust among individuals whom the instructor is teaching online (Hoefling, 2003). Promoting the development of group trust in a virtual learning environment requires a particularly complex methodology. Hoefling (2003) suggested that trust was established with virtual groups through logically occurring phenomena, such as the formation of first impressions, as well as by more intentional methods such as identifying early-established patterns that became embedded in classroom culture. Emotional bandwidth can be developed in many ways; however, the optimal approach is through the facilitation of simple conversations using a variety of available technical tools. As the case study illustrates, interpersonal connectedness is promoted through a “high touch” approach to the use of relatively mainstream media-based applications such as e-mail, synchronous instant message/chat, asynchronous discussion, and audio-video conferencing.

Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) identified “swift trust” in groups as a trust building strategy. This type of trust is initially based on social structures. For example, trust is automatically given to the instructor and fellow students of an online class because of the integrity of the roles each person plays. However, swift trust is only temporary and may not continue. Developing strong relationships and connecting with peers and the instructor on several levels expands swift trust to a new confidence which leads to longer lasting relationships.

Reflection

The cultivation and exploration of emotional bandwidth within experientially-based courses is facilitated through the implementation of learning objectives, activities, and resources that rely heavily on a reflective process. The methods by which reflection is taught to students within the contexts of life-long learning and service-learning have been of specific focus over the last several

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