Course Transitions, Midsemester Assessment, and Program Design Characteristics: A Case Study

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Practical guides exist to support faculty who are developing service-learning courses, but little research has been done on the process of transitioning from a nonservice-learning to a service-learning course. Since such transitions are likely to become increasingly common as service-learning becomes institutionalized on campuses, the need for relevant research is critical. This paper utilizes a case study to highlight some of the challenges inherent in course transitions. Drawing from literature related to service-learning course development, faculty development, and assessment, we contend that process-oriented assessment tools, such as the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID), are essential to the research on, and practice of, effective transitions to service-learning courses.

Nonservice-Learning to Service-Learning Course Transition

Many U.S. colleges and universities are moving from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This paradigm shift is visible in several higher education reform movements occurring over the past several years (Boyer Commission, 1998; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). This shift highlights the need for collaboration within higher education institutions, as well as between these institutions and the communities in which they reside. One way to shift from teaching to learning, and begin to address reform concerns, is to incorporate service-learning into college courses (Ehrlich, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999). This change requires revising individual classes.

Driscoll (2000) describes service-learning as “a course-driven feature of the curriculum, an area of the university controlled by the faculty” (p. 35), and argues “the future growth and sustainability of service-learning depends to a large extent on the faculty” (p. 39). Although service-learning has become a robust field of research, few studies focus on course design or courses in transition from nonservice-learning to a service-learning format (Heffernan, 2001). Howard (2001) contends that questions of service-learning course development are “serious” and “demand the attention of the service-learning community” (p. 6).

Heffernan (2001) and Howard (2001) offer useful starting points for faculty transitioning existing classes to service-learning courses. Heffernan’s Fundamentals of Service-Learning Course Construction includes scores of sample syllabi as models for effective classes and assignments. Howard’s Service-Learning Course Design Work-book provides a comprehensive guide to conceptualizing a service-learning class, including worksheets to help faculty think through the process of transitioning from a nonservice-learning to a service-learning course. Both books aim to establish clear criteria for, and best practices in, service-learning course design. While Heffernan gives scant attention to evaluation, Howard’s workbook stresses the importance of both formative and summative assessment as a tool for the instructor to understand the alignment (or disconnect) between course goals, teaching strategies, grading methods, and student learning. Howard further stresses, “If a critical mass of students are not demonstrating sufficient learning, this may suggest that either learning strategies are not effective in meeting learning objectives or learning assessment methods are not effective in measuring student learning” (p. 21).

Although student learning is a crucial, perhaps the crucial, indicator of a service-learning course’s success, information on learning should not be the only data collected about the student experience during the development of a service-learning course. Eyler and Giles (1999) maintain, “Students need considerable emotional support when they work in settings that are new to them; there needs to be a safe space where they know that their feelings and insights will be respected and appreciated” (p. 185). The service-learning classroom often provides such a space, but students in a course that is just developing a service-learning component may experience unusual stressors in both the community and classroom. During such a transition, faculty not only need to assess stu-
dent learning, but also to probe other aspects of the student experience to more fully comprehend what is supporting and hindering students’ learning.

Assessment and evaluation supply needed evidence about structural components of programs, methods of program development and delivery, and short- and long-term impacts of activities (Gelmon, 2000). When it comes to transitioning a nonservice-learning course to service-learning, assessment is critical for effective teaching and learning. As Gelmon asserts, “In the short-term, assessment can provide immediate feedback allowing for incremental changes while responding to pressing needs and concerns. In the long-term, assessment data can provide the foundation for planning and for redesign and improvement” (p. 85). Furthermore, Gelmon suggests “assessment works best when it is ongoing and framed in the spirit of continuous improvement, rather than episodically...[It] requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences, the underlying organizational structures, and the processes of delivery that lead to those outcomes” (p. 87).

The Case, Part I: A Course in Transition

In 1985, the Department of Human and Organizational Development at a midsize private research university committed itself to including a required service component in the curriculum for all undergraduate majors. The one-credit course, Values and Community Service, emerged as an initial attempt to link community and classroom. The course’s seven class meetings presented an overview of local service agencies. Students performed 21 hours of service in the community, and could choose to fulfill their hours at one or several different service sites. At the semester end, students completed a written and oral reflection on the service experience (see “Original Course” column in Figure 1).

In 2000, the department decided to revise Values and Community Service as part of a broader effort to emphasize service-learning across the curriculum. The transformed course, Principles of Civic Engagement, would be a one-credit introductory class required for all majors, offered as part of the department’s Freshman Experience. The department anticipated a number of obstacles to a smooth transition from a nonservice-learning to a service-learning course:

- Class size posed a significant obstacle with 100+ students enrolled in a single semester.
- Course objectives needed to be modified to focus on principles of civic engagement, democratic citizenship, and social justice.
- Partnerships with community agencies had to be cultivated to ensure that students would be engaged in service projects that afforded reciprocal benefits to the campus and community.
- Clear connections between classroom and community needed to be established throughout the semester.
- Curricular changes in several courses had to be coordinated so that this introductory class both complemented other parts of the Freshman Experience and prepared students for continued community engagement in upper level service-learning courses.

The Principles of Civic Engagement teaching team used a one-year planning and development period to redesign the course and build community partnerships. As part of the course transformation process, the teaching team met with focus groups of students, community partners, departmental faculty, and faculty from other institutions. Over time, a new vision for the class evolved. Course requirements increased significantly, including weekly class meetings, regular reading assignments, and 40 hours of community-based work in a single agency. To strengthen community-campus communication, a Web site was designed to allow agencies to post descriptions of available service projects and students to create “service resumes” so community partners could assess student qualifications and “fit.” Because of the scale and complexity of the transformed course, an expanded teaching team emerged with one full-time instructor, four graduate student teaching assistants, and a group of “peer mentors” (juniors and seniors who, for course credit, attended all class sessions, assisted with course management, and provided leadership in small-group discussions and reflection activities).

In the fall 2001 semester, Principles of Civic Engagement debuted as a new required course for all freshmen majoring in Human and Organizational Development: 106 students enrolled, divided into two sections of 53. On the first day of class for each section, students learned about the transformation and course goals:

- To facilitate developing students who are effective community participants—who are reflective, culturally aware, and responsive through reciprocal service and learning.
- To teach academic content in an applied, experiential, and reflective manner.
- To contribute to the community in ways that build on community-identified assets and strengths, and address community-identified needs.
- To explore how lives of commitment to the common good are formed and sustained.
### Program Design Characteristics and Key Features of a Course in Transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Design Characteristics</th>
<th>Original Course: Values and Community Service</th>
<th>Transitioned Course: Principles of Civic Engagement (after the SGID)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing of Course</td>
<td>1 faculty</td>
<td>1 faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 graduate teaching assistant</td>
<td>4 graduate teaching assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 undergraduate peer mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students Served per Semester</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record Keeping</td>
<td>Class Attendance</td>
<td>Class Attendance, Supervisor report, Peer mentor tracking, Final log sheet of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating/Connecting with Community Sites</td>
<td>Initial Contact at beginning of semester</td>
<td>Contact throughout semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application/Curriculum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Hours</td>
<td>21 hours</td>
<td>25 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Class Contact Hours</td>
<td>8 hours</td>
<td>21 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text/Readings</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>4 readings and in-class discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation/Support for Service-Learning Activities</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>8 class sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place in Curriculum</td>
<td>Required for Human and Organizational Development majors</td>
<td>Required second semester of freshman year</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Evaluation</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>More structured process for supervisor evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Evaluation</td>
<td>Student Course Evaluations</td>
<td>SGID, Student Course Evaluations, Teaching Team Focus Groups, Discussions with Center for Teaching staff, Individual Student Input, Department Chair Consult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Placement/Quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Sites a Student Could Serve</td>
<td>More than one, if necessary to complete hours</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Community Sites</td>
<td>Students self-selected and contacted sites</td>
<td>Application procedure and placement approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Reflection</td>
<td>Final paper about service experience</td>
<td>Guided reflection at various points throughout the semester, both written and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for students to work with others from backgrounds different than their own.</td>
<td>Organizations were representative of those diverse populations.</td>
<td>Organizations were representative of those diverse populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Voice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students engaged in work that meets community identified needs</td>
<td>Community partners shared their volunteer needs and students selected sites based on their interests, abilities, and personal circumstances (transportation, schedule, etc.)</td>
<td>Community partners developed and directed student service experiences based on community need. Students selected sites based on their goals and expertise for meeting those identified needs. Web program allowed community partners and students to more fully assess fit with one another’s goals and needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Class sessions included discussions on readings, reflection activities, conversations with guest speakers who shared personal reflections on the importance of civic engagement, and an orientation to service-learning. Additionally, students participated in a bus tour of the local community with stops at various service agencies, introducing students to the diverse and vibrant people living near campus. By the fourth week of class, most students had been placed, and some had begun their work in community service sites.

Before the middle of the semester, however, the teaching team suspected that the course was not developing as planned. Informal student comments during and outside of class revealed significant but ill-defined frustrations with the course. The teaching team quickly decided an intervention was necessary to safeguard student learning and enhance the overall student experience with the course. The team contacted the University’s Center for Teaching to schedule a Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID), an in-class student focus group conducted by a neutral consultant.

Midsemester Assessments and Course Transitions

Conducting a midsemester assessment like the SGID is particularly important during a course transition when timely and focused student feedback is essential. Research suggests that major revisions in an existing course, such as integrating service-learning into a nonservice-learning course, tend to produce a temporary but real decline in student satisfaction (Franklin, 2001). Faculty can use midterm assessments to uncover and address some of the student concerns resulting from the transition. Formal end-of-term student course evaluations and other outcome assessments can also produce useful student data, but faculty (as with the Principles of Engagement teaching team) may decide not to wait until the class has ended to gather and reflect on information about the student experience.

Various methods may be used to collect student midterm feedback on a course in transition, ranging from quick Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993), such as the minute paper or student satisfaction surveys, to more complex approaches such as Student Management Teams (Nuhfer, 1997). In this case, the teaching team chose an SGID in part because this approach has been found to yield statistically significant and meaningful improvements in student course evaluation ratings (Piccinin, 1999). Regardless of the method chosen, however, midterm assessments can be beneficial during the transition from a nonservice-learning to a service-learning course.

SGID data addresses student perceptions about what in the course is helping and what is making it difficult for students to learn. This data is collected in a five-step process pioneered in the 1980s (Clark & Redmond, 1984). The standard steps of the SGID are:

1. A trained consultant (often a faculty colleague or a teaching center staff member) briefly interviews the faculty member about the course to establish the SGID goals. As Gelmon and colleagues highlight, the aim and purpose of any assessment should be clear from the beginning of the process (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001).

2. The consultant then interviews students, with the instructor out of the room, during regular class time. The interview typically includes both small and large group conversation to give all students a chance to share their experiences. At this paper’s focal institution, the usual SGID format involves first dividing the class into small groups (depending on the size of the class, from 2-6 students per group) to discuss and record student comments on three broad questions:
   i. What aspects of this course and/or the instruction are most helping you learn? Why?
   ii. What aspects of this course and/or the instruction would you recommend be changed to enhance your learning? Specific suggestions?
   iii. Any other comments?

Once the small groups conclude, the consultant leads a discussion with the entire class about major group themes. The consultant records student comments, and collects the written responses to the three questions from the small groups.

3. The consultant produces a written report that compiles and organizes student responses. The report typically does not include significant analysis of the data; instead, the consultant has student comments transcribed and then sorts the results by order of frequency.

4. The consultant and the faculty member meet to review the report. This conversation is guided by the faculty member’s goals for the assessment and analysis of the student data, along with the consultant’s expertise in issues of teaching and learning.

5. The faculty member closes the assessment loop by discussing the results with the class.
The faculty member typically addresses major student concerns raised in the SGID, either by explaining any changes to be made or by clarifying why the class will not be revised.

The SGID process encourages honest student responses because an independent consultant, not the teacher, gathers and processes data from the questionnaire and interview, removing any information that connects individual students with specific comments. In other words, the process keeps faculty “blind” to the source of particular responses, an important consideration in effective assessment (Clark & Redmond, 1982). This may be particularly important in a new service-learning course because students are being asked to stretch both academically and personally. As noted earlier, students may experience increased anxiety in the community or classroom due to the stress of working in new and diverse settings (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The SGID can provide the safe space essential for students to feel respected and appreciated as participants in the process of transforming the course.

Because this technique is widely used by U.S. college and university teaching centers, and variations on the method have been explored extensively in faculty development literature (Black, 1998), faculty do not need to become SGID experts to benefit from this technique. “Identifying appropriate and affordable expertise,” Gelmon and colleagues (2001, p. 6) suggest, is a major barrier to effective assessment in service-learning, but SGID expertise already exists on many campuses. Another major assessment challenge involves the timely collection and analysis of data; the SGID addresses this by gathering and using information during the semester. By collaborating with a teaching center, faculty can use the SGID to help navigate the often difficult transition from a nonservice-learning to a service-learning course.

The Case, Part II: SGID Outcomes and Implications

Though the transformation of a nonservice-learning course to service-learning can be daunting, midterm student feedback is a powerful support for a smooth transition. In the case of the course, Principles of Civic Engagement, organizing and interpreting the SGID data represented a critical juncture in the course transition process. Common themes emerged from the data, pointing the teaching team toward Eyler and Giles’ (1999) five program design characteristics of placement quality, application, reflection, community voice, and diversity. The teaching team labeled and sorted student feedback by course design characteristics, giving the instructors a virtual roadmap for the transitioning process.

**Placement Quality, Diversity, and Community Voice**

Placement quality, diversity, and community voice received minimal attention from students in the SGID. A few students commended the instructors on providing a varied set of service organizations from which to choose, but doubted that the students could make a “real difference” in the community during a single semester. In general, students reported enjoying the exposure to novel issues and situations beyond their campus communities. They cited the newly formed relationships with “diverse” people outside the campus as the most significant aspect of their experience in this course. These SGID comments echoed what the teaching team learned informally from students as the course progressed.

**Reflection**

Identifying and classifying reflection-oriented feedback proved more challenging since students rarely used the word “reflection.” Although this omission may not be surprising, it prompted the teaching team to be more explicit about the language they used to talk with students about both individual class activities and larger course goals. Reflection is essential in service-learning, and the teaching team wanted students to understand how and why they were being asked to reflect throughout the course.

While student comments rarely mentioned “reflection” by name, significant SGID student feedback focused on reflection activities. Students generally expressed a desire for more frequent reflection activities, both in class and at their service site with community partners. Students also seemed to want more small-group reflection discussions in class, and more creative reflection opportunities throughout the semester.

**New Program Design Characteristics**

After categorizing placement quality, diversity, community voice, and reflection-related comments, the instructional team found a large portion of the SGID feedback was still unclassified and not fully accounted for by “application,” the remaining category in the Eyler and Giles (1999) scheme. To address these gaps, the teaching team created three additional program design characteristics to expand Eyler and Giles’ (1999) original five categories: management, curriculum, and assessment/evaluation. Expanding Eyler and Giles’ (1999) scheme allowed the teaching team to more fully address student needs and concerns, as well as transform the course in ways that made it more efficient and effective.

**Course Management**

Management posed the greatest and most immediate challenge to achieving course objectives. SGID
feedback emphasized how course management-related challenges were becoming a significant distraction to students, both in the classroom and at their service sites. This did not surprise the teaching team because they too felt many of the same frustrations. The themes linked to course management included:

- Too many course instructors with unclear roles and responsibilities;
- Insufficient records and documentation maintained on service and course related matters;
- Limited access to transportation, to and from service sites;
- Absence of a clear communication system between community partners, students, and the teaching team.

Similar concerns emerge from faculty in the service-learning literature. Research indicates that faculty frequently cite challenges with course management as the primary deterrent to investing in service-learning, specifically: issues associated with coordinating students, community partners, and course-related tasks; time commitment involved; creating and maintaining quality community placements; and, developing efficient communication (Driscoll, 2000; Driscoll, Dengel, & Pollack, 1999; Hammond, 1994). The SGID feedback from this course seemed to indicate that students, too, consider course management a major barrier to effective service-learning.

Application/Curriculum

A significant portion of the SGID student comments could be linked to “application” in the Eyler and Giles (1999) scheme, meaning the extent to which students were able to recognize the connections between their classroom and community experiences. However, student feedback tended to connect application with other curricular-based factors that together shaped both the classroom environment and student learning outcomes. For example, many students expressed anger that the course required so much more work than what they believed to be appropriate for a one-credit class, leading a significant number of students to disengage from the class or to simply “go through the motions.” Students also commented that the frequency of written assignments appeared to overwhelm both them and the teaching team, giving the students little chance to reflect thoughtfully or receive meaningful feedback from the instructors.

These “application/curriculum” comments proved to be valuable as the teaching team revised the course midsemester and later planned for future semesters (see “Transitioned Course” column in Figure 1 to note changes made as a result of the SGID and other feedback).

Assessment/Evaluation

Until the SGID, the teaching team depended exclusively on informal feedback during the semester since formal end-of-semester student course evaluations would not be available until the class ended. Although student comments in the SGID did not raise assessment/evaluation issues, the teaching team found midsemester assessment essential in enhancing student learning and satisfaction. Hence, assessment/evaluation quickly surfaced as a new and viable course design characteristic to be infused throughout the service-learning course experience.

Conclusion

Implementing various types of assessments (formal, informal, formative, and summative) can provide rich and timely feedback for course redesign and improvement. Furthermore, such assessment data can be useful in new research on the transition process and its impact on faculty, students, and the community. For service-learning practitioners and researchers, midsemester assessments offer a wealth of information crucial to understanding the course transition process, improving the teaching and learning in a particular course, and providing a foundation for research that may deepen our knowledge of service-learning.

In utilizing the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) to conduct a midsemester evaluation of a course recently revamped as an improved service-learning course, we found the method to be most helpful. Much of the student feedback about the course was successfully analyzed using Eyler & Giles’ (1999) five program design characteristics. Some of the student feedback required an expansion of their application characteristic.

Adding three new program design characteristics to Eyler & Giles’ (1999) scheme—management, application/curriculum, and assessment/evaluation—provides a more comprehensive framework for evaluating and understanding quality service-learning experiences. Recent scholarship (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003) also suggests a possible, although different, expansion of Eyler and Giles’ program design characteristics. Our proposed new program design characteristics offer a more holistic view of the service-learning experience. This expanded perspective may lead to course design advances that enhance student learning and the entire service-learning experience for instructors, students, and community partners.

Notes

1 Placement quality refers to students being involved with a meaningful service site that affords them opportun-
ties for significant service and learning. Application means the degree to which students can link their service and coursework, making relevant connections between the two. Reflection requires students to critically examine their experiences through activities and exercises that stretch, challenge, and provide space for new learning and connections. Diversity is the opportunity for students to work with people from ethnic, economic, or other backgrounds different than their own. Finally, community voice relates to students doing work that meets community-identified needs.

2 Educating Citizens, citing a 2001 conference paper by Morgan and Streb, suggests that student leadership responsibility in a service placement contributes to “student benefit” and is a characteristic of effective programs (p. 274).

References


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