

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO DEVELOP BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN A SERVICE-LEARNING SETTING

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Introduction

Integrative learning exposes students to experiences beyond the classroom to help connect academic knowledge with real-world contexts. This article describes a project where business communication students were involved in integrative learning through service to non-profit organizations to develop a multimodal communication plan. The multimodal communication plan included traditional business documents and specific communication for social media (Facebook and Twitter).

For this project, business communication students worked in collaboration with local, non-profit organizations to develop a new or updated communication plan to help improve communication with the public. This project included the following learning outcomes to assist students in developing effective communication strategies: 1) utilize social media effectively for business purposes, 2) write for real-world problems, and 3) reflect upon writing skills. Data were gathered about students' perspectives about the teaching methodology. Writing samples were also collected to see if improved writing occurred.

Connecting classroom knowledge to real-world activities is a valuable way for students to connect what was learned in a classroom setting to practice in a business setting, and service-learning provides such an opportunity. Using social media as a tool through which to communicate is one aspect of teaching business communication students how to apply their writing skills through social media outlets. This application meets today's 'generation me' students where they are electronically and illustrates a professional use of social media tools with which they are familiar.

Furco and Billig (2002) suggest such an integrated service-learning effort must

- be organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum;
- have clearly stated learning objectives;
- address real community needs in a sustained manner over a period of time; and
- assist students in drawing lessons from the service through regularly scheduled, organized reflection or critical analysis activities, such as classroom discussions, presentations, or directed writing. (p. 20)

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This article describes service-learning, social media, and a service-learning project incorporated into business communication courses at two southeastern, public universities. This service-learning project addresses the suggestions of Furco and Billig.

Literature Review

Service-learning projects can be implemented to increase effective communication skills (Tucker & McCarthy, 2001). Service-learning not only gives students an opportunity to practice applications learned in the classroom but also provides students with the opportunity to exercise interpersonal skills which are necessary in today's workplace (Groneman & Railsback, 2005). Service-learning encourages civic responsibility while giving business students hands-on experience (Groneman & Railsback, 2005; Hepburn 1997; Morgan & Streb, 2001;). Equally important, research on service-learning indicates that it "increases students' awareness of their community and its needs, helps change stereotypical beliefs and increases understanding of social and cultural diversity" (Mennen, 2006, p. 192). Thus, the three legs of the stool upon which service-learning pedagogy rests are service, learning, and reflection (Jacoby & Associates as cited in Dubinsky, 2006).

Stevens (2001) advocated that service-learning reinforces key business attributes such as character, citizenship, and a sense of ethics. Therefore, the service-learning experience is not only beneficial to students but also is reflective of the increasing importance of community service in the business world (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999). Service-learning is an engaging teaching-learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (National Service-learning Clearinghouse, 2006). Service-learning applies community service to fulfill a specific learning standard (Groneman & Railsback, 2005).

Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experiential learning emphasizes the use of service-learning to make the abstract ideas of the classroom concrete through the "consequences that result from their application" (p. 20). Learning is a result of experience (Kolb, 1984), and it is that concept which makes service-learning a valuable component in almost any course. Thus, service-learning gives students the opportunity to practice applications learned in the classroom. A study by Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, and Zlotkowski (2000) concluded that service-learning aids in building-people skills necessary for success. As documented by Eyler and Giles (1999), service-learning has helped students demonstrate the complexity of understanding issues, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development.

While the classroom environment provides a setting for students to discuss real-world concerns and related questions, the service-learning experience provides students with an opportunity to use the concepts taught within the classroom in

a real-world setting (Hoyt & Thalmann, 2001). Therefore, the service-learning experience directly impacts students' interpersonal skills, higher-order thinking skills, and civic values which help prepare them for business.

Service-learning is a curriculum-based form of outreach that attributes equal weight to both service and learning goals (Hoyt & Thalmann, 2001). Thus, it enhances and enriches educational objectives and is especially useful when learning outcomes are more easily met outside the traditional classroom environment (Tschopp, 2004).

Service-learning is a form of active learning that connects meaningful community service with academic coursework and purposeful reflection. The experience yields reciprocal benefits for all participants, a renewed sense of civic connection, and encourages critical thinking and self-examination (University of South Carolina, 2009, p. 7).

Service-learning is designed to benefit both the student and the community in mutually reciprocal ways. When done correctly, service-learning includes these six hallmarks:

1. *Integrated Learning*: There is a clear link between the community service and academic content;
2. *High Quality Service*: Projects are meaningful, well organized, and address a community-identified need;
3. *Collaboration*: Students, faculty, and community partners all have an integral role to play in the planning and implementation of the project;
4. *Civic Responsibility*: Projects promote student responsibility for community well-being;
5. *Reflection*: Structured time or assignments allow students to analyze the experience and course connections; and
6. *Evaluation & Assessment*: Students, faculty, and community partners participate in evaluating the project or course (University of South Carolina, 2009, p. 16-17).

Given these hallmarks, crafting assignments can become an especially challenging task. Dubinsky (2006) relies on these guidelines from Hatcher and Bringle (1997, p. 153):

- Clearly link the service experience to the course content and learning objectives.
- Structure reflection in terms of description, expectations, and the criteria for assessing the activity.
- Schedule reflection assignments regularly during the semester so that students can practice and develop the capacity to engage in deeper and broader reflection.
- Provide feedback to help students improve critical analysis.
- Include opportunities for students to explore and clarify their values.

An often 'left-to-last element' is reflection, often a sort of 'tacked-on experience.' To avoid this from happening, incorporating the guideline from Hatcher and Bringle regarding intentional reflection assignments is critical. Self-reflection coupled with a greater awareness of community needs may compel students to continue involvement.

Service-learning experiences are useful tools in helping students learn about a myriad of issues affecting the communities in which their colleges/universities are located. These experiences, in turn, may also affect students' attitudes regarding local social problems and community issues. Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer and Illustre (2002) studied service-learning's influence on college students' self-reports of civic attitudes. The Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) was administered to 217 students involved in service-learning and 324 students who were not involved in service-learning. The questionnaire was given to students at the beginning and end of a semester. The CASQ provides a score on six scales:

1. Civic Action
2. Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills
3. Political Awareness
4. Leadership Skills
5. Social Justice Attitudes
6. Diversity Attitudes

The researchers reported that students who participated in service-learning, as compared with those who did not, demonstrated positive outcomes on the CASQ scales. The service-learning experience provided students with opportunities to work with people different in generation, race, and class from those with whom they live and go to school. These experiences helped students develop "social and problem-solving skills including communication, role-taking, and conflict resolution" (Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer and Illustre, 2002, p. 23).

Implementing social networking through a service-learning project in the business communication classroom helps connect students' familiarity with social media with the business environment. A recent Pew Study (Hampton, Goulet, Raine, & Purcell, 2011) indicated that approximately 80% of American adults use the Internet and approximately half has at least one social networking site. People use social networking sites in various ways, but 52% of the Facebook users and 33% of the Twitter users note they use the site daily. The overwhelming majority (over 90%) of those using social networking sites use Facebook and 13% use Twitter. Incorporating the use of social networks into a business communication class also provides an excellent opportunity to help students learn the most effective ways to use these tools and to be aware of the pitfalls of inappropriate use. Peluchette and Karl (2010) reported on an analysis of 200 Facebook profiles that found "42% had comments regarding alcohol, 53% had photos involving alcohol use, 20% had comments regarding sexual activities, 25% had seminude

or sexually provocative photos, and 50% included the use of profanity” (p. 30). Why does this happen? Students seem to believe no one will see these postings except their friends. The opposite, however, is the reality. Peluchette and Karl also reported on a 2006 study that surveyed 100 executive recruiters, 77% of whom use search engines in the recruitment process “and that 35% have eliminated job candidates based on the information they have found on the Internet” (p. 31).

Facebook and similar tools are developing into communication tools for businesses of all sizes. Newly hired employees are accustomed to “following” their friends on Facebook, so transitioning to “following” or keeping in touch with colleagues using the same or similar tool is easy. Nikon Instruments uses a similar internal social network and has developed a code of conduct that clearly focuses the use on business and not idle chit-chat (Kopytoff, 2011). With the increased availability and usage of technology, the use of social media and social networking sites have created a new medium also used by restaurants and other service-oriented businesses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Approximately one-third of Americans use social media at least twice a week, and approximately 56% feel a stronger connection with companies and feel better served by companies who use social media to interact with consumers (Business in Social Media, 2008).

Implementing real-world business writing situations and service-learning into business communication courses are not new concepts. Addams, Woodbury, Allred, and Addams (2010) found that incorporating actual business situations into assignments motivated their students to write because it made a difference to people in the industry. Crews and North (2008) found that incorporating service learning in the business communication classroom also gave students the opportunity to improve their writing in a real-world setting. Students wrote specific letters for their non-profit organizational partners; therefore, the instruction was systematically relevant. The letters were written to meet the communication needs for the non-profit organization.

Using social networks within the classroom environment also has begun to become a part of business communication courses. Decarie (2010) noted there were challenges and opportunities for business communication students using Facebook, and it was the teacher’s responsibility to show students how to effectively use the network. Involving business communication students in writing for real- world applications should be investigated and incorporated into the curriculum.

Service-Learning Project

Students may have difficulty in business communication courses due to their writing abilities, soft/people skills, and/or their abilities to connect business communication course content to the real world. This connection is essential to help students develop critical thinking skills, develop a critical learning experience, and see the connection to the business environment. Grammar and writing skills can be developed through a business communication course; but these skills, along

with soft skills, can be enhanced when instructional strategies link the classroom with the real world. Service-learning is such a proven instructional strategy.

This service-learning project discussed in this article is based on the prior work of Crews and North (Crews & North, 2006; Crews & North, 2008; Gale, Crews, & North, 2007;) in addition to personal teaching experience and research in service learning. This instructional strategy and a similar project were used previously with graduate students and proved to be effective in the learning process. This project has now been expanded to undergraduate students in business communication to help assess the effectiveness of the project at this level as well. The original project included an informational report, bad-news letter, goodwill letter, persuasive letter, routine letter, oral presentation, and self-reflection. As the project was expanded to undergraduate students, the requirements were also expanded to include writing Twitter and Facebook communication components.

After business communication content was taught in class (i.e., persuasive letters, goodwill letters, bad-news letters, etc.), students developed such communication pieces for the organization with which they were affiliated through the service-learning project – their community partner. Course learning outcomes were achieved as students developed the business communication documents. However, additional learning outcomes were met as students developed appropriate social media communication for their organization.

The researchers, however, also were interested in whether the students had expectations of the service-learning experience such as,

- enhancing course content and readings;
- benefitting the community;
- encouraging them to become more involved in the local community;
- improving their written communication skills;
- improving their oral communication skills; and
- enhancing their resume.

After class discussions pertaining to social media, writing for the Web, and Twitter and Facebook for business purposes, students were provided the following guidelines to create communication components through Facebook announcements and Twitter tweets for their community partner.

Facebook (FB) announcements were limited to a maximum of four sentences and directives included the following:

- Review the non-profit organization's mission and create a slogan for its Facebook page based on that mission.
- Write a Facebook public service announcement that provides information about an organization activity or community involvement.
- Write a Facebook announcement encouraging people to donate to the organization.

- Write a Facebook announcement promoting a fundraiser.
- Write a Facebook announcement highlighting something special on the organization's Web page.
- Write a Facebook announcement applicable to the organization's need that is not mentioned above.

Twitter tweets were limited to 140 characters and directives included the following:

- Review the non-profit organization's mission and reduce it to an effective Tweet.
- Write a Tweet about an organization activity or community involvement.
- Write a Tweet encouraging people to donate to the organization.
- Write a Tweet promoting a fundraiser.
- Write four Tweets that will each serve as a "Thought for the Week" that the organization will send out to all followers each Monday during a one-month period.
- Write a Tweet applicable to the organization's need that is not mentioned above.

Students also provided suggested social media strategies to their community partners to enhance the organization's communication. As students worked with their community partners and analyzed the appropriate use of social media and strategies for communication through this media for a humanitarian, non-profit organization, they were provided an excellent opportunity to improve their written communication skills, oral communication skills, and critical thinking skills while connecting classroom learning to the real world.

At the end of the project, students delivered an oral presentation to their peers, professor, and community partners. These presentations provided information about the organization as well as the components of the project that were specific to the organization. The information pertaining to using social media not only included the actual abbreviated communication, Facebook announcements and tweets, but students also used this as an opportunity to help the community partners understand how to effectively use hash tags in their tweets and how to effectively get their point across in an abbreviated business communication environment.

Through these activities, students learn how Facebook and Twitter can be used effectively for business purposes in addition to personal social interaction. These activities also helped students write more concisely and think critically about the key elements to include in the Facebook announcements and tweets. As with the studies mentioned previously, this project gave students an opportunity to apply their writing to real-world situations. The complete communication plan students created through this service-learning project have a long-term impact, as the non-profit organizations can implement them at an appropriate timeframe.

Data Collection And Results

As innovative teaching strategies such as service-learning are implemented, it is essential to gather data from students to analyze strengths and weaknesses and whether students are achieving the learning outcomes of the course. In this study involving business communication students in an integrative learning experience with a service-learning project, students were asked key questions in a pre- and post-service-learning survey. With the key questions, the researchers wanted to gather data from student to see if the service-learning component was a factor in why they took the course and issues pertaining to what they are learning in college and how they learn. Table 1 below provides more details.

Table 1
Key Questions Prior to the Service-Learning Experience

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enrolled in this course because of the service-learning component.	6%	13%	30%	36%	15%
I learn more when courses I take contain hands-on activities.	49%	43%	6%	2%	0%
Things I learn in college are useful in my life.	41%	37%	20%	2%	0%
Courses in school make me think about real-life in new ways	19%	60%	17%	4%	0%
I enjoy learning in school when the course pertains to real-life.	41%	59%	0%	0%	0%

Students, in fact, did not take the class because of the service-learning component; however, they did indicate their learning preference includes participating in hands-on activities and learning when courses pertain to real life. This is the basis for service-learning. A pre-service-learning survey was provided to students the first week of class to obtain insight into the students’ attitudes or perceptions of being involved in the community, choosing a career that serves others, and being concerned about community issues. The post-service-learning survey, which was the same as the pre-survey, was provided to students the last week of class.

The data in Table 2 provides more insight as to whether the service-learning experience changed their attitude or perception. This study reports only descriptive

data regarding participants' responses to the service-learning survey. No demographic data were collected from the participants, and, thus, no correlational statistics were computed. Five students did not complete the post-survey due to dropping the course, being absent, or by choice.

Table 2
Pre- and Post-Service-Learning Survey Results

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Being involved in a program to improve my community is important.	36%	43%	55%	48%	6%	7%	2%	2%	0%	0%
I am concerned about the local community issues.	21%	31%	49%	50%	26%	14%	4%	5%	0%	0%
It is important for me to find a career that directly serves others.	17%	29%	60%	52%	15%	14%	6%	2%	2%	2%
It is important to volunteer my time to help people in need.	30%	40%	62%	55%	6%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%
I intend to work in a career that will make contributions to society.	19%	17%	49%	62%	30%	19%	0%	0%	2%	2%
I feel that I can have an impact on the local social problems.	17%	14%	60%	60%	17%	26%	6%	0%	0%	0%
I think people should find time to contribute to their community.	36%	45%	47%	48%	17%	5%	0%	2%	0%	0%
I plan to improve my community in the near future.	17%	17%	55%	60%	23%	21%	4%	2%	0%	0%
It is important that I work toward equal opportunity (e.g., social, political, vocational) for all people.	23%	33%	53%	50%	21%	14%	0%	0%	2%	2%

Table 2 (continued)
Pre- and Post-Service-Learning Survey Results

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
I have a sense of civic responsibility to become involved in my community.	21%	26%	51%	50%	26%	17%	0%	5%	2%	2%
I view myself as an active citizen.	13%	12%	57%	62%	26%	17%	4%	7%	0%	2%

Note: Pre-Test n = 47; Post-Test n = 42

When reviewing the data in Table 2 and collapsing the Strongly Agree and Agree categories, the percentage in 9 of the 11 questions increased between 4% to 11% from the pre-survey to the post-survey. This indicates an increase in students' attitudes about being involved in the community, choosing a career that serves others, and being concerned about community issues. The question regarding the importance of being involved in a program to improve the community remained the same with 91% of the student in the pre- and post-survey indicating they strongly agree or agree. One question pertaining to feeling as though individually they can have an impact on local social problems reduced by 3% across the strongly agree and agree categories.

Table 3 relates directly to the expectations students had prior to the service-learning experience and then their perception as to whether the service-learning did actually impact them in the areas noted in the table. For example, the first pre-survey question read, "I expected the service-learning experience in this course will enhance the course content and readings." The post-survey question read, "The service-learning experience in this course did enhance the course content and readings."

Table 3
Pre-Survey Expectations and Post-Survey Perceptions

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
I expect the service-learning experience in this course will enhance the course content and readings. (Post-survey: It did.)	38%	40%	43%	40%	11%	12%	6%	5%	2%	2%
I expect the service I complete through this course will benefit the local community. (Post-survey: It did.)	30%	29%	60%	48%	11%	17%	0%	7%	0%	0%
I expect that as a result of participating in this class I will become more involved in actions that address problems that impact the local community. (Post-survey: I have.)	15%	14%	64%	48%	17%	26%	2%	10%	2%	2%
I believe the service-learning in this course will improve my written communication skills. (Post-survey: It did.)	38%	24%	40%	48%	13%	17%	6%	10%	2%	2%
I believe the service-learning in this course will improve my oral communication skills. (Post-survey: It did.)	34%	14%	51%	60%	11%	19%	2%	7%	2%	0%

Table 3 (continued)
Pre-Survey Expectations and Post-Survey Perceptions

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
I believe the service-learning in this course enhanced my resume. (Post-survey: It did.)	34%	21%	49%	57%	13%	12%	0%	10%	2%	0%

Note: Pre-Test N = 47; Post-Test N = 42


When reviewing the data in Table 3 and collapsing the strongly agree and agree categories, the percentage in all questions decreased between 1% to 13% from the pre-survey to the post-survey. This indicates either the students’ expectations were too high or the students’ perception of their experience is lower than their expectations. However, all of the post-survey responses with strongly agree and agree combined ranged from 71% - 80%. The question pertaining to the experience enhancing the course content and reading resulted in the smallest decline, from 81% in the pre-survey who strongly agreed and agreed and 80% in the post-survey. The question that resulted in the largest decline by 13% was the question pertaining to whether the service benefitted the community. Based on students’ comments throughout the semester, there is only so much the students felt they could do in one semester. Therefore, they didn’t perceive their contribution to the community partner to be as big as they expected.

As for the questions pertaining to improving oral and written communication skills and enhancing their resume with this service-learning experience, the percentages decreased 6% (78% to 71%), 11% (85% to 74%), and 5% (83% to 78%) respectively from the pre-survey to the post-survey. Students found it difficult to meet face-to-face (F2F) with community partners as much as they expected, and this may be indicated in the oral communication percentage decline. However, when actually assessing students’ written work, it was evident the students’ skills improved. Figures 1 and 2 provide evidence of that improvement.

Students were given a pre- and post-writing assignment as well. The instructions were to compose an unsolicited letter to encourage people to donate to their area Red Cross non-profit organization. Students were to create a letterhead, compose an unsolicited, persuasive letter in block format with open punctuation, use 1” margins, and use a serif font. Students were provided with an inside address and asked to include an appropriate salutation, complimentary close and sign the letter as if it were from them, the Fundraising Director. No other information was provided. Figure 1 provides a sample of an actual student’s pre-written assignment.

Concluding Comments

This article provides one example of how to incorporate service-learning into a business communication course. This project incorporates the hallmarks of service-learning and also provides a contextualized learning situation as the communication plan developed serves a real purpose in a business setting. It also provides information for others teaching business communication. Through this information others can understand how service-learning can enhance students writing skills, help students meet learning outcomes, and provide an integrative experience for all students.



**American
Red Cross**

Mr. Jackson Baniff
283 East Elmwood Road
Columbia, SC 29208


Mr. Jackson Baniff,

The Mission of the Columbia Region Red Cross is to provide relief to victims of disaster and to help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies. Our vision is simply to "serve humanity with compassion, integrity and innovation, to improve quality of life in our communities". Our efforts are made possible solely through the generosity of the community and thus fundraising is of vital importance for our organization to continue to provide these services. We would therefore like to encourage you to donate to the Columbia Region Red Cross, whether it be through volunteering, giving blood, or making a donation to the wellbeing of your community. Detailed information on how you can help your community can be found at our website <http://centralscredcross.org>. There are innumerable ways to contribute to this noble cause, and we hope that you are able to make a contribution for each donation makes a difference in the life of someone in need.

Sincerely,

Jeneen Frasier
Fundraising Director

Figure 1. Student's pre-written assignment



American Red Cross

Columbia Region

2751 Ball Street (P.O. Box 91)
Columbia, SC 29201(803) 540.1200
centralscreddcross.org

November 16, 2011

Mr. Jackson Baniff
283 East Elmwood Road
Columbia, SC 29208

Dear Mr. Baniff

Did you know every two seconds someone in the U.S. needs blood? That more than 38,000 blood donations are needed every day? That one pint of blood can save up to three lives?

The Columbia Region Red Cross is a non-profit organization dependent on the generosity of the community, dedicated to achieving our mission to *provide relief to victims of disaster and help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies*. Our fundamental principals are to alleviate human suffering, to bare no discrimination against those in need, to remain neutral in times of controversy, to remain independent in order to act in accordance with our mission, and to be a voluntary, unified, and universal organization for all those in need.

We depend on our community as much as they depend on us. Our programs and services would not be possible without the donations of the people we strive to serve. Blood donations are one of the most valuable contributions we receive. This procedure is of no cost to you, is of minimal discomfort, and provides you with a great sense of satisfaction. Rino, one of our proud donors, testifies "I love donating blood. The thought of being able to heap save three people's lives every time I go makes me feel like a better person."

Financial donations are one of the most effective ways to help suffering people in your community. Your donation enables us to provide programs and services which address critical human, health, and safety needs, including the provision of shelter and food to victims of disaster. You are able to dedicate your donation to any of the following causes:

- Where the need is Greatest
- Disaster Relief
- American Red Cross Columbia Region
- Horn of Africa Drought

Thank you for considering this opportunity to partner with our organization as we strive to lift the burden of disaster and despair from communities across the world. Make your donation today (by phone, by mail, online, or in person) or contact us to schedule a blood donation appointment or to receive volunteer information. We can be reached on (803) 540.1200 or through our Web site www.centralscreddcross.org. Once again, thank you partaking in our missions as we strive to bring hope to those in despair.

Sincerely

Jeneen Fracier
Fundraising Director

Financial contributions to the American Red Cross are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law.

Figure 2. Student's post-written assignment

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