

Service Learning Plus Social Learning: Preparing Future Journalists Through a Collaborative Project

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Abstract

This study examined how a collaborative project involving students, faculty and a nonprofit news organization in Oklahoma on coverage of community problems enhanced students' understanding of communities and professional practices. It applied a theoretical framework that combines two pedagogical approaches—service learning and social learning—to analyze the case. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 project participants including students, professors and journalists. The findings suggest that service learning in journalism succeeds when students get the opportunity of social learning and work with professional journalists.

Keywords: Journalism, service learning, social learning, collaboration, practices

The Internet and digital technologies have transformed communities as well as journalism, threatening the “relevance and existence of traditional journalism education” (Picard, 2016, p. 4). Many suggest journalism schools must build partnerships with local communities and news organizations, while journalism students must work more closely with communities and professional journalists to learn how to deal with the challenges faced by journalists (Jarvis, 2012; Newton, 2012). A number of journalism schools recently launched partnership projects, but little is known about those projects' impacts on journalism curriculum and students (for examples, see Doll, 2014). This article presents a case study of a collaborative project known as Talk with Us. It provides an understanding of how school-media collaboration can be incorporated into journalism curriculum, and of the extent to which such collaboration helps students prepare for future challenges.

This study uses a theoretical framework that combines two pedagogical approaches—service learning and social learning—to analyze the case. The service learning approach suggests that

direct engagement with communities is a vital learning experience for students. Students gain knowledge and learn skills relating to curricular objectives through community engagement (Billig, 2002; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). A social learning approach stresses facilitating opportunities for students to work with practitioners for learning the norms, routines and latest practices of a professional field (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some recent pedagogical studies in mass communications suggested that service learning could help develop future journalism curriculum (e.g., Motley & Sturgill, 2014; Muturi, An & Mwangi, 2013). Madison (2014) applied social learning to journalism practicum pedagogy. This article argues that neither a service learning nor a social learning approach alone is adequate to encompass the complexity of journalism education, in which engagement with both citizens and professionals is important. The findings provide insights into why service learning in journalism succeeds when students get the opportunity of social learning and work with professional journalists.

Collaboration for Journalism Education

In an open letter to the U.S. university presidents in 2012, six foundations that provide funds to journalism schools called for massive and immediate changes in journalism curricula “to succeed in playing their vital roles as news creators and innovators” (An open letter..., 2012). Some warned that journalism schools, along with the industry, might face a dangerous fate if they don’t change (Newton, 2012), as journalism education is up against a difficult future: “a future that is full of innovation and creative disruption” (Finberg, 2012).

Some scholars and professionals agree that collaboration among journalism educators, citizens and professionals is a key for journalism schools to tackling the upcoming challenges (An open letter..., 2012). The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications requires journalism schools to be “actively engaged with alumni, professionals and professional associations to keep curriculum and teaching, whether on site or online, current and to promote the exchange of ideas” (Nine Accrediting Standards, n.d.) for the council’s accreditation. Journalism students are expected to develop an understanding of diversity of peoples and cultures as well as an understanding of best professional practices such as accuracy and fairness. The ACEJMC recommends that a journalism school contributes “to its communities through unit-based service projects and events, service learning of its students and civic engagement of its faculty” (Nine Accrediting Standards, n.d.).

Mensing (2010) noted that community-centered teaching could “provide a way to conceptualize a reconstitution of journalism education to match that taking place in journalism beyond the university” (p. 511). Jarvis (2012) asked journalism educators to develop and encourage new thinking about the roles of journalists in the society, “Creating and partnering with new kinds of news ventures to not only teach but make more journalism.” Jarvis (2012) also recommended that journalism schools create media outlets that would serve small communities. Bradshaw (2012) argued that discussion on journalism education often overlooks some significant areas. He claimed that this discussion revolves around the view of media industrialists who want changes in journalism education because the industry now requires a different set of skills. According to Bradshaw, what is often ignored are the way journalism education is organized; the information environment that students now operate in; and the relationship between media industry and academia. Giles (2007) suggested that students be trained to report on increasingly

complex society: “Journalism schools should invest in their students a spirit of intellectual depth and versatility and a desire for continuous learning over a working lifetime.” Overholser (2006) also put emphasis on stronger connection among scholars and practitioners. She also suggested that schools need to work as labs where students will experiment and test new techniques of journalism.

Newton (2012) identified four trends in journalism schools across the U.S. First, journalism programs reach out to other departments and launch a team-teaching model. These programs are putting scholars and professionals together to work with new media. Second, journalism programs push for innovation—both technological innovation and entrepreneurial innovation. Third, journalism programs adapt a collaborative model of storytelling that focuses on increasing collaboration among journalists, businesspeople and programmers. Fourth, journalism schools use a “teaching hospital” model where students learn by doing in a newsroom. In these schools, students get real-life experience and get familiar with actual content from the industry.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have applied several pedagogical approaches to examine collaborative projects at different universities. The prominent approaches include service learning or experiential learning (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001), learner-centered teaching (Weimer, 2002) and social learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This study has built a theoretical framework by combining the service learning and the social learning approaches. This framework allows researchers to examine student engagement with the communities they serve as well as the community of practice that they are members of.

Service Learning: The service learning approach is rooted in the work of John Dewey (1938), who proposed a multi-step process of learning, challenging the traditional approaches to education (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). Dewey described the learning process as a logical inquiry that starts with a learner experiencing a real-world problem and exerting efforts to solve it. To solve the problem, the learner formulates questions about the problem, gathers information, makes hypotheses and tests them, and draws conclusions. In other words, learning occurs within a meaningful context and matures through reflection (Dewey, 2007; Giles Jr & Eyler, 1994). Later work of several notable scholars (e.g., Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget) provided support for Dewey’s approach. Lewin (1951) and Piaget (1952) believed that learning is an active process that occurs through one’s interactions with the surrounding environment and reflection. These ideas have later been developed into the pedagogical approach known as service learning and applied across a variety of disciplines, including business (Droge & Murphy, 1999), communication (Applegate & Morreale, 1999; Muturi et al., 2013), journalism (Motley & Sturgill, 2014), sociology (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994), and medicine (Burrows et al., 1999). Despite disagreements over the definition of service learning, scholars across disciplines agreed that the key components of service learning were experience, reflection, and reciprocity (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jacoby, 1996; Kendall, 1990).

As service learning refers to a wide range of experiential education across disciplines, it is difficult to find a comprehensive definition of the term (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). Jacoby (1996) provided a definition that covered much of the literature on the topic: “Service-learning is

a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p. 5). Service learning is distinguished from other forms of learning and community service by its equal emphasis on both service and learning on one hand and reciprocity of benefits on the other (Furco, 1996; Howard, 1993). Moore (1990), an advocate of a poststructuralist approach to education, suggested that service learning allows students to examine various systems of meaning and investigate critically the power relations among powerful social institutions. Kendall (1990) noted that service learning enables students to learn about the “historical, sociological, cultural, and political contexts of the need or issue being addressed” (p. 20). The main objective of service learning is to boost critical thinking skills and enable students to integrate theory with practice through direct engagement with the communities (Gray et al., 2000; Muturi et al., 2013; Werder & Strand, 2011). Service learning helps students better relate their knowledge to the world outside of classrooms (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Widely accepted as a form of experiential learning, service learning “incorporates students’ involvement into the dynamics of experiential learning and the rigors and structure of an academic curriculum” (Muturi et al., 2013, p. 388). Muturi et al. (2013) also noted, “Service-learning is viewed as a means to better citizenship and a greater understanding of community needs, and also exposes students to the problems facing their communities and encourages their involvement in finding solutions” (Muturi et al., p. 390).

Previous pedagogical research found evidence that service learning helped students develop a sense of social responsibility (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001), and become more tolerant towards diversity and able to relate learning experience to the community (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service learning was found to increase students’ ability to analyze complex social problems (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Einfeld and Collins (2008) found that participants in a service-learning project “developed several multicultural skills while interacting with their clients, such as empathy, patience, attachment, reciprocity, trust and respect” (p. 95). Researchers found that service learning helps reduce negative stereotypes in the community (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and increase awareness among students about the complicated social issues (Jones & Hill, 2001). Boyle-Baise (2002) suggested that service-learning is “collaborative in intent,” “responsive to local needs,” and helps those who are marginalized in the society (p. 4).

Service learning was adopted widely across various disciplines as it empowered “students to bring about positive social change” (Welch, 2009, p. 174). It does not only engage students and faculty members in meaningful dialogues around important community issues such as equity, tolerance and power (Saltmarsh & Heffernan, 2000), but also builds bridges between schools and communities (Cone & Harris, 1996).

A Social Learning Approach. Lave and Wenger (1991) offered a theory of social learning that explains how old and new members co-construct professional communities. This framework, based on situated learning, suggested that learning is a social process and it is defined by “legitimate peripheral participation” that means drawing “attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (p. 29). Lave and Wenger’s approach is different from Albert Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory that suggested individuals learn from observation of others’ experience.

Bandura's attention-retention-reproduction-motivation process applies to a broad range of people while Lave and Wenger's approach applies specifically to professional communities that may include students aiming to join a particular community. Bandura's theory provides an explanation of how individuals learn while Lave and Wenger explains how seniors in a professional community create and maintain standard practices—knowledge of which is essential for those who want to join that community.

Lave and Wenger, an anthropologist and a computer scientist, noted that newcomers in a professional community must be introduced to, and become grounded in, the norms, routines and standard practices. Madison (2014), who applied the theory to journalism education, suggested that professional communities create and maintain jargon to solidify their shared concepts (Madison, 2014). Elders in the community act as gatekeepers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Elders must grant access to newcomers. Newcomers may also need to “wage a campaign to gain the interest and acknowledgment of community elders” to gain access to the established community (Madison, 2014, p. 319). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), entry of interns or new graduates to a professional community is called peripheral participation. This participation comes to be called legitimate participation because senior members of the profession sanction the entry of newcomers and train them.

A Combination of Service and Social Learning. The service learning and the social learning complement one another. A combination of these two approaches can provide a better framework to explain collaboration among educators, citizens, and journalists. For instance, the focus of service learning is on the community—the citizens. This approach helps students know the community better, encounter real life problems and find ways to solve them. But it is also important to note that most university graduates enter a community of practice (e.g., doctors, lawyers, journalists) and follow their established practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Zelizer, 1993) to serve citizens. Success often depends on how closely the new practitioners can follow the existing practices developed by the elder practitioners in the particular community of practice. The social learning approach helps explain this part. Journalism is considered a social practice. Journalists are members of a community of practice (Borden, 2007; Zelizer, 1993). Best journalistic practices in serving citizens are determined by participants in the practice pursuing excellence. Communities of practices have their own routines developed over time in relation to other practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 2011). Initial success of newcomers (entry of new graduates to a community) in a community of social practice depends on how aware they are of existing best practices as well as routines. Therefore, this study combines service learning and social learning to analyze the case under study. Using this framework, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the collaborative project enhance students' understanding of communities?

RQ2: How did the collaborative project enhance students' understanding of professional practices?

Method

This study uses case study method (Yin, 2009) to analyze a collaborative project between the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma and a

non-profit news organization in Oklahoma called Oklahoma Watch. The one-year project starting in summer 2014 had adopted elements of both service learning and social learning to give students an opportunity for in-depth public affairs coverage. Participating students, accompanied by professional journalists, visited three low-income neighborhoods in Oklahoma City, interviewed citizens about community problems and prepared multimedia stories that were later published on a publicly available website: <http://talkwithus.net>. The students were exposed to a large-scale effort to draw attention to a community issue involving numerous partners and means of engagement, including not only interviews with community residents but also interviews with officials in response to the problems they raised. Participating students included those enrolled in five journalism classes as well as students working as interns for Oklahoma Watch.

Study Design. Case study is a form of empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). It emphasizes “an understanding of people, events, and processes in their natural settings” (Fleming, 2014). Case study researchers might examine documents, observe activities, and conduct interviews to answer research questions. The authors of the article had access to important project documents such as project proposal and list of participants. Both authors were directly involved with the project and, therefore, able to observe the activities of the project very closely. The authors also conducted 11 in-depth interviews with project participants including students, professors and professional journalists. A protocol was developed to analyze the interviews.

Case study is a preferred method “when (a) “how” or “why” questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 2). The first and third of these were true of this project, and the investigators – though involved in the project – did not have control over most details of how it was carried out. “Case studies have been done about decisions, programs, the implementation process, and organizational change” (Yin, 2009; p. 29).

As noted, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How did the collaborative project enhance students’ understanding of communities and professional practices?

Based on a preliminary analysis of the project, this study proposed that collaborative educational projects in journalism are more likely to succeed if two conditions are met: (1) students are exposed to the communities they serve, and (2) students are given an opportunity to work with professional journalists. These professionals guided students through the entire process from selecting a neighborhood to visit to publication of stories. Therefore, data collected by interviewing members of this project fit the proposition (Yin, 2009), and can appropriately answer the research question. The unit of analysis is the collaborative project described above.

Results

Two major themes emerged from the interviews based on literature on service learning and social learning: understanding of the community (service learning) and understanding of journalism practices (social learning). Close reading of the transcripts based on knowledge from observation of the project and project documents led to identification of major categories within

each theme.

Understanding of the Community

The interviews suggested that both students and professional journalists who participated in the project grew in their understanding of the communities from the perspective of citizens. There was also evidence that some students grew in their understanding of the community from the perspective of officials, while also encountering some roadblocks to their understanding.

Perspective of citizens. Meeting and interviewing residents over their concerns about community problems helped to undo stereotypes and uncover blind spots about community needs and challenges. A reporter who worked as a liaison between the professional news organization and students and faculty noted that the areas where they did interviews have negative stereotypes connected with them.

But we actually go out into these communities, you see that there is really, there is not a lot of truth to the stereotypes ... Yeah, maybe there are some bad crimes that happened in the areas but that's not reflective of the entire community, that's not what this people...really not what this community wants.

Similarly, one student said he learned that everyone doesn't fit neatly into a box. For example, he found college-educated people living in one low-income neighborhood because they wanted to and white families who loved living in the predominantly African-American neighborhood.

Students also discovered neighborhood issues and challenges they would not have expected. One student from an affluent background was surprised that a resident raised lack of swimming pools as a concern and was happy to go on camera for about 45 minutes talking about it and its impact. Another student commenting on the same issue said, "That's not something you think would turn out to be an acute problem, but it really is because just for people's safety they should be learning how to swim." A third student said she learned about the difficulty of getting seemingly small problems such as street congestion fixed – problems that affect daily living.

Residents' fear of raising problems publicly and lack of trust also came to light. One student said: They just don't trust us with the information. And a lot of people were afraid that if they would say something then it would get back to their community and it would reflect them in a bad light and then they would be in danger.

Perspective of officials. Talking with officials, who were also interviewed in the project in connection with each resident's concern, provided some insight on community issues, one student said. The officials did provide a different perspective. She said:

It was interesting learning about what their (residents') concerns were and then trying to find out from the officials what were the reasons or what were the struggles fixing them or what couldn't be fixed – or the response they had to what the concern was.

However, she said it was difficult for a number of students to get officials to respond to them at all. Another student said she had to learn how to keep probing with questions once she had an

opportunity to interview – an issue connected with the second category, understanding of journalism practices.

Understanding of Journalism Practices

The interviews also indicated that students gained a greater understanding of journalism practices. This finding was particularly evident in relation to interactions with people but also, to a lesser extent, in relation to understanding of technology.

Interacting with people. A faculty member and the reporter for the professional news organization both commented on how students grew in their understanding of how to interact with people they didn't know. The professor noted that students were trying to interview residents who "were not used to dealing with the media." He pointed out that "there is a trust factor that you have to build as a journalist. They were able to do that." Another student also commented on the work involved in overcoming the trust barrier, trying to give residents "the confidence to go on camera and let them know that what they will be doing, we will be helping, not hurting."

The reporter said he watched students develop in their interview skills, gaining comfort with talking to people. He mentioned the example of one rather shy student who "became a lot more outspoken" in the course of the project.

That same student talked about speaking to people with different experiences and the benefit to them as well as to the journalist. "If you go out and you talk to people that aren't like you, you won't start writing stories and pieces that aren't true. You won't have headlines, you won't have stories that disenfranchise groups."

Students also learned from the experience of interacting with officials they were interviewing for responses to concerns raised by neighborhood residents. They learned about the need for persistence and for building relationships with officials to enable access. One commented:

You would ask something, and they have their script of what they want to say, and I was making sure to keep them on track and sometimes they would just talk so long. You don't get the chance to ask another question, and so I just kind of interrupt and make sure that they knew this is what I am trying to ask.

Another student said they learned the value of thinking through questions and anticipating possible roadblocks to answers.

Interacting with technology. In addition to understanding of journalism practices related to other people, some interviews suggested improvements in understanding of practices related to technology. One professor said the students "learned a new way to report a story" by using mobile devices for interviews. He said they also learned the value of using a less intrusive device than a large video camera or DSLR because they are "less intimidating" to interviewees.

Some students reported gaining understanding of video editing. One of them commented on how helpful the professional reporter was in learning to edit to make a compelling story. A student

also commented on learning how a tripod would have improved shooting of longer interviews because the video with a handheld camera would get shaky.

Discussion

This case study has examined how a collaborative project involving students, faculty and a nonprofit news organization on coverage of community problems enhanced students' understanding of communities and professional practices. Interviews with 11 participants suggested that students developed in their understanding of the communities primarily from the perspective of the residents who were interviewed on video, through insights that helped to undo stereotypes and identify community needs and challenges that were not obvious or expected. Interviews also pointed to learning about journalism practices. In particular, students learned the basic journalistic essential of talking with strangers, including people with backgrounds that contrasted with theirs, and building trust. From a practice standpoint, their interactions with officials taught them how to persevere, build relationships and get meaningful answers. In a project in which technology was central, it is notable that students talked most about what they learned about dealing with people. However, they also learned from interacting with technology – for example, the value of using mobile devices because they are less intrusive (also related to interaction with people) and the impact of video editing on the power of the story.

The combination of learning about the communities and learning about professional practices places the project at the nexus of service learning and social learning. By experiencing the real problems of these low-income communities through interviews with residents, in the context of the communities themselves, and discussing possible solutions with officials, students engaged in the kind of learning process (Dewey, 2007; Giles Jr & Eyler, 1994) that scholars have identified with service learning (e.g. Muturi et al., 2013). Students gained in critical thinking as they saw their preconceived notions about community residents and their needs challenged thanks to immersion in the world away from campus.

Alongside this service learning, students were engaging in social learning by working under the guidance of faculty (all of whom have substantial experience in the practice of journalism) and an editor and particularly reporter from the nonprofit news organization, Oklahoma Watch, with which the school partnered. The faculty and journalists served as "elders" of the professional community by helping to describe and model professional-level practices for students (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the field, particularly those students who worked directly with the reporter – who proved to be the key figure on the ground in inculcating professional practices – learned norms of how to interact with community residents effectively and routines for approaching officials. They also had the opportunity to practice these themselves and get feedback in line with the expectation of professional practice. Notably, on the technology learning side, the engagement about norms and practices involved initial engagement of the reporter with news organization interns together to do preliminary test mobile video interviews over the summer before the classes started on the project. In this way, working with a technology that is relatively new to both professionals and students, the elders and learners worked together to lay a foundation that was crucial to subsequent student learning. They thus moved closer to leaving the peripheral participation stage to legitimate participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) than the other students later.

Unlike previous studies, this project brought together these two theories as a framework for discussing the implications of student, faculty and professional engagement in a collaborative journalism project. The study thus adds conceptually to previous work and suggests a dual lens for performing future studies of the burgeoning collaborative partnerships at journalism schools. Service learning provides a valuable grid for examining projects that involve intensive engagement with communities, but it does not emphasize the particulars of professionals and professional practices in this learning. Social learning complements service learning by providing a framework for considering the dynamics of interaction of professionals to be, working professionals and faculty members steeped in the profession and its norms.

The focus of this case study was on a collaborative project at one school, and it is limited by this and the fact that the students interviewed were primarily those most highly engaged in the project. Less engaged students may have had a different experience of learning. Future research could address the service and social learning aspects of other cooperative projects that schools have undertaken across the country through case studies involving examination of the projects themselves, related documents and interviews with participants.

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