An Idealized Model for a Service-Learning Nonprofit Management Course

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Abstract

This article offers an idealized model for introducing a service-learning nonprofit management course to business students. All business students must take this course in their senior year. This course will allow the business students to be exposed to a plethora of challenges in and outside the classroom environment by focusing on a nonprofit agency in the community, serving and learning through drafting a strategic plan for the agency. We also suggest that students should use critical thinking, a way of thinking that will reinforce the service-learning component of the course.

Introduction and Rationale

Probably the most important area of growth in experiential education has been in service-learning. Service-learning programs have become very popular over the last decade as the theories are now "advocated by students, faculty, presidents of colleges and universities" *(Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999)*. The growth has been explosive, as the number of campuses participating in this type of learning has increased by more than two hundred percent *(Eyler and Giles 1999)*.

With this growth, service-learning has come to be differentiated from other volunteer activities. Defined by the National Youth Leadership Council *(Carin and Kielsmeier 1991)* as "a teaching method that connects meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth and community" *(p.1)*, service-learning has come to be viewed as a balance between service and learning goals *(Sigmon 1994)*. Service-learning therefore differs from a community service or a professional development project, where these activities are not integrated into the college course content *(Stacey, Rice, and Langer 1997)*. A service-learning program must (1) meet a real community need, (2) be integrated into the school's academic program, and (3) provide time for structured reflection *(Corporation for National and Community Service 1990)*.

There are significant benefits for students, faculty, and the community from service-learning programs. Marcus, Howard, and King *(1993)* found that students in service-learning sections of a

class were significantly more likely than those in the traditional discussion sections to (1) perform to their potential in the course, (2) learn to apply principles from the course to new situations, and (3) develop a greater willingness to work toward the resolution of societal problems. Stacey, Rice, and Langer *(1997)* state that faculty benefit from service-learning in many ways, including the ability to engage all students, help students structure and act on knowledge, and provide authentic assessment opportunities. Benefits to the community include receiving direct aid and an infusion of creativity and enthusiasm from college students, and building links between the university and the community *(Stacey, Rice, and Langer 1997)*.

> "*. . . faculty benefit from service-learning in many ways, including the ability to engage all students, help students structure and act on knowledge, and provide authentic assessment opportunities.*"

Along these lines, our paper will contribute to the service-learning field by introducing a model for use in a course, nonprofit management education, that all students in a school of business and public affairs take in their senior year. The intent of the model is twofold: (1) to expose the business students and faculty to the idiosyncrasies of the nonprofit community through a service-learning nonprofit management course housed in a school of business and public affairs; and (2) to engage the students in thinking critically about nonprofit issues and concerns in and outside the sphere of the classroom environment.

Organizational needs in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors have greatly changed with flatter and leaner hierarchies, more diversity in the workplace, global concern and competition, and rapid technological change *(Johnston and Packer 1987; Hickman 2000)*. The new postindustrial paradigm is therefore more focused on collaboration and cohesiveness where "answers are to be found in community" *(Senge 1990)*. Organizations operate in a more organic and dynamic manner where supportive and open environments that encourage sharing of information and valuing each person's contribution are the norm. In addition, these organizations must support relationships, interconnectedness, and shared power; most important, they must advocate a learning environment that focuses on continuous self-development *(Allen, Hickman, Matusak, Sorenson, and Whitmire 1998)*.

Higher education has been criticized for not educating students to meet these organizational needs *(Eyler and Giles 1999)*. Petzinger *(1999)* states that business education has slept through this post-industrial awakening by continuing to treat education according to an industrial paradigm that is linear and mechanical and closely follows Taylor's argument that "all possible brain work should be removed from the shop" *(p.B1)*. Hutchings and Wutzdorff *(1994)* report that students in this type of educational environment are passive in their learning, believe that learning happens only in the classroom, and are too oriented toward giving the right answer instead of learning. Therefore, these students do not fill new organizations' need for creative, reflective, observant, and action-oriented college graduates *(Drucker 1993)*.

Government and educational agencies have taken action to rectify this situation. The 1983 and 1994 passage of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* and *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act* has provided guidelines for higher education to meet these needs by emphasizing more active learning through personal experiences and creating more opportunities for critical thinking and lifelong learning *(Arsenault 1996)*. The American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force (*Speilberger, Lambert, McCombs, and Farley 1995)*, in response to these reforms, advocated more learning-centered principles with the primary focus on the learner. These principles include providing more of a social context for learning, improving strategic thinking skills, and creating more opportunities for reflection. The major goal of these principles is to have students "become active, goal-oriented, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for their own learning" *(p.4)*.

The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the accreditation organization for business schools, has also established curriculum guidelines to meet these organizational needs. Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Collins *(1999)* state that college business programs desiring to be accredited by AACSB must emphasize more practical hands-on experiences to provide more meaningful learning.

Individual undergraduate schools have also responded in many ways, including the promotion of experiential education. Once resisted, the use of experiential education in classroom exercises, games, and role-plays has become widely accepted in higher education today. In this kind of education, students become more experimental in their learning, realize that learning is not just for the classroom, and become continuous learners *(Kolb, Osland, and Rubin 1995)*.

Figure 1. Service-Learning Nonprofit Management Model
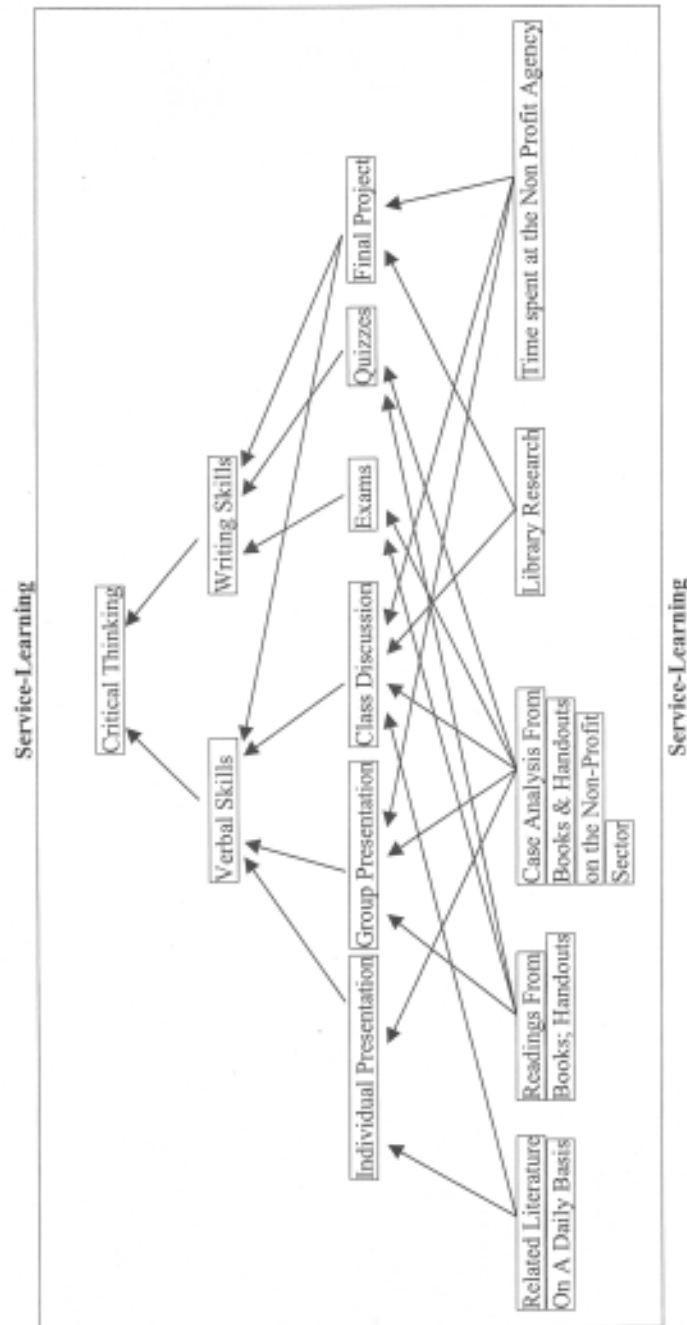
Pilot Model

Our model was based on one of the authors' recent experiences. In coordination with the university's service-learning program, a special class was designed to give senior business majors an opportunity to apply their strategic skills with a nonprofit organization. All students had successfully passed the strategic course the previous semester that is basically illustrated in Figure 1. Thus, the model was tested in two different courses, the target being nonprofit organizations.

The nonprofit organization, which agreed to work with the class after meeting with the authors, had been recently formed to provide professional clothing for job interviews for low-income women. The agreed-upon objectives were to develop a strategic plan to become more connected with other community nonprofit organizations and develop a plan to raise funding, which was desperately needed. Over a period of ten weeks, the students interacted with the local community, contacted many funding institutions, and developed a strategic plan. The culmination of the experience was a presentation of the strategic plan to the board of directors.

A focus group with the students was conducted at the completion of the project. A majority of the students stated that the benefits of the service-learning were numerous but focused on their ability to use their strategic management skills in real-life situations, getting firsthand exposure to the needs of a nonprofit organization, and improving their problem-solving and writing skills.

Critical Thinking and the
Service-Learning Nonprofit Management Course

The purpose of this part is to advocate for the use of critical thinking in this service-learning nonprofit management course, so that students become active and critical thinkers, instead of passive recipients of information. Critical thinking is an important ability that will serve students well in the workplace and will enhance the goals and outcomes of management education. Our argument is divided into three main sections. The first provides a working definition of critical thinking and discusses some of the conflicts surrounding it. The second describes the importance of and need for critical thinking in management education in general. The third part describes some of the pedagogical principles and strategies for teaching critical thinking. Using a proposed nonprofit management course to be offered at the senior year within a school of business and public affairs, it discusses the application of these

concepts and presents the actual model with examples of assignments and activities that promote critical thinking and service-learning, including a final group project designed specifically for the nonprofit management course.

What Is Critical Thinking?

The reader may ask, "What is critical thinking?" and "Why should we bother with it?" According to Browne and Keeley *(1990)*, critical thinking is the ability to evaluate the validity of information. At its most basic level, critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that enables an individual to reach logical and well-informed conclusions. Richard Paul *(1993)* defines critical thinking as fundamentally concerned with excellence of thought. It is based on two assumptions: (1) that the quality of our thinking affects the quality of our lives, and (2) that everyone can learn how to continually improve the quality of his/her thinking. Paul describes critical thinking as "a unique kind of purposeful thinking in which the thinker systematically and habitually imposes criteria and intellectual standards upon the thinking; taking charge of the

> "*. . . critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that enables an individual to reach logical and well-informed conclusions.*"

construction of thinking; guiding the construction of the thinking according to the standards; assessing the effectiveness of the thinking according to the purpose, the criteria and the standards" *(p.21)*. Critical thinking is also responsive to social and moral imperatives to go beyond enthusiastically arguing opposing viewpoints by seeking out and identifying weaknesses in one's own position. For many scholars and educators, critical thinking is also a content- or discipline-specific activity.

In order to assist students in this kind of discipline-specific critical thinking, instructors must provide them with opportunities to assess the knowledge and conventions of the discipline; accordingly, faculty should be willing to lay the conventions of their disciplines (including how knowledge is constructed, circulated, and valued within them) open to scrutiny and reflection. Thus, exposing the student to a service-learning exercise would create an opportunity for the student to think critically in terms of the nonprofit organization's issues, research those issues, develop a

decision-making process, and bring all the above to the classroom for discussion and assessment.

Acquiring the ability to think for oneself independently is what education is all about. In a management capstone course, students can be encouraged to develop critical thinking in a number of ways. The principal vehicles are the various course assignments, which should be explained to the students in terms of how each of them is designed to develop critical thinking. These assignments can take a variety of forms, from informal classroom exercises to semester-long projects. However, teaching critical thinking need not necessarily mean more student papers or lengthier assignments, especially for teachers who are used to assigning writing during the semester anyway. Instead, it means that as teachers we must shift our focus from testing for discrete bits of knowledge to providing students with opportunities to think critically about and make use of such knowledge with the intent of fostering independent thinking.

Critical thinking can be encouraged by focusing on the understanding of the essence or fundamental attributes of phenomena and processes of the course, often by drawing on metaphorical parallels. It can also be taught by engaging students in discussions about the conflicts in government policies and/or management strategies with organizational, community, consumer, and/or employee needs. These conflicts can be explored in written and oral projects produced by students working in groups or as individuals. Such projects can help students formalize the knowledge gained in class discussion. Engaging students in vigorous open-class discussions on every aspect of the course material will also help promote active participation and critical thinking on their parts.

Critical thinking is especially important for the nonprofit management student, who will be working in a somewhat more complex environment than his/her counterparts in corporate management. Dennis Young *(1999)* has described some of these complexities in his article "Nonprofit Management Studies in the United States: Current Development and Future Prospects":

> Nonprofits often perform different functions than do business or government bureaus. They provide services to consumers, clients, and citizens, as do entities in other sectors, but they also advocate for social change, provide a special context for fulfillment of expressive needs of their employees and other participants, and are mobilized to promote a variety of different social and religious values.

They represent the interests of minorities and communities rather than of individuals, commercial establishments, or political jurisdictions. *(p.17)*

Thus, nonprofit managers work in a context that differs from the corporate sector both in terms of mission and ethics. Since critical thinking promotes reflectiveness, awareness of difference, increased literate dexterity, and commitment to participating in an intellectual community, it can also serve nonprofit management students in developing habits of mind, approaches to new situations, intellectual and social attitudes, and management strategies that are better suited to the goals of the nonprofit sector. The service-learning experience will reinforce the future nonprofit manager's ability to manage and organize in a more efficient and effective manner.

The Importance of Critical Thinking in Management Education

Since the beginning of universal public education in America in the mid–nineteenth century, the value of a person's education has been measured against its utility in the workforce. Hence, schools and universities reform their curricula in response to social and economic pressures to produce particular kinds of workers. According to educational theorist James Berlin *(1998)*, the "response of the curriculum to the exigencies of its historical moment thus represents a negotiation among forces both outside and inside the institution" *(p.17)*. For instance, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the economy shifted from "entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism," college curricula shifted from an emphasis on the liberal arts, rhetoric in particular, to the sciences and training for industry *(Berlin 1998, 17–18)*. In our current historical moment, colleges and universities are responding to the economic and social exigencies of a shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Post-Fordism is distinguishable from Fordism because it includes multinational production, decentered operations, and the "standardized production and consumption" of goods and services *(Berlin 1998, 43–44)*. McLoughlin *(1999)* adds that Post-Fordism organizations differ from Fordism organizations in the "democratization" of work through involvement and participation, the reskilling of workers through team-based systems, and the development of intra- and interorganizational relationships.

Concurrently, there has been a shift in the roles played by government and nonprofit agencies. Government cutbacks to social

programs over the last twenty years have shifted a greater burden onto the nonprofits, which have, at the same time, experienced a decrease in philanthropic support. These social and economic changes have brought for-profit and nonprofit organizations into a closer and more collaborative relationship, and have changed the nature of management in both sectors of the economy *(Young 1999)*.

Other criticisms of higher education refer to the compartmentalization of knowledge and the barriers to interdisciplinary work for both faculty and students. Service-learning programs may create working relationships among faculty in different departments as they collaborate on interdisciplinary service-learning courses, methods for sharing community service resources, and action research projects. Service-learning is built on a foundation of inquiry or continuous learning and discovery, with the potential for creating awareness of and respect for a broader vision of scholarship to add to the traditional scholarship of discovery, what Boyer *(1994)* identified as the scholarship of teaching, application, and synthesis.

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There has also been a dramatic restructuring of the workforce over the last twenty years, marked by a decrease of well-paid, secure positions in manufacturing and an increase in "less secure part-timers, casuals, temporaries, and public trainees" *(Berlin 1998, 44)*. Although these positions offer less economic security, they require higher levels of education than manufacturing jobs, particularly in terms of written and oral communication (or literacy) and critical thinking. The nature of nonprofit management has changed as well. According to Young, "losses in public sector support and limited growth in traditional philanthropic funding have led nonprofits to enter the commercial arena" *(1999, 15)*. Nonprofits now sell "goods and services" as a major source of revenue and, accordingly, have had to learn new strategies for management that balance this new-found need to compete effectively for funding with a continued commitment to the social mission of the organizations *(Young 1999)*. Business students who are exposed to these challenges through the service-learning nonprofit management course can become better

managers with a more realistic outlook on what the community is all about. Such managers can assist the nonprofits in achieving their short- and long-term objectives.

Critical thinking abilities incorporated into the service-learning nonprofit management course are difficult for students to master and can be difficult for teachers to include in their classes *(Baron and Sternberg 1987; Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet 1991; Ennis and Norris 1990; Mezirow 1990; Snow and Swanson 1992; Talaska 1992).* This is partly because critical thinking is not encouraged throughout the curriculum, and partly because it demands much more flexibility and interactiveness on the part of students and instructors than does the traditional lecture method *(Meyers 1986).* Consequently, critical thinking coupled with service-learning will provide a difficult but nonetheless very realistic and challenging experience for the students, faculty, nonprofit organizations, and community.

> *"[Students] gather and integrate information, develop realistic objectives and strategies . . . and then recommend an implementation plan."*

The Pedagogical Model and Its Application

The pedagogy we advocate is centered on developing the critical thinking abilities of students as they engage in the service-learning nonprofit management course. The principal aim is to help business students develop multiple literacies. To become effective managers in both for-profit and nonprofit environments, students need to possess strong written and spoken literacy, and to be aware of the idiosyncrasies of the community at large and be good citizens by serving in it. Thus, the principal aim of incorporating critical thinking into the service-learning course is to assist students in developing community thinking literacy.

To achieve this, students in the service-learning nonprofit management course design a strategic plan for a nonprofit organization in the community. The students, acting in groups, are involved in the entire strategic planning process from the original meeting with the client nonprofit organization to the final presentation to the board and the other stakeholders. Students develop an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) through in-depth interviews and observations and collection of secondary data.

They gather and integrate information, develop realistic objectives and strategies for the nonprofit organization, and then recommend an implementation plan. The strategic plan also includes a forecast for demand for the organization's services and a budget illustrating the amount of funding needed for grants and foundations.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of the pedagogical approach. Serving and observing in the nonprofit agency, conducting library research, analyzing relevant cases on the nonprofit sector, reading from various sources, and discussing related literature on a daily basis all contribute to various activities within and outside the classroom. The students are exposed to a plethora of challenges in and outside the classroom through a variety of methodologies. These methodologies consist of identifying a nonprofit organization in the community; researching the organization; conducting interviews; observing; conducting a literature review; holding group meetings; making presentations as individuals and/or in groups during the course and also at the end of the semester; taking exams and quizzes; and finally, putting everything together in a report. This report is in fact a strategic plan drafted by the student groups that is then presented to the board of directors, employees, and clients of the nonprofit organization; to the class; and to various faculty members. The students enhance their speaking and writing skills and use critical thinking to synthesize course requirements into a great service-learning experience.

"In such a course, both the teacher and the students are committed to the process of learning."

The faculty member(s) involved in this endeavor must commit to a teacher-facilitator model. Such an approach requires more care and attention than more traditional pedagogies, for the teacher's responsibilities do not end with bringing subject expertise to the classroom. The instructor should also engage students in genuine open dialogues about complex issues in the field; work side by side, almost collaboratively, with students as they probe, analyze, and apply what they are learning; model critical thinking for the students; and encourage students to assume greater responsibility for their learning. In addition, the instructor should keep a close contact with the nonprofit agency and monitor the students' performance with an agency's supervisor. In such a course, both the teacher and the students are committed to the process of learning.

For the instructor such commitment may take any number of the following forms in and out of the classroom *(Katsioloudes and Tischio 2001)*:

1.   Being readily available to students for consultations both during office hours and by appointment
2.   Keeping abreast of the nonprofit management literature (academic and practitioner), so as to maintain both the rigor and the timeliness of the course content
3.   Maintaining a frequent, close contact with the nonprofit agency
4.   Learning something about the students' backgrounds to help tailor remarks in class to better reach them individually
5.   Adapting and improving instructional methods to suit student, institutional, cultural, and economic needs as they change over time
6.   Giving comprehensive feedback on assignments
7.   Obtaining detailed feedback from both the students and the nonprofit agency on everybody's progress.

Conclusion

The learning experience for both the faculty and students will be invaluable. This model offers students the opportunity to understand the strategic planning process in a real-life situation. In addition, the students will be exposed to the community—that is, the real world—and also to nonprofit management, which is often a neglected aspect of undergraduate education. Synergy results because the organization receives a viable, realistic, and objective strategic plan that it can implement. Once the decision to use the critical thinking approach in the service-learning nonprofit management course is made, certain logical steps can be worked out, such as instituting regular training seminars to allow faculty to share experiences and insights on how to keep focused on student learning and understanding; exploring alternative instructional methods to lecturing (such as using more experiential exercises, including service-learning courses); and enriching the curriculum with more real-life problem solving, group-based assignments, field studies, and student consultancy projects.

Keeping these values in mind, we have tried to approach the educational objectives as well as the concomitant instructional process. The pitfall of most course designs is a commitment to content at the expense of an equal commitment to the process of learning.

Such an approach risks degenerating into a grab bag of knowledge and skills with no clear overarching aim. A commitment to fostering critical thinking through a service-learning nonprofit management course within a school of business and public affairs, can provide the impetus for reshaping courses so that business school curricula become relevant for all the students, regardless of whether or not they intend to enter the for-profit management workforce. This shift in pedagogy will help business students become more flexible and creative thinkers, who in turn will be able to adapt to rapidly changing social and economic contexts that affect the organizations in which they work. Some of the benefits will be felt immediately in the classroom as students exhibit a greater commitment to their education in the quality of their work and their willingness to participate responsibly in groups. Other benefits of this approach will be felt in the organizations that students join after graduating since the students will be better able to address the complexities of managing a nonprofit organization. Furthermore, the business students will be more sensitive to community issues, and eventually become more committed members of the community at large.

"*A commitment to fostering critical thinking through a service-learning nonprofit management course . . . can provide the impetus for reshaping courses so that business school curricula become relevant for all students . . .*"

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