Collaborative Teaching for Community Engagement in Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Basic courses within communication, with their emphasis on skills-building, topical content, as well as introductions to core disciplinary concepts offer great opportunities for students and instructors to connect with community partners in an effort to apply classroom knowledge to address community needs. Collaborative teaching can be beneficial for instructors when looking to introduce community-engaged learning into classes.

Collaborative teaching is typically accomplished by two instructors operating in the same classroom, yet community engaged learning also lends itself well to collaboration among instructors from different courses. Experimenting with a new approach, we fostered collaboration between a journalism course and a social justice course by engaging students in issues of food justice on campus.

COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING AND COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Collaborative teaching typically consists of two or more instructors sharing responsibility for teaching students in the same classroom; collaborative teaching is also commonly referred to as team teaching (Battencourt & Weldon, 2010; Robinson & Schaible, 1995; Villa, et al., 2008). Yet this is not limited to the internal classroom experience, as course planning and evaluation are also key elements of collaboration (Villa, et al., 2008). Collaborative teaching has been recognized for its benefits to students (higher achievement, greater retention) and instructors (colleague support, shared resources).

Community engaged teaching works especially well in a collaborative environment as instructors are able to share resources and allocate administrative tasks between each other, alleviating a key source of stress in initiating these types of projects. Our project developed a new approach to collaborative teaching by incorporating community engagement as a core objective in two basic communication courses. Rather than co-teaching a singular course, we collaborated in redesigning and planning each course to foster connections among students between the two courses, working together on food justice projects. Our study offers guiding practices for instructors interested in initiating a community engaged collaborative teaching modality among communication courses with different areas of focus.

CREATING CONNECTIONS THROUGH FOOD JUSTICE

Connections: Two basic communication courses – COMM 3555: Convergence Journalism and COMM 3556: Communication and Social Justice – were selected to incorporate community engagement projects in Fall 2012. Together, we developed complementary course syllabi and teaching materials, and designed class projects around the principles of community engaged learning. To focus both classes on practical applications and campus community involvement, food justice was chosen as a central issue. Students explored issues of food quality and access, nutrition, and hunger through specific course content, while connecting with the other class through projects.

Organization: Each class was organized to mimic the activities of an applied setting; the social justice course was organized as an advocacy group and the journalism course was organized as a newsroom. This structure invited students to envision themselves as real participants in the promotion and reporting of food justice issues throughout the semester, and allowed them to connect with students from the other course.

Activities: Throughout the semester, both classes attended food-related social justice events on campus, including Social Soup and the Bennion Center Hunger Banquet, while building a collaborative blog featuring their work and commentary. Journalism students composed news stories covering the events, while social justice students composed blog-style event reviews. Students provided commentary on the other class’ work, allowing each to experience giving and receiving real-time feedback in a public forum. As the blog is public and shared with community partners, all students benefit from having their work available to include in professional portfolios.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Early qualitative analyses of student assignments and course feedback from both courses suggests that overall, students found the community engagement element to be a fun and successful venture. Despite some challenges in peer-to-peer collaboration, it also indicates a positive experience that provided students with pragmatic knowledge and experience in communication. Students demonstrated a deeper understanding of not only issues of food justice, but also the intersection of these issues with their own community. Anecdotal feedback from community partners also indicates their feeling of a successful experience working with undergraduate students. Findings from this project are being used to generate best practices on collaborative teaching and community engaged learning.

BENEFITS

This project offers several benefits to the university’s teaching community:
• First, it provides a tangible example of how the values of the newly minted “community engaged learning” might be incorporated into existing courses taught by graduate students and faculty.
• Second, this project provides practical instructions and resources for those seeking to develop a course in this manner. Bringing community engaged learning into the classrooms can be a daunting task requiring substantial time and coordination above and beyond the expectations of a regular teaching assignment. Collaborative teaching is one way to make such an endeavor feasible and successful.

BEST PRACTICES

• Know how your class fits into the dept / college curriculum - what requirements does it meet? Identify learning outcomes that benefit from collaboration.
• Schedule plenty of prep time before the semester starts, and check in frequently and regularly with your collaboration partner.
• Know your strengths and weaknesses as an instructor. Divide work in ways that make sense (strive for what works rather than split down the middle).
• Be flexible and open to changes to make the class work best for your students. Identify strategies for contingency plans and schedule changes.
• Be open with your students and actively solicit feedback on the projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & REFERENCES

Thank you to the CTLE TA Scholars program for supporting this project!