

Student Perceptions of Service-Learning Efficacy in a Hybrid / Online Undergraduate Writing Class

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Abstract:

Studies examining the benefits of service-learning in the context of the traditional classroom are abundant; more recently, data related to student perception of efficacy in an online setting has been explored, though not as extensively. The purpose of this exploratory study is to bridge this gap by investigating student perceptions of service-learning benefits and course outcomes in an online public relations writing class that employs a version of the pedagogical approach – a Hybrid I framework (academic experience is conducted online, service component conducted onsite) – compared with students in traditional (face-2-face academic experience and service-learning onsite) sections of the same course.

Using a quantitative, causal comparative framework, findings indicate that Hybrid I students reported more significant improvement to a range of learning, social and personal outcomes, and select course-specific outcomes compared with students in the other sections. Findings highlight the viability and benefits of a Hybrid I framework, and its potential to provide an innovative opportunity to create a bridge between academic learning and community service, potentially freeing students from geographical and other personal constraints.

Key Words:

E-service learning, service-learning, online learning, online service-learning, civic engagement, citizenship, civic responsibility, experiential learning, hybrid online learning.

Introduction

Service-learning is a form of experiential education that provides students with a unique opportunity to participate in intentionally structured activities that address a clearly identified community need (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996). Firmly rooted in the principles of experiential learning, academic service-learning helps students learn course content as they serve their community, and reflect on the connections between explicit course content and their experiences in the field (Strage, 2004). The teaching strategy aims to integrate meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, and teach civic responsibility (Seifer, 1998). The pedagogical approach yields many positive learning and development outcomes for students; indeed, numerous studies have found a positive correlation between service-learning participation and a host of positive personal, social and learning outcomes (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Gray, Ondaatje & Fricker, 2000; Hertner, Reid-Maroney, & Bell, 2016).

Coined e-service learning, Dailey-Hebert, Sallee, & DiPadova (2008) describe this 'version' of service-learning as "an integrative pedagogy that engages learners through technology in civic inquiry, service, reflection and action." Malvey, Hamby & Fottler (2005) define the pedagogical tool as "...an electronic form of experiential education and incorporates electronically supported service-learning." Waldner, McGorry & Widener (2012) assert that e-service learning is a key to the future of service-learning because it effectively transforms the service-learning experience by freeing it from geographical constraints and facilitating meaningful engagement.

To date, while research has explored attempts to deliver service-learning in an online format, studies that explore the efficacy of a hybrid online version are less abundant. This is problematic given the well-documented advantages of a hybrid pedagogical approach to all parties, particularly non-traditional students (Mironesco, 2014), the fact that research suggests that the majority of 'e-service-learning' generally occurs in this format (Waldner, McGorry & Widener, 2012), and the reality that 28 per cent of students take at least one online course (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). It behooves institutions of higher education to incorporate some version of service-learning experiences into online curricula, especially as many institutions are requiring service-learning to fulfill students' course requirements in a variety of disciplines, across multiple delivery channels – including online (McGorry, 2012).

This paper seeks to address the research gap that exists in relation to the efficacy of a hybrid framework. Using a quantitative, causal comparative study the researcher explores students' perceived degree of improvement across a range of learning, social and personal outcomes, and select course-specific outcomes in a Hybrid I online service-learning public relations writing class (academic experience conducted online, service component conducted onsite) compared with students in traditional sections of the same course (face-2-face [F2F] academic experience and service-learning onsite).

Literature Review

Service –Learning Defined

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are many different definitions of service-learning. The National Society for Experiential Education (1994) defines the pedagogical tool as "any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience." Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service-learning as: "a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students: (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." This process enables students to "gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). For many, critical reflection is a central dimension to a successful service-learning experience (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Eyler, Giles & Schmiede, 1996), some even assert that it is this element that has the most transformational effect on students (Pompa, 2002; Kiely 2004; Parker, Myers & Higgins, 2009).

Service –Learning Outcomes

With regard to the efficacy of service learning, there is an abundance of research that explores the social and personal outcomes associated with the pedagogical approach (Verjee, 2010), including: a sense of social awareness and citizenship skills (Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001); improvements in self-concept and political engagement (Morgan & Streb); feelings of civic and social responsibility (Brownell & Swaner 2010; Einfeld & Collins 2008; Engberg & Fox 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002); ethical thinking and social accountability (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002); increased awareness of diversity (Simons & Cleary 2006; Jones & Abes 2004, Dumas, 2002); multicultural competencies and community involvement (Root, Callahan, & Sepanski, 2002; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002); Rockquemore & Schaffer 2000, Einfeld & Collins 2008); personal efficacy (Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006); leadership and communication skills (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001); interpersonal skills (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Hinck & Brandell, 1999); and moral development (Boss, 1994; Strain, 2005).

Significant positive academic learning outcomes are also associated with service-learning, including: improved analytical and problem solving skills (Hesser, 1995; Strage, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006); critical thinking skills (Callister & Hobbins-Garbett, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999); GPA and writing skills (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000); and enhanced cognitive development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Feldman, Moss, Chin, Marie, Rai, & Graham, 2006; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

In addition to the numerous benefits for students, service-learning also has the potential to benefit faculty and higher education institutions. Faculty benefits include scholarship and community engagement opportunities (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002), and a host of beneficial teaching and learning outcomes (Cantor, 1997). Institutional benefits of service-learning include, increased persistence and retention (enrollment)

rates (Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998); a unique opportunity to build relationships and foster trust with community partners (Lisman, 1998; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996); and the potential to provide research data to leverage funds or grant resources (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998).

E-service learning

Without doubt, online learning is an integral part of today's organizational and educational environments (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Guthrie and McCracken, 2010). The critical role of e-learning is further reinforced by survey data related to the state of online learning in U.S. higher education (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016) that indicates the number of higher education students in public institutions taking at least one distance education course is one in four (28 per cent; 5.8 million), up 3.9 per cent from 2014 (marking a thirteenth consecutive year of growth). Of these 5.8 million students taking online courses, 49 per cent take all of their courses online, 51 per cent take some distance courses. The researchers also found that 66 per cent of higher education institutions report that online education is critical to their long-term strategy. Despite the statistics, it appears that the pace of growth of e-service learning offerings is not keeping pace with the growth of the online student population (Waldner, McGorry & Widener (2012), which is surprising given the potential the pedagogy provides to address the well-documented challenges of student engagement and interaction in online courses. Indeed, Bennett & Green (2001) assert that service-learning and online instruction can have a "symbiotic educational relationship," but relatively little research exists regarding attempts to deliver service-learning experiences completely online (McGorry, 2012).

In terms of the key elements and best practices associated with e-service learning Conrad & Donaldson (2004) identified a number of valuable components, including clear establishment of learning goals, and active collaboration of students community partners; Waldner, McGorry & Widener (2012) reinforce the importance of integrated multidisciplinary tasks with real-world applications, deliverables that benefit "clients," and continual performance-based assessment. Self-reflection is also considered to be a critical component of e-service learning (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) as it enables students to connect thought and action, and encouraging higher order critical thinking skills including analysis, comprehension, problem solving, and evaluation (Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott & Zlotkowski, 2000).

Strait and Sauer (2004), who appear to have published some of the earliest scholarship related to the benefits of e-service learning, assert that the pedagogy offers an alternative model to the 'conventional' classroom experience, providing students with a unique opportunity to create a bridge between academic learning and community service. Waldner, McGorry & Widener (2012) assert that e-service learning produces important benefits for all parties involved – for students, an opportunity to experience civic engagement; for the community partner, additional personnel enable them to take on new projects, thus broadening the scope of their reach; for the faculty member, service opportunities for tenure; and for the university - positive community relations. They also claim it frees service-learning from geographical constraints, and a powerful and much-needed tool to promote engagement. In addition to these benefits, e-service learning has the potential to engage non-traditional populations including the disabled

(Malvey, Hamby, & Fottler, 2005); those who don't live in close proximity to universities and colleges (Strait & Hamerlinck, 2010); shy or introverted individuals, and individuals with conflicting work or family commitments (Waldner, McGorry & Widener, 2012).

Waldner et al.'s (2012) extensive literature review indicates that that e-service-learning generally occurs in a hybrid model, and identified an e-service-learning typology comprised of four distinct types of eService-learning: hybrid type I, hybrid type II, hybrid type III, and extreme service-learning. In a hybrid type I course, the academic experience is conducted online, but the service is conducted onsite. A hybrid type II course is conducted onsite while the service component is conducted entirely online. In hybrid type III courses, the academic component and service experiences are conducted both onsite and online. Finally, extreme service-learning occurs when both the academic and service experiences are conducted online, with no onsite component. Each lends itself to different service and learning outcomes, and products/deliverables.

Service-learning and Public Relations Education

Service-learning as a pedagogical tool is frequently incorporated by mass communication, including public relations educators, into both coursework and the curriculum because it provides students with the ability to apply classroom theories to real-life practice, gaining valuable experience in interacting with both clients and students (Panici & Lasky, 2002). Indeed, Serini's study found that nearly 75 per cent of Public Relations Society of America's 'Educators Academy' respondents indicated they used service-learning as a central classroom tool (2002). Kinnick (1999) asserts that service-learning pedagogy lends itself well to the public relations discipline, traditionally manifest in forms of experiential learning such as internships, volunteer activities, and practica. Other public relations service-learning scholarship focuses on the efficacy and value of service-learning to the student and community partner, and how the pedagogical tool is a valuable asset to the public relations curriculum (Fall 2006; Witmer, Silverman & Gaschen, 2009; Bush, 2009; Corbett & Kendall, 1999; Werder & Strand, 2011; Drake, 2000; Patterson, 2004; Corbett & Kendall, 1999). Several empirical studies have also attempted a systematic assessment of learner outcomes (Jones & Hill, 2003; Werder & Strand; Aldoory & Wrigley, 2011), but few capture the scope of benefits the pedagogy from the student perspective. Indeed, despite acknowledgement of the abundant benefits of service-learning in the public relations curriculum, scholarship that explores students' perceptions of the pedagogy is lacking (Muturi, An, & Mwangi, 2013); none have examined student perceptions in the context of a hybrid online delivery format.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework of experiential learning draws upon the work of Dewey and Kolb. Indeed, service-learning is believed to have evolved, at least in part, from the seminal work and core assumptions of John Dewey who advocated learning by doing (1916, 1939); Dewey extolled the values of a "progressive education"- an education where thought and action come together in classroom and real life settings (Dewey, 1938). Saltmarsh (1996) argues that Dewey's contributions formed the basis of a cultural and political critique and re-conceptualized pedagogy aimed at development of democratic values and critical citizenship.

Kolb's scholarship focused on the learning processes and outcomes of community service experiences in a number of contexts, including higher education (1984, 2005). According to Kolb, experiential learning was best described in the context of a four step framework: i) the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience; ii) the learner must be able to reflect on the experience; iii) the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; iv) and the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience (McWhorter, Delello, & Roberts, 2016). Four learning roles are assigned to the transitions between the four learning abilities described above: the reflector role, the theorist role, the pragmatist role, and the activist role. According to Kolb, there is no designated "starting point" for the cycle, but learning is most effective when the student goes through all points, regardless of where they start (Petkus 2000).

Both scholars believed that the pedagogical approach enhances conceptual understanding, increases student ability to apply abstract concepts, and involves greater opportunities for general learning (communication, cooperation and teamwork, leadership skills) than traditional lectures, readings, and examinations (Crabtree, 2008). The dominant theme of the literature related to service-learning is that it has a positive impact on college students' academic, civic, and personal outcomes. To date, however, the extant scholarship examines service-learning benefits and outcomes in the context of traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom experience - data related to student perception of efficacy in a hybrid online setting has not been explored to any significant degree, and many higher education institutions have yet to explore all of the possibilities of online service-learning opportunities (McGorry, 2012). The purpose of this study is to bridge this gap by exploring student perceptions of service-learning benefits and discipline-specific course outcomes in an online class that employs a Hybrid I framework (academic experience is conducted online, service component conducted onsite) compared with students in traditional sections of the same course (F2F academic experience and service-learning onsite).

As such, the following research questions, derived from the literature, guided this study:

RQ1: Do students enrolled in a hybrid I online service-learning Strategic Writing course report improvement in selected service-learning (personal, learning and citizenship) outcomes that are significantly different to students enrolled in other service-learning sections?

RQ2: Do students enrolled in the hybrid I online service-learning Strategic Writing course report improvement in select discipline-specific learning outcomes that are significantly different to students who enrolled in other service-learning sections?

Methodology

A survey was designed to measure student perceptions of experiential outcomes of the strategic writing course. Three service-learning benefits/outcomes – personal, learning, and citizenship – were measured with 21 items adapted from Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen (2006) SELEB scale – an outcomes assessment tool of Service-Learning Benefits. In addition, 12 items measured (discipline-specific) college-learning outcomes related to both technical managerial skills adapted from a survey conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (Hart,

2015). IRB approval was secured prior to administering the survey; the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small sample of faculty and students to verify the categorical representation, and assess validity and comprehension.

Students in five sections of a public relations writing class were invited to participate in the survey: one 100 per cent online section; n=15), two blended sections (50 per cent online/50 per cent F2F; n=26), and one 100 per cent F2F section; n=7). The course is required for all Strategic Communication concentration students, and students pursuing a Public Relations minor; it offers writing experience in various forms of public relations including writing assignments that would be typical in both nonprofit and business organizations. No textbook was required in any section of the course.

In each of the course sections, students complete the service learning coursework onsite via a service activity that met an identified community need(s). On average, the number of SL hours all students were required to commit over the course of the semester was comprised of ~12 direct participation hours (activities which meet a need or contact time with clients, community members or audiences) and ~12 indirect participation hours (preparation such as training, planning or research for service activity). All students (F2F, blended, online) were required to complete the 'direct' portion of their contact time on-site, in person via volunteering, fundraising, on-site meetings, etc. The course instructor selected the (local) non-profit community partner that students worked with during the semester; this included a homeless organization, a therapeutic equine-assisted therapy program for people with disabilities, and an early-education organization that serves preschool children in under-resourced neighborhoods. Academic coursework (culminating in a useable media kit for the community partner) was conducted using small groups; direct/onsite service work was conducted individually. In addition to the academic and direct SL work, all students were also required to submit individual reflection papers during the semester to enhance further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Participants

At the conclusion of the spring 2016 semester, a Qualtrics survey link was circulated to students in all five sections of the public relations writing course in a Communication Studies department at a mid-sized, public Northeastern regional university (N=67). An initial solicitation email with web-link to the survey was distributed, and one reminder email yielded 48 completed surveys (n=48; response rate = 72 per cent).

Operationalization of the survey

Each respondent first answered a series of demographic questions. To assess perceptions of the effects of the course, the survey asked students to respond to items in three sections rating their personal outcomes (8 items), learning outcomes (6 items), and outcomes related to civic and social responsibility (7 items). Each section contained responses that were rated on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Twenty-one items were measured on a 5-point scale preceded by the statement: The following items complete the phrase below. Click the response that best represents your level of agreement with the completed statements: "The assignments and projects I worked on in this course..."

Next, respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed that the course improved their ability across 12 (discipline-specific) college learning outcomes, also measured on a 5-point scale, and preceded by the statement: The following items complete the phrase below. Click the response that best represents your level of agreement with the completed statements: "The assignments and projects I worked on in this course improved ..." These items represent both technical (5 items) and managerial (7 items) public relations skills and are linked to the objectives/learning outcomes of the course.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 19 for Windows. A $p \leq .05$ significance level was used for all statistical tests. A series of non-parametric Whitney-Mann tests were conducted to inform all research questions. The survey has preliminary convergent validity because it uses several of the same constructs presented in the SELEB scale (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). Cronbach's α of >0.9 demonstrated strong internal reliability.

Findings

Description of Respondents

Of the 48 respondents participating in the study, 77 per cent ($n = 37$) were female and 23 per cent ($n = 11$) were male. The median age of student respondents was 20-22 years old (71 per cent; $n = 34$). The majority of both student and on-site supervisors were Caucasian, (85 per cent; $N=41$). The student respondents were mostly juniors (58 per cent; $N = 28$), 27 per cent ($N=13$) were seniors. Ninety-four per cent took the class to fulfil a major requirement ($n=47$). Thirty-one per cent indicated that they have taken at least 3 other online classes ($n=15$); 30 per cent have taken four or more ($n=14$). Sixty-three per cent ($n=30$) indicated this was the first SL course they had enrolled in, the remainder ($n=17$) had taken one other SL course. Fifty per cent ($n=23$) indicated that they worked on average 3-5 hours per week on course-related activities, 27 per cent worked less than 3 hours ($n=13$), and 11 per cent ($n=23$) worked 5-7 hours. Statistical analysis indicated an absence of statistically significant differences between the two groups in relation to demographic items.

RQ1: Do students enrolled in the online service-learning Strategic Writing course report improvement in selected service-learning (personal, learning and citizenship) outcomes that are significantly different to students enrolled in a 'traditional-format' section?

Using a non-parametric statistical measure – the Mann-Whitney U test – there was a statistically different response between the two groups in relation to over half of the 21 outcomes (see Table 1). Descriptive statistics (Likert scale, 1 = Strong Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree) indicate that respondents enrolled in the online section agreed with the statements (mean = 4.06) more than their counterparts in the other sections of the course (mean = 3.61). Student responses in the online section were statistically different (greater agreement) to the other cohort with regard to half of the eight personal benefits and all seven of the citizenship benefits that were adapted from the SELEB scale. There was no difference (both groups agreed) in relation to the six learning benefits. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Student Perceptions of Service-Learning Outcomes.

"The assignments and projects I worked on in this course..."	Z score	P value (*p<0.05)	Online Mean	Other Mean
Made this course very different from other courses I have taken in the Communication Studies Department	-2.162	*.031	4.14	3.41
Meant that this course required a greater commitment of time than other courses	-2.585	*.010	4.29	3.48
Meant that this course required more work on my part than other courses.	-2.214	*.027	4.07	3.45
...Motivated me to work harder in this course	-0.992	.321	4.07	3.83
Made me feel that part of my learning was self-guided and independent of the instructor.	-0.409	.682	4.14	4.0
Was an extremely valuable part of this course.	-0.825	.409	4.07	3.83
Was closely linked to the subject of this course.	-0.330	.741	4.21	4.24
Increased what I learned about this subject.	-0.520	.603	4.21	4.28
Increased my interest in this subject.	-0.114	.927	4.07	4.04
Increased my interest in this field.	-0.219	.843	4.07	4.11
Enabled me to really know what it's like to be a practitioner in this field.	-0.504	.648	4.08	4.18
Was a lot of fun.	-1.275	.202	3.07	3.52
Was more work than it was worth.	-0.945	.345	3.0	2.62
Meant that this course gave me a greater sense of pride and accomplishment than most courses.	-2.014	*.044	3.93	3.38
Definitely met a need in the community.	-4.051	*.000	4.36	3.28
Will make a difference to community/community partner.	-3.518	*.000	4.29	3.34
Made me more aware of problems in the community.	-2.675	*.007	4.29	3.59
Made me more aware of how I can be of service to the community.	-2.577	*.010	4.43	3.79
Made me more interested in community service.	-3.213	*.001	4.29	3.38

Made me interested in continuing the project as a volunteer or through an independent study.	-3.127	*.002	4.21	3.24
Made me interested in community service as a career choice.	-2.010	*.044	3.50	2.86

Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.931$

RQ2: Do students enrolled in the online service-learning Strategic Writing course report improvement in select discipline-specific learning outcomes that are significantly different to students who enrolled in a 'traditional-format' section?

Using a non-parametric statistical measure – the Mann-Whitney U test – there was not a statistically different response between the two groups (Online mean = 4.785; Others mean = 4.57), with the exception of one variable - *my ability to work effectively with others in teams* ($z = -2.433$; $p = .015$; Online mean = 4.71; Others mean = 4.28). (See table 2.) Both groups agreed that assignments and projects they worked on improved both technical and managerial skills that were linked to the objectives/learning outcomes of the course.

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Discipline-Specific Learning Outcomes

"The assignments and projects I worked on in this course increased..."	Z score	P value (* $p < 0.05$)	Online Mean	Others Mean
My ability to effectively communicate orally	-1.704	.088	4.57	4.14
My ability to work effectively with others in teams	-2.433	*.015	4.71	4.28
My ability to effectively communicate in writing	-.074	.941	4.93	4.86
My ethical judgment and decision-making	-.260	.795	4.71	4.55
My critical thinking and analytical reasoning skill	-.814	.416	4.86	4.79
My ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings	-1.144	.253	5.0	4.83
My ability to analyze and solve complex problems	-1.750	.080	4.86	4.48
My ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources	-.501	.616	4.86	4.76
My ability to innovate and be creative	-1.052	.293	4.93	4.9
My ability to stay current on changing technologies and their applications to the workplace	-.617	.537	4.71	4.62
My ability to work with statistics/numbers	-.196	.845	4.5	4.28
My ability to analyze and solve problems with people from different backgrounds and cultures	-1.747	.081	4.79	4.45

Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.950$

Discussion

There are many positive outcomes associated with service-learning as a positive pedagogical approach, including feelings of civic and social responsibility (Brownell & Swaner 2010; Engberg & Fox 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005); personal efficacy (Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006); and academic learning outcomes (Hesser, 1995; Strage, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen (2006) developed the 'SELEB' scale to measure underlying service-learning experiential dimensions to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of service-learning from the student's perspective. This study confirms research that highlights key personal, learning and citizenship benefits of e-service learning; results indicate that respondents – those enrolled in the online and other sections of the public relations writing course – reported improvement in relation to the 21 service-learning outcomes. In addition, the study explored perceptions of efficacy related to 12 discipline-specific learning outcomes (comprised of two skills categories – technical and managerial) and all respondents reported improvement. This study also supports Kinnick (1999) assertion that service-learning pedagogy lends itself well to the public relations discipline, boosting critical thinking skills and preparing students for dual roles as citizens and employees.

Online learning is an integral part of today's organizational (Shea-Schultz & Fogarty, 2002) and educational environments (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Forty-nine per cent of students take all of their courses online, and 66 per cent of higher education institutions report that online education is critical to their long-term strategy. Indeed, service-learning as a pedagogical tool is frequently incorporated by mass communication educators, including public relations educators, into both coursework and the curriculum because it provides students with the ability to apply classroom theories to real-life practice, gaining valuable experience in interacting with both clients and students (Panici & Lasky, 2002). Despite acknowledgement of the abundant benefits of service-learning in public relations curriculum research gaps exist in the context of a hybrid online delivery format; this study addressed this need and found that, not only did respondents agree that service-learning coursework and assignments improved their ability in relation to personal, learning and citizenship categories – perceptions were significantly higher among students in the online cohort. With regard to personal benefit, online students reported improvement in over half of the items indicating that students thought the course was “different,” gave them “a greater sense of pride and accomplishment,” and required “a greater time commitment” and “more work” than other courses they have taken. This study also found that respondents in both cohorts agreed with statements related to citizenship benefits - that the experience made them more aware of “problems in the community,” “how to be of service to the community,” “interested in community service,” “interested in continuing the project as a volunteer or through an independent study,” “interested in community service as a career choice,” and that they made “a difference to community.” Here again, responses were significantly higher (indicating greater agreement) among the online student cohort.

With regard to whether the service-learning nature of the course contributed to their improvement across a range of discipline-specific outcomes, the study found that all respondents - online and 'other' cohort - agreed. The discipline-specific outcomes were

divided into two skills sets - technical and managerial. Respondents agreed that the course improved their ability to “communicate orally,” “work effectively in teams,” “communicate effectively in writing,” “stay current on changing technologies,” “locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources,” and “work with statistics/numbers.” They also agreed that the course increased their ability in relation to managerial skills, including, “ethical judgment and decision-making,” “critical thinking and analytical reasoning skill,” “apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings,” “analyze and solve complex problems and be “innovate and be creative, “ and “analyze and solve problems with people from different backgrounds and cultures.”

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Study

To conclude, this study’s findings support the assertion that service-learning as an online pedagogical approach offers a viable alternative model to the ‘conventional’ classroom experience, providing students with a unique opportunity to create a bridge between academic learning and community service. The results are important because, as Waldner, McGorry & Widener (2012) assert, e-service learning produces important benefits for all parties involved – for students, the community partner, and coordinating faculty member. In addition, e-service learning frees service-learning from geographical constraints and is therefore a powerful tool to promote engagement. E-service learning also has the potential to engage non-traditional student groups, overcome geographical constraints that would otherwise restrict some students, and students with other family or other commitments or obstacles that would otherwise prohibit their ability to participate. Undoubtedly, the pedagogy offers important possibilities to form innovative, challenging partnerships – a resounding win-win for all parties involved.

Although the survey response rate was high (72 per cent), the convenience nature of the study and small sample represents a limitation; subsequently, external validity is low. In addition, differences in student perceptions may be due to differences in course management and instructor variables. Another limitation of the study relates to causal inference - selection bias in particular as students who participated in the study were not randomly assigned to sections. In addition, while each student was in a section of a public relations writing with the same course description and learning goals and outcomes, it’s not realistic to assume that each instructor taught the class in the exact same way, varying degrees of experience and enthusiasm may have factored into responses.

Future research will expand the study by incorporating qualitative elements, and increasing the representativeness and generalizability of the study by increasing sample size (including other universities).

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