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Integrating Civic Engagement with the Online Classroom: Lessons from Tennessee State University

Online education continues to grow. “About 7.1 million students took at least one online course during fall 2012 – a 6.1 percent increase [over fall 2011].”¹ Online education breaks down barriers for students who face employment and familial obligations and/or geographic obstacles. The opportunity to earn one’s degree without facing class attendance at a specific time at a fixed, physical location opens the door to higher education. There are plenty of debates surrounding the effectiveness of online courses – some celebrate the new accessibility while others bemoan the loss of traditional college learning. This article recognizes the debate while accepting the reality that online education is here to stay. To that end, it is imperative that educators seek to provide online students with quality educational experiences that promote the values of their curriculum and properly train students for employment. Unfortunately, in the area of civic engagement educators are facing serious challenges in integrating activities, lessons and experiential learning opportunities within the online environment.

As online teaching and learning has grown, there have not been parallel innovative developments in the field of civically engaged teaching and learning. We have some catching up to do. We need to develop innovative ways to merge these two pedagogical dynamos. Few online learners are benefiting from civic and community engagement opportunities connected to the curriculum.²

At Tennessee State University (TSU) in Nashville, Tennessee, the Bachelor of Science in Urban Studies (BSUS) and minor on Nonprofit Management and Leadership (NML) programs have faced and continue to face the aforementioned dilemma – how do the BSUS and NML programs comprehensively educate their online students in the areas of active citizenship, public

service and civic engagement? In the BSUS and NML programs it is necessary to graduate students who harbor a lifelong commitment in these areas as these graduates will, most likely, be at the front lines of social service, public policy and government work.

The BSUS and NML programs at TSU began in 2008 with the goal of educating public servants for Middle Tennessee's public and nonprofit workforce. The programs sought to recruit traditional and non-traditional students by offering an array of course delivery methods including online and hybrid courses. Over the past six years, both programs have become increasingly non-traditional and increasingly online. Through these changes the faculty have remained committed to their core values and have explored a plethora of online service learning³ methods and civic engagement activities - some successful and some not. These experiences have helped the BSUS and NML programs adapt to the new online reality.

Service Learning

In the online environment with non-traditional, working adults it is much more difficult to require students to complete a project involving a large number of on-site hours. This requirement also, in many ways, defeats the appeal of online courses (non-fixed location, time). Several faculty members in the NML program attempted to simply transition their on-ground service learning requirements to the online classroom. For example, in one NML course a faculty member required students to complete twenty hours of community-based, fundraising work at a nonprofit. This requirement was an absolute failure as students could not find placements after working hours or child care for non-working hours placements. The faculty member ended up giving several students the opportunity to write a paper in lieu of the service learning requirement; thereby, losing the purpose of the educational opportunity. In the course

evaluations, students found the requirements “cumbersome, wasteful and completely unnecessary.” The next semester the faculty member adapted their approach to service learning by asking students to identify a community organization in need of fundraising documents (e.g. fundraising plan, grant inquiry letter template). The assignments for the course focused on completing these documents in service to both the community partner and to the student (as students then had applied practitioner documents for their portfolio). In another NML course the instructor identified a community organization in need of a specific marketing document and had the students work as a team to complete the document over the course of the semester in partnership with the nonprofit organization. For both of these assignments, students were given direct feedback from the nonprofit organization as well as the instructor. For the fundraising plan assignment, students were asked to submit a draft plan for assessment, received feedback and then were able to work with the community organization to respond to instructor concerns. These concerns often included lack of goal clarity, the fit of grant/special events for the size of the organization, and reasonableness of employee workflow. It is imperative that service learning activities in the online environment remain true to the benefits students see in the online classroom; flexible time and location.

Civic Engagement and Assignments

The BSUS program at TSU is an interdisciplinary social science. Subsequently, its curriculum is heavily focused on the history of, people residing in and policies governing urban areas. By necessity, students educated in urban studies must be well-equipped to work in and with organizations who actively work toward addressing issues of public concern. The BSUS students at TSU hope to address social and community policy issues including homelessness,

public transportation, pollution, juvenile crime and environmental justice. It is incumbent upon the BSUS faculty to design assignments with the goal of concurrently teaching practical skills on the process of and fostering the values within the area of civic engagement.

Faculty members at TSU have found several diverse methods of designing online assignments while meeting the aforementioned goals. One example is the Social Problem Portfolio. In this assignment, students are asked to identify a social problem of interest to them. They are given a set of parameters including identifying two different cities who are addressing the problem as to compare their program and policy approaches. The outcome of the assignment is to design a community presentation exploring the problem as if presenting to a group of community leaders and residents. This assignment helps students delve into a social problem while learning to make outreach to local communities. Another example is the Neighborhood Media Analysis Paper. In this assignment, students are asked to identify a small neighborhood in an urban area (e.g. Sylvan Park in Nashville) and to find ten recent news articles from local media about that neighborhood. Students analyze the article's content, stakeholders, neutrality and are then asked to research the history, demographics and social and political institutions of the neighborhood. This assignment provides students with content analysis skills as well as perspective related to media coverage as it relates to policymaking and community change. For each of these assignments, students are assessed on skills related to the formatting and content. For example, a student's Social Problem Portfolio may have great information but if it is not visibly appealing it will likely fail in its application. For both assignments student submit work at varying stages. For example, students submit their sources for the Neighborhood Media Analysis Paper as well as answers to very basic questions about their neighborhood four weeks into the semester. The students are given direct feedback from the instructor. At the mid-term,

students provide answers to more detailed questions about the articles (e.g. who are the stakeholders, what are the main themes of the articles etc...). This tiered approach helps students avoid the last-minute, up-all-night cramming so common amongst students. The external pressures on our students and the lack of constant instructor contact of the online classroom makes this process even more essential.

Overall, online assignments should seek to provide students with knowledge of community outreach methods, social problem histories, and public policy processes necessary to foster a commitment to civic responsibility and a sense of citizenship. This should be coupled with assignments that develop skills that future public servants will need to work with diverse communities.

Utilizing Online Methods of Civic Engagement

To many, the online environment has simply opened new forms of civic engagement. The accessibility of knowledge, information sharing and organizing methods has opened new doors for individuals to address public problems and find solutions for those problems. The online classroom should take advantage of the World Wide Web as a unique, independent tool for civic engagement.

Many of the non-traditional students in the BSUS and NML programs, while familiar with Facebook and Twitter, are not as familiar with other outlets for online civic engagement or the methods through which to engage online. Students are asked across many of the BSUS and NML courses to identify potential online outreach and engagement tools. For example, they are asked in the NML courses to review the ways in which nonprofits work with communities and stakeholders via the Web. Moreover, students are connected to content on blogs and social

networking sites for various course modules. Next Door application connects neighbors in small communities. This connection can be used to organize local events, discuss community concerns and/or share goods and services. For BSUS students exposure to and participation in the Next Door site for their neighborhood is an ideal learning opportunity to examine the intricacies of locally-based civic engagement and participation; one that increasingly combines the virtual and traditional methods. Utilizing the web as a teaching and learning tool is effective and exposes students to the growing world of virtual civic engagement.

An important component of a responsive online classroom is student feedback. The BSUS program uses multiple methods for feedback collection including traditional end-of-semester evaluations, anonymous suggestion boxes in the discussion areas of the course site, open forums and instructor chats, and periodic anonymous evaluation opportunities via the online quiz function. These diverse methods allow instructors to alter plans during the semester and prior to course development. One student commented on the very presence of these ongoing feedback tools, stating that the instructor, “provided a section on e-learn where we can ask questions, [making the course] easily accessible.” Students experiencing the BSUS and NML civic engagement opportunities provided essential feedback as part of the learning process. For example, speaking of the Social Problems Portfolio, students remarked that it made you, “open your eyes and look around” and “learn by helping increase our awareness.” Of the fundraising plan, “The best things were actually writing a fundraising plan and a grant proposal. Those two papers are 'real-world' applicable and become quite handy as we transition into nonprofit work.” Students also appreciate the use of diverse web-based tools in the learning experience. Students stated that the tools, “helped contribute to my understanding of real-life situations and how they pertain to Urban Politics” and were “exciting, pertinent and applicable!” One student even

commented that, “this was the first time I took an online course where the instructor used more than just a text book to teach.” This final comment makes it clear that the engaged classroom is an important goal that instructors are should be seeking to obtain.⁴

Designing the Civically-Engaged Virtual Classroom

Online courses should, ideally, expose students to the same experiences and opportunities that their traditional counterparts receive. In order to ensure this equality, faculty members must continually adapt their online assignments, content and course requirements to meet the changing realities of civic engagement. The BSUS and NML programs at TSU continue to make changes to their online courses to meet the challenge of designing a civically-engaged virtual classroom – one that utilizes the appeal of asynchronous online classroom.

¹ Babson Survey Research Group, “Grade Change: Tracking Online Education in the United States, 2013,” January 2014, <http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/grade-change-2013>, (accessed May 15, 2014).

² Center for Digital Civic Engagement, “Service-Learning in Online Courses,” <http://mncampuscompact.org/cdce/service-learning-in-online-courses/>, (accessed May 27, 2014).

³ Service learning is the integration of classroom learning activities with community engagement and field experience.

⁴ Student Evaluations, Tennessee State University (Spring 2013, Fall 2013, Spring 2014), Urban Sociology, Urban Politics, Marketing and Community Awareness for Nonprofit Organizations, Effective Fundraising and Grantwriting for Nonprofit Organizations.

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