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Concepts and Models
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Communication Studies

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Communication and Social Change: Applied Communication Theory in Service-Learning

by Robbin D. Crabtree

In the *Western Journal of Communication*, Nakayama (1995) argues for relevancy in the discipline of communication studies when he says, "[c]ommunication scholarship can (and should) make a difference in the everyday lives of people" (174). The same argument can be made for our teaching as an extension of our scholarship. Through service-learning in communication-related endeavors, our students will learn to do relevant research while also providing related and needed service to local communities. Service-learning courses also challenge faculty to unite the too-often disparate duties of teaching, research, and service. One master's-level course I teach at New Mexico State University serves as a case in point, using a service-learning model informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR) philosophy and methods.

This essay provides a rationale for service-learning in communication studies, delineates the features of this course and its major assignment, and explores some of the issues and dilemmas that faculty must consider when teaching a service-learning course.

Service-Learning and Communication

Service-learning has gained popularity in recent years, despite concurrent trends reflecting an increasing emphasis on individualism, decreasing sense of civic responsibility, and general alienation from community (Barber 1992; Kraft 1996). While service should not be seen as a panacea for deeply rooted social problems, it does fulfill a number of educational objectives including active learning, *praxis* (Freire 1970), collaborative learning, application, intercultural communication/perspective-taking, and critical reflection (CNCS 1993; Gamson 1997), along with providing needed service to local communities and opportunities for university-community collaboration. Related to the goals of participatory grass-roots community development, service-learning creates opportunities for collaboration among various communities, both in the solution of problems and in the generation of knowledge (Ansley and Gaventa 1997; Sirianni and Friedland 1997). The development of communication skills is central — by design and/or by outcome — to service-learning projects (e.g., Nelms 1991) as well as community development projects (e.g., Moemeka 1994). The terms "leadership," "participation,"

and "empowerment" are peppered throughout the literature on service-learning and community development; the critical component of each is communication (Windahl and Signitzer 1992).

Communication and Social Change: A Case Study

During the spring semester of 1995, I taught a master's-level seminar called Communication and Social Change. Having a background in development communication but teaching students mainly interested in organizational communication, I decided to build the class around a collaboration with a local nonprofit agency. The executive director of La Piñon Sexual Trauma Recovery and Crisis Center (heretofore referred to as the rape crisis center or RCC) agreed to a collaboration to be centered around their spring fundraising event, Take Back the Night. This agreement was somewhat difficult to arrange since the executive director had had disappointing experiences with university faculty in the past. The students' agreement was unanimous when I presented the idea.

The course was based in two essential areas of communication theory. First, the literature on development communication, focused primarily around so-called "third world" community development issues, provided the foundation and rationale for our project (Hornik 1988; Moemeka 1994; National Academy of Sciences 1972). Second, the literature on communication campaigns served as the empirical and practical guide for our endeavors (Jones 1982; Kotler and Roberto 1989; Rice and Paisley 1981; Rogers 1995; Rogers and Storey 1987). Together these literatures provide a strong theoretical and empirical basis for communication-for-change projects within a service-learning framework. Finally, the Participatory Action Research literature added some specific methodological and ethical guidelines that informed the project (Brown and Tandon 1983; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Hall 1981; Tandon 1981). The attached syllabus summarizes the general framework for the course.

The primary course assignment was a group project around the Take Back the Night (TBTN) event. While TBTN varies from place to place, it is a world-wide event protesting the prevalence of sexual violence. In Las Cruces, New Mexico, it entails an afternoon 5K walk/10K run, then a public gathering with awards and a raffle followed by a candlelight vigil at sunset where some participants may tell their stories while others simply speak the names of people they know who have been sexually assaulted. It is a powerful example of collective action with the potential of raising both awareness and funds for the local rape crisis center. Unfortunately, the agency did not have the personnel or expertise to plan the event for maximum effect. For the previous two years the event had had a disappointing turnout and

had resulted in almost no media attention or public awareness.

Working in collaboration with agency staff and volunteers, the 12 students enrolled in the course formed the following committee structure. One group did fundraising. The previous year, TBTN had broken even. The event made back only what it had put out to fund the event itself. The fundraising committee raised approximately \$2,500 to fully underwrite that year's event. Another \$2,500 was earned by the event itself, all of which went toward the provision of agency services. This was the agency's single most successful fundraising event in its three-year history.

A second group did media relations. It used guerrilla journalism (Gallion 1993) and public relations strategies to get the issue of sexual assault more coverage in local media. It arranged for the executive director and various class members to serve as panelists on local radio and television talk shows. It created public service announcements for print and broadcast media. When an eight-month pregnant woman was raped by an English Department teaching assistant during the semester, the committee was in the position to bring the rape crisis center to the public's attention as never before.

A third group handled campus relations. Given the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, this committee attempted to raise campus awareness through holding teach-ins, making class presentations, setting up tables in the student union, recruiting volunteers for the agency, and orchestrating campus organizations' participation in the TBTN event (fraternities, sororities, athletic teams, clubs).

A fourth group handled promotions throughout the community and outlying areas. Through the use of posters, stickers, buttons, and fliers that they created, this committee promoted awareness of the issue as well as the event itself. Participation in Take Back the Night quadrupled from the previous year, and was double the participation of the Albuquerque event despite the fact that Las Cruces has only about one-fifth of Albuquerque's population.

Together the students in the class represented more than 50 years of related education and/or experience. Breaking down the hierarchical structure of the traditional classroom where the teacher is the expert, they were able to identify and use the education, work, and life experience they already had as undergraduates; community volunteers; political activists; P.R. and marketing personnel; along with their newly-acquired theoretical and empirical knowledge in communication for change. In course evaluations, they acknowledged the opportunity to apply both their education and their experience as the single-most important feature of the course (also see Kraft 1996).

The impact on the agency was also powerful. As the executive director of the rape crisis center stated in her letter of appreciation, "This is the first

time that a professor has reached out to my agency for the purpose of a project with such long-term and long-reaching effects. To give a class the 'real life' experience as a group, as opposed to independent studies, allows the cohesiveness and team building so desperately needed in this community." The fact that some of the students have continued their association with the agency as volunteers, contributors, and event participants further attests to the project's meaningfulness.

Logistical, Ethical, and Professional Considerations

Service-learning is not without its problems, despite its being exciting and effective. The following brief discussion pinpoints some of the dilemmas faculty tend to confront when they do service-learning courses or class projects.

Logistical Problems. The first issue I confronted concerned the negotiation of compatible goals between the agency and the students. While we usually encountered success in this arena, coordinating a class project with the daily functioning of a nonprofit agency can be difficult. Since discourse between the service partners should take place throughout the project (Freire 1970), creating time and opportunities for this exchange can be disruptive to both agency functioning and student and faculty schedules. I personally underwent the RCC 40-hour training during spring break and by becoming a crisis advocate achieved a dual membership that allowed me to serve as the bridge person. In addition, at least one student attended every event planning meeting for agency staff and volunteers so we could coordinate our efforts. Becoming familiar with each other, building mutual trust, and learning to respect each other's distinctive roles took time and effort.

Further, there exist barriers between the town and the university. As in most college towns, our two communities often coexist with little interaction. Of specific concern here was the fact that all but one of the students spoke no language other than English, whereas much of the community is Spanish-speaking. In the future, this barrier will need to be addressed more effectively by both the agency and any service-learning projects sponsored by the university.

In addition to communication knowledge and skills, the students need creative talents. In order to complete many of the tasks outlined by the group, specific skills that are not part of our curriculum need to be accessed. We, ourselves, for example, were fortunate to have a team member who had experience as a graphic artist. Also, some students have a tendency to be passive learners. While excited about the applied nature of the course, those without activist inclinations needed to be prodded into action.

Finally, campus authorities may dislike collective action on the part of

students. For instance, when this group staged a leafletting before a major public lecture at the student union, administrators were displeased and called the Communication Studies Department in protest. The students had done nothing illegal, but their visibility had repercussions for the department.

There are logistical issues related to identifying and developing a functional relationship with an agency, creating contacts with local media, and the sorts of difficulties students face in most group projects they do for courses (finding times to meet, etc.). However, with advance work by the instructor, above-average students, and a supportive department, most of these obstacles can be overcome.

Ethical Concerns. The ethical issues that need to be dealt with in the course of a service-learning project cannot be overemphasized. One early dilemma came after students did their first paper assessing various issues related to sexual assault (date rape, serial sex criminology, the legal system, counseling and recovery, etc.). The students' consciousness was raised. However, as a result, they became more afraid of sexual assault. They reported unusually heightened sensitivity to the issue, and their peace-of-mind was alarmingly disrupted. One solution was to schedule a self-defense workshop for the class, which we held one week in place of our conventional seminar. I felt it was my responsibility to respond to this unforeseen consequence produced by my course.

An important consideration any instructor must make concerns the long-term effects of one semester's service-learning project on an agency. I knew that the agency we worked with would be left without a comparable infrastructure or people-power the following year; no long-term commitment had been made. One way in which we addressed this situation was through my becoming cochair of the event on an ongoing basis as part of my responsibilities as an RCC volunteer. In this way I could maintain some of the infrastructure designed by my students. Individual students also remained committed to the organization in various ways.

Another ethical concern revolves around the implicit competition between an instructor's teaching goals and social change objectives. For instance, even if parts of the project fail, the project as a whole can still serve as a great learning opportunity for students. Also, while truly participatory projects have more integrity, the semester system is too short to allow achieving bona fide participation at the community level. This long-term issue needs to be confronted by faculty as well as by the institution if service-learning programs are to be implemented ethically, using the most responsible and effective (i.e., participatory) methods (see Ansley and Gaventa 1997).

Perhaps the most important ethical issue is exploitation. As Gamson

(1997) states, "We must recognize that communities are not voids to be organized and filled by the more knowledgeable; they are well-developed, complex, and sophisticated organisms that demand to be understood on their own terms — or they will not cooperate" (13). Neither communities nor individual agencies within communities should be exploited for the learning opportunities of (sometimes) elite college students. Assuring that genuine service to communities is taking place — on their own terms — must be paramount. University-community collaboration requires "moving over, making space, and in some instances sharing or giving up certain kinds of power" (Ansley and Gaventa 1997: 53).

These issues should be the subject of advanced soul-searching on the part of the instructor, should be brought to the attention of department heads and administrators in a forthright manner, and should serve as subjects for class discussion and reflection. In fact, critical reflection has been identified as the key component to successful service-learning projects (e.g., Kraft 1996; Rutter and Newman 1989).

Professional Considerations. One of the most significant barriers to the implementation of service-learning is motivating faculty to participate (Bringle and Hatcher 1996). Service-learning is often incompatible with current professional pressures on faculty, which place emphasis on publishing *über alles*. The faculty should carefully weigh the following considerations.

Service-learning courses take more time and more energy than does regular classroom teaching. For example, in addition to my own training, I met with student committees outside of class, participated in student-organized actions, put in many hours related directly to the event itself, and spent several hours in the hospital emergency room with recent victims/survivors of sexual assault. For me, service is critical to my own sense of community. Nevertheless, teaching responsibilities and tenure worries are legitimate priorities that can be overwhelming. When compared with publications, neither teaching innovations nor community service is particularly valued in most tenure reviews (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Gabelnick 1997).

Teaching a service-learning course may also mean a public profile for the instructor. The class and the instructor can become newsworthy. Such visibility, in turn, can bring criticism as often as acclaim — depending on the values of one's department head, deans, and other administrators. For instance, I appeared on television and radio, besides being interviewed for several newspaper articles. During these media appearances, I did not hide my radical feminism beneath a veil of "professionalism," and my department head expressed his concern.

While potentially risky, service-learning is a "practice-what-you-preach" opportunity for faculty. Service-learning demands that faculty practice the active learning strategies they purport to value, respect the diversity of stu-

dent learning styles, and work to overcome the disconnection between our work as teachers and our profession as researchers (Gamson 1997). In order to do service-learning, faculty need to be personally committed. Ironically, like my department head, some of the students in my course were uncomfortable with my intense personal commitment. In course evaluations, a couple of students noted that they found my involvement "subjective" and "unprofessional." This points to a broader concern about what it means to be a professional academic. Ansley and Gaventa (1997) explore this problem eloquently when they note:

A young, untenured professor does not have to be a heartless or craven careerist to find herself cut off from the very social problems and people that initially drew her to her discipline. She finds in her everyday academic life no existing conduits through which to receive information about or build relationships with those people and those problems. (52)

Service-learning can be one of these conduits and make a professional academic feel more alive, more connected, and more empowered as she passes the same feelings on to her students and, through them, to the community. As with most social action, service-learning encompasses the often dangerous practice of democracy (Ansley and Gaventa 1997).

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COMM 560:
Communication & Social Change

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Moemeka, A. A. (Ed.). (1994). Communicating for Development: A New Pan-Disciplinary Perspective. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Windahl, S. & Signitzer, B. (with J. T. Olson). (1992). Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication. London: Sage.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING AND RESEARCH: (On Reserve)

Many of the items on the attached bibliography are on reserve. Others are available in the library's regular collection. These are made available as supplementary reading (some of them will be referred to in lecture) and for your individual research. This list is by no means exhaustive (either in terms of available materials on the subjects or in terms of NMSU library holdings on these subjects).

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course marries theory and practice towards the objective of social change. We begin from the perspective that there are serious social issues before us, and that communication is central to addressing those issues. In this course, we continue with the perspective that we have the social responsibility to apply our knowledge and skills to the betterment of society, and to commit ourselves to the service of those most disadvantaged by the structures and norms of our society. Further, this course brings the academic out to the community as we undertake an actual communication campaign around a serious issue facing this community. The course will entail a single group project which allows students to apply communication theory in a social change effort. (If you have interests or research needs which don't fit with the group project, an individual project may be proposed as an alternative.)

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- To build understanding of the key issues related to communication and social change;
- To explore various theories of and approaches to communicating for change;
- To identify and analyze a social problem relevant to our community;
- To develop, plan, and undertake a communication campaign to address the specific problem;
- To consider ethical and methodological issues related to the study and practice of communication for social change.

EXPECTATIONS:

- Attendance and thoughtful, informed participation in class are critical to the development of a stimulating and collaborative learning environment.
- All reading assignments should be done prior to the class period when they will be discussed.
- All writing assignments must be APA style with appropriate and thorough notations and citations.
- All oral presentations should be done in a scholarly fashion.
- All assignments will be turned in on time.
- Communication is a two-way and transactional process. Every effort should be made to practice effective interpersonal, group, and public communication skills in and out of the classroom.

ASSIGNMENTS:

5 Microtheme Exams	25%	Group/Campaign Contribution	20%
Problem Assessment	15%	Campaign Evaluation	15%
Literature Review	20%	Attendance/Participation	5%

MICROTHEME EXAMS:

Rather than formal examinations on the course readings, a series of essay exams will be given randomly throughout the semester. These questions require that you have done the reading and are able to thoughtfully reflect on those readings in relation to ongoing class content discussions. Responses should be well-reasoned and well-written. Generally you will have 30-45 minutes to consider the question and write your response. Sometimes these exams may be given as take-home essays to complete as you do the reading. Microthemes allow you to demonstrate familiarity with the literature, synthesize your ideas, and make connections between various perspectives. An analytical approach is more useful than the ability to regurgitate specific details from the readings; although, details help you to support your answer.

GROUP/CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTION:

This course will require a great deal of group cooperation, both within the class and between the class and a community agency. Therefore, you will be expected to attend meetings, generate ideas for the campaign, and accomplish tasks assigned by the group. In order to measure your contribution, I will consider: the grade assigned to you by your fellow group members, a grade I assign you as an observer (and frequent participant) of the group, and a journal of your campaign activities. Journals will include a log of phone calls, meetings, and so forth; samples of your ideas (whether or not the group adopted them); reflections on the group process and the readings when appropriate; and an assessment of your own performance as a team member.

PROBLEM ASSESSMENT PAPER: (6-8 pgs)

Based on your specific area of interest, you will explore an aspect of the social problem which could be addressed through communication. Your assessment of this problem should include a thorough description of the problem as discovered in previous writing on the subject (think about using both scholarly publications as well as other sources of information), and a description of the specific population affected by this problem. Your paper should address the following questions:

- What is the specific problem and how does it relate to the state of social well-being and the notion of social justice? (this will be the main part of the paper)
- Why is this problem/situation important to study? To change?
- What specific attitudinal, behavioral, and/or structural changes need to be made in order to address this problem?
- Who are the populations most affected by this problem? (demographic characteristics, geographic locations, etc.)
- What are the cultural factors which will influence the ways this population should be approached about the problem?
- What are the communication norms of this population and how might they influence project design?
- At what level (individual, organizational, community, mass public, etc.) is the solution to this problem best sought?

LITERATURE REVIEW: (8-10 pgs)

Find three articles which report on communication for social change projects. These can be in the so called "first" or "third" worlds; they can be related to health, agriculture, political consciousness, education, etc. They can be campaigns that sought to change attitudes or behaviors. Review and assess these projects according to what you have learned through course readings and lectures. Be sure to set up your evaluative criteria (and cite your sources). Remember, you can't discuss everything, so focus on what you think are the most significant strengths and weaknesses of the projects. This paper will help you apply what you have read and heard in class, and assist you in planning our communication-for-change project.

CAMPAIGN EVALUATION: (5-7 pgs)

After the campaign is completed, we will need to evaluate its effectiveness. It will be impossible to do this using systematic research of the target population, but you will be able to assess our campaign according to all you have learned in class. This should be both academic and reflective; in other words, there should be citations from class and other readings, as well as personal insights and anecdotes. The format can be similar to your literature review, but should include readings and class discussions completed since the literature review.