



How Applied Learning Shapes Nonprofit Management Education

by Judith Millesen

Editors' note: *The Nonprofit Quarterly's 2009 supplement on nonprofit educational programs focuses on the evolution of service experience in this rapidly evolving field and its implications for prospective students, educators, and the nonprofits that work with the graduates of these programs.*

IN NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, applied-learning techniques provide students with the practical skills they need after graduation. Nonprofit employers value the combination of academic rigor and hands-on experience, but what makes for an effective, experiential university-based program? To get a sense of what constitutes a strong applied-learning program, I conducted several interviews with faculty and administrators in university-based

centers across the country that are dedicated to creating a strong link between community engagement and the academic work of a university. These interviewees cited the integrity of the institution's commitment to applied learning and the ability of a university's faculty to carefully organize a program around rich unpredictability.

Institutional Commitment

In terms of a program's integrity, it matters when

a university makes the mission of the nonprofit management center or institute an extension of an explicit commitment to service.

At the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, the work is “part and parcel of what Brown is,” Roger Nozaki explains. “Students come to Brown because they are interested in learning what they can do to make a difference.”

At Xavier’s Leadership Center, faculty members work with students to “solve urgent and important problems while facilitating an environment of guidance, participation, and hands-on learning” that is consistent with the university’s mission of “assisting students as they journey toward becoming civic-minded leaders.”

Institutional commitment is essential to the success of an applied-learning program. When undertaken correctly, these experiences are incredibly time- and labor- intensive, requiring a dedicated effort to build and sustain relationships with community partners so that authentic practical learning can take place outside the classroom.

Authentic Engagement

Strategies for authentic engagement generally should be longer term and build trust between a university and nonprofit leaders as well as reflect an understanding of the projects that will best serve students and add value to nonprofits.

But building trust is tricky. As in any relationship, many factors influence creating a healthy partnership between a university and a community partner. So managing expectations of community members, students, and a university is essential. Ensuring that everyone is on the same page and maintaining open lines of communication go a long way toward creating valuable partnerships.

“We can’t just send students out into the field,” remarks one instructor, “and hope that they pick an applied-learning experience and that they can figure out how it fits into the curricular content. If I’m going to assign a student into some sort of applied project for their coursework, I will put as much care into it as I would picking exactly the right textbook.”

Still, part of what makes an applied-learning program work is its ability to respond to

real complexity. After all, this kind of learning teaches the skills that students will be expected to have in the field, and there is no way to fully anticipate when a situation can present teachable moments. One instructor likened the experience to his program’s boot camp session in which military representatives conduct a strategic thinking exercise that focuses on the value of partnerships and leaning on others. The exercise presents a chaotic situation, and instructors look for teachable moments. Faculty members have discovered that the opportunity to find these teachable moments arises when they are least looking for them. And these moments often don’t occur in the classroom, so it can be difficult for instructors to create these moments when they are accustomed to more structure.

Complexity and teachable moments can manifest in any number of unpredictable situations. Instructors must let go of the perception of safety that traditional classroom structure provides and be comfortable responding to the teachable opportunities that unpredictable situations offer.

Addressing this complexity adequately can be a difficult thread to pull through, but it is essential to the learning experience. Some programs encourage co-teaching classes, and many integrate practitioner presentations into classroom learning.

So applied learning is part and parcel of what’s happening in the classroom, not an add-on. In strong programs, faculty take the lead in identifying the project and in making a connection between the curriculum and the projects that students work on. And formality actually matters. The structuring of the agreement between a community partner to ensure that everyone is on the same page may seem bureaucratic, but the more formalized the process, the better the experience for everyone. Client expectations are managed, the integrity of the learning experience is ensured for students, and the university is able to better fulfill an articulated service role in the community. Moreover, all participants know what to expect.

Well-Articulated Expectations

Many of the program leaders with whom I spoke had strong relationships and an ongoing dialogue with their community partners, so they had a

strong corps of resources to which they could turn for advice. Experience plays a major role in receptivity, so the care with which projects are chosen and monitored lays the foundation. One interviewee discussed the valuable role of alumni in locating and hosting projects. “They’ve been through the program, they understand how it works, they know what to expect,” the interviewee says. “They can think about the project in the way that the school actually does the work.”

Again, some measure of formality matters. A careful process for identifying projects and articulating expectations is essential. To solicit projects, some schools send out a formal request for proposal, while others have an established network of community partners. It is also crucial to be forthright with prospective clients; they are expected to work with the team, provide feedback and advice, and evaluate the team’s performance (and this assessment is factored into the student’s overall grade for program coursework). Clients also agree to attend the public presentation of projects and to permit the university to publicize the work students have done for them. In some programs, clients reimburse students’ out-of-pocket expenses.

Random-Order Learning and Other Nonlinear Stuff

Although a robust body of context-specific experiences is essential for learning to occur, experience can become learning only once it is reflected upon. Reflection is important to applied learning and some of students’ “aha” moments may reveal themselves at unexpected moments. Persistent, directed vigilance to find teachable moments can facilitate the process of translating experience into learning. But this requires flexibility in the learning process.

The learning process has to include moments for students to say, “I feel,” “I think,” and then “I do,” but most academics omit the “I feel” part. So how do you bring faculty along? “Many faculty members live in their head,” shares one interviewee. For them, “teaching is one-directional not bidirectional. . . . These faculty members teach just what’s in their head.” Instructors are often anxious about a chaotic classroom, but students

need to get used to experiencing and working with the unexpected. So instructors need to work with students to allow events to unfold, seizing the moments when learning can happen. This can be a seemingly random process, but we have to seize those moments. In stellar programs, faculty members do just that.

Challenges

Even when there is a strong institutional commitment to applied learning and highly developed mechanisms for aligning expectations, a few challenges must still be overcome to ensure programmatic integrity and success as well as to generate authentic learning experiences for students. Interviewees identified at least four important challenges.

First, it is essential to engage faculty in pedagogical discussions about what matters. “The problem with too many universities,” notes one interviewee, “is that we never have deep conversations about what good learning is or what good teaching is. And we get all wrapped up in this whole idea of academic freedom: ‘No one touches my classroom, I know better what to teach, it’s nobody’s business what I am teaching’—that’s the academic culture. [So you have to] find the faculty who are open to learning.”

A second challenge is related to student expectations and assessment. “Just like in the business world, salary and bonus and performance appraisal always get in the way of organizational effectiveness,” notes one interviewee. “In the classroom, grades get in the way. . . . Students are so fixated on what they need to do to get a good grade. . . . You want to almost scream at them and say, ‘I don’t give a damn about the grade. I care that you have an epiphany and gain new insight,’ and it is really hard to make that happen in a classroom.”

A closely related third challenge is students’ lack of experience in the field. “What I expect from students is something equivalent to what their boss would ask of them, and they really do not have the skills to do that,” emphasizes an interviewee. “Crafting acceptable solutions is harder in the public and nonprofit sector, because there are so many variables and other kinds of things

Instructors need to work with students to allow events to unfold, seizing the moments when learning can happen.

that are happening. You develop sensors and are able to pick up the cues.”

And finally, even the most well-articulated agreement or memorandum of understanding cannot predict the future or prevent people from behaving badly. “We can’t control the clients,” emphasizes an interviewee. “Sometimes liaisons move; projects fall off the radar at the client agency; sometimes people get busy at the client agency and don’t provide prompt feedback. . . . People change jobs, get sick; things crop up. Sometimes there will be conflict within a client agency about what they really want, and the team faces a challenge to work with the client agency about what the final deliverable will look like. . . . We try to stay out of all of that and coach the students about how to deal with it. But clients are unpredictable, and they have their own agendas.”

In sum, applied learning is an important

pedagogical tool that can increase self-directed learning and improve problem-solving skills. By recognizing that students come to the classroom with knowledge and beliefs about what is being taught, faculty can help students to make connections between what they know, the reference materials they discover, the situation in their organizations, and the goals of the classroom. Even though complexity will rear its head along the way, students are almost always pleased with the “real world” experience that applied learning provides.

JUDITH MILLESEN is an associate professor of political science and a faculty fellow at the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs at Ohio University.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 160107.