

E-Service-Learning:
Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Learning
Kathleen M. Marleneanu
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

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Online learning is transforming the more traditional approaches to instruction and learning as often seen in regular classrooms. While transitioning learning to online seems to open up an endless amount of resources for student engagement, these resources must actually be decided upon and utilized by the instructor. If not, the online students, physically separated from their instructor and classmates, may easily become disengaged, hindering learning. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2012) state that in order to provide students with engaging learning experiences, “schools, universities and training organizations are looking for more effective learning approaches that focus on the students’ learning and less on the delivery of content” (p. 195). Service-learning is a viable method of achieving this, and with rapidly expanding online programs, e-service-learning is becoming even more relevant (Waldner, McGorry, and Widener, 2012). Incorporating e-service-learning into online courses with the use of best practices and effective tools provides numerous benefits, particularly that of enhancing student engagement.

E-Service-Learning Article Summary

The journal article “E-Service-Learning: The Evolution of Service-Learning to Engage a Growing Online Student Population” by Waldner et al. (2012) explains what e-service learning is, as well as its benefits, limitations, and best practices.

Definition

E-service-learning is the online counterpart of service-learning which “involves course assignments that give students the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills taught in the classroom to projects that benefit the community” (Waldner et al., 2012, p. 124). Waldner et al.

(2012) explain that service-learning becomes e-service-learning when “the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online” (p. 125).

Types. Through their research, Waldner et al. (2012) identified four types of e-service-learning: instruction online, service onsite (e.g., students in an online sports management class meet via telephone with area schools, and then perform five hours of on-site service to meet identified needs); instruction onsite, service online (e.g., students in a face-to-face web design course create a website for the local school district); instruction and/or service partially onsite and partially online (e.g., students in an online grant writing class develop a grant proposal by doing online research, but also meet with the teacher and client for discussion and presentation of work); and lastly, instruction and service 100% online (e.g., students in an online health care course check and update a not-for-profit care facility’s human resources policies and procedures for compliancy).

Benefits

As shown by its four types, integrating e-service-learning can enrich a wide variety of courses. The benefits extend to the students, community partners, participating faculty, and educational institution (Waldner et al., 2012). Most importantly, Waldner et al. (2012) suggest that e-service-learning “holds the potential to transform both service-learning and online learning by freeing service-learning from geographical constraints, and by equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement” (p. 123).

Limitations and Solutions

While many benefits of e-service-learning exist, some limitations are also present. However, Waldner et al. (2012) have identified ways to overcome these limitations:

Training of all participants can minimize technological challenges. Solid course design and real-time synchronous virtual class sessions, along with clear discussion of expectations, can ease communication barriers. Instructors can address the additional student and instructor workload by explicitly acknowledging the student benefits of e-service-learning in terms of practical application and hands-on service. (p. 145)

These solutions are part of the best practice design strategies that instructors should consider when implementing e-service-learning.

Best Practices

The best practices for designing e-service-learning courses, as found by Waldner et al. (2012), include “providing training for the parties involved; coordinating technology options with the community partner; drafting contracts and memorandums of understanding for students and community partners; scheduling pre-set meeting times to enhance communication; and implementing strategies to facilitate group interaction” (p. 145). Following these practices will help set-up a smooth and engaging learning experience.

E-Service-Learning and Distance Education

With the growth of distance education, and online learning in particular, there is a push for learning experiences to become more student-centered. Simonson et al. (2012) state that the Internet “can provide a student-centered learning environment, if the materials and methods are designed to take advantage of the interactivity and resources the Internet provides” (p. 126). E-service-learning is designed to utilize both online interactivity and resources, making it a valuable method for shifting the focus onto the learner as opposed to the instructor. Student-centered learning promotes active, collaborative, mastery, and student-controlled learning (Simonson et al., 2012). In addition to having these qualities, e-service-learning helps develop

students' ethics. Ruso (2012) explains the importance of this: "For an institution to be defined as excellent, personal development of the students should also be facilitated and this is possible through building better bridges to the world outside campus borders. Education is not limited by schools anymore" (p. 382). In light of this, distance education is an extremely effective conduit for service-learning. In online distance education, students can participate "from school, home, office, or community locations" (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 125).

Student Engagement in Online Learning

No matter where students are physically, within the online course they need to be engaged. Instructors can help facilitate this engagement by designing the course to be interactive and meaningful. The educational philosopher John Dewey theorized that meaningful learning was learning by doing; and it was partially from this idea that service-learning evolved (Waldner et al., 2012). There are certain expectations and tools in online learning that relate to meaningful experiences and corresponding student engagement.

Expectations. To promote student engagement, online learning instructors are expected to create a learning environment "that utilizes life, work, and educational experiences as key elements in the learning process in order to make it meaningful", and present the curriculum and provide tools for students so that they can easily "transcribe theory into practice" (Illinois Online Network, 2000, para. 9). Incorporating e-service-learning into a course does just that: "Service-learning allows students to learn by doing, connecting theory with practice" (Waldner et al., 2012, p. 124). To measure student learning, meaningful performance-based assessments are also expected. Waldner et al. (2012) suggest that e-service-learning similarly addresses assessment issues "by providing meaningful questions, by connecting to real-world issues, and by creating deliverables for the external community partner(s)" (p. 127).

Tools. To meet these expectations of engagement, certain technology tools are especially helpful to incorporate into an e-service-learning course. Waldner et al. (2012) cite studies that found web-based journals to foster community development and reflection, and simulations and games to foster team-building and simulate practical experience. A study by Ruso (2012) found that the online communication tools of email, instant messaging, and other web 2.0 technologies foster “engagement, commitment between individuals to have good pedagogical practice, [and] collaboration to complete tasks together” (p. 376).

Personal Thoughts and Conclusion

Student engagement is essential for effective online learning, and e-service-learning enhances this engagement by providing student-centered, meaningful learning experiences. Simonson et al. (2012) propose that the “transformation from teacher-centered to student-centered can be seen when the instructor sets aside traditional ideas about teaching and begins to ‘think outside of the box’” (p. 196); and I see e-service-learning as a result of just that. I am currently in an online grant writing class in which we each partner with a small nonprofit to write a grant proposal for an identified need. It is the first service-learning course I have ever been a part of, and even within the first week I could feel a higher level of engagement with my classmates, instructor, and material than I usually have in courses, whether face-to-face or online. Waldner et al. (2012) state: “Those who study online learning environments call for techniques to enhance engagement. E-service-learning answers this call” (p. 127). Based on the research I have read and on my personal experience, I agree, and hope to see e-service-learning become a more prevalent part of distance education in the near future.

References

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