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CYBERNETIC SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS LEARNED

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Although the title of the course, Combating Loneliness among Older People in Contemporary Society, states a clear goal, our service-learning class was shaped by five guiding parameters. By avoiding certain things, we allowed the course to self-organize and evolve into a learning experience beyond the one originally envisioned. This paper introduces the cybernetic concepts that informed our service-learning course design strategy. We discuss our efforts to remain true to our operational norms when confronted by bureaucratic obstacles and unexpected challenges. Finally, we glean several lessons from our experience to aid others in course design and advocate for the cybernetic approach.

Cybernetics explores how systems maintain order through processes of information flow involving negative feedback. The approach essentially attempts to understand elementary learning methods (artificial intelligence). One tenet of the perspective is that one can find what one is looking for by avoiding what one does not want to find. For example, when learning how to ride a bike for the first time, a child stays on a bicycle by not falling down. Discussing the advantages of utilizing such cybernetic principles in organizational design, Morgan (2006) states that “we find the principle of avoiding noxiants defining a space of acceptable behavior within which individuals can act, innovate, or self-organize as they please” (p. 96). In other words, avoiding what one does not want can open up a variety of ways to

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accomplish tasks. Concurring with Morgan (2006), we contend that cybernetic notions are useful in course design as well as organizational design. By avoiding certain undesirable outcomes, a service-learning course may self-organize into a learning experience beyond original expectations. The creation of our service-learning course, Combating Loneliness among Older People in Contemporary Society, was guided by five such design principles. We are not suggesting that these are appropriate for all service-learning courses involving seniors, but they reflect our opinions and preferences. These principles follow:

1. The service-learning course will not simply be added to an existing course.
2. The service-learning course will not be totally applied.
3. The service-learning course will not promote secondary, instrumental relationships between students and seniors.
4. The service-learning course will not leave the seniors without concrete byproducts that celebrate their lives and symbolize the relationship between students and seniors.
5. The service-learning course will not be without ongoing assessment mechanisms.

In the following section, we review our five principles and discuss why they are vital and how we attempted to avoid them. We consider the outcomes in course structure and course process that our conscious avoidance produced.

FIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR A SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

The Service-Learning Course will not Simply be Added to an Existing Course

With increased pressure from external agencies for courses with a civic engagement component, many universities have created offices of service-learning. Many faculty members eager to pursue the righteous goal of civic engagement simply add a community assignment to an existing course or relabel an existing course. Such activities provide excellent photo opportunities for alumni magazines and fodder for annual reports. However, we did not want to merely add on to an existing course, because we wanted the community

service element of the course to be the focus rather than what could be perceived as a marginalized component.

To avoid the tendency to just add a service component to an existing course, we began planning our new course over 18 months before we hoped to implement it. Since the Office of Service-Learning had no monies to free us from our normal responsibilities in development or delivery of the course, we initiated talks with our dean about the feasibility of offering such a new course in light of our regular course obligations. We argued that our courses would offer an excellent public relations opportunity for the Arts and Sciences Department and that we would meet all normal load obligations. Ultimately, we were given the green light to begin course development and pursue Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for human subject research.

At our university, we can offer a new experimental course (X Course) one time without going through the normal curriculum administrative channels. This option allows us to get the course listed quickly with relatively few bureaucratic hurdles. If the newly created general course title, Service-Learning in Sociology, is deemed successful, then our department will formalize the offering. This would enable other department faculty with an established venue for service-learning course development. In other words, the department might offer another community service opportunity, Service-Learning in Sociology: Understanding Alzheimer's Disease, in a future semester. Staying true to the first design principle, each course will be first and foremost focused around community service and will count toward the normal load of the faculty member.

The Service-Learning Course will not be Totally Applied

Although focusing on experience, the course was intended for sociology. Students were expected to frame their experiences through the theories and concepts offered in this discipline. Developing the syllabus, we made sure that the students would be exposed to current (Atchley, 1997; Cushman, 1990) as well as classic theorists (Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1962; Marx, 1964), providing a platform for understanding alienation and loneliness. In the fall semester, our students spent one hour in the traditional classroom situation for every hour at the site. The first semester tests attempted to assess how well the students could apply these theoretical concepts to their experiences with their senior partners.

We also attempted to foster sociological imagination in our students (Mills, 1959). The students were asked to link their senior partner's lives (private troubles) to broader societal events (public troubles). In the early part of the course, we had the students create a timeline using the Our Timelines Web site (www.ourtimelines.com) to sensitize them to the public troubles experienced by their partners. In the second half of the course, we requested a page discussing the social history of each public trouble. We also called for at least one page on how the public trouble impacted and continues to influence their partner's life. Through such readings, activities, and assessment, we made this course not simply an applied do-gooder experience, but a true sociology course.

The Service-Learning Course will not Promote Secondary, Instrumental Relationships between Students and Seniors

In our observations of other service-learning courses, it appeared that often only a few visits were made to the sites during a relatively brief time frame. Although beneficial, we were afraid such a visitation schedule would reinforce a revolving door mind-set shared by many residents in such institutionalized settings. Staff members come and go, but lasting ties are not created or maintained (Diamond, 1986). Since our topic was the risk of loneliness in older populations, we were quite sensitive to this potential issue. To try to avoid this, we matched one senior with one student for the entire academic year. The 4-hour course was structured over two semesters. The students received one grade at the end of the spring semester for both semesters. In other words, the students had to commit for the entire school year in order to pass the course.

In the fall semester (3 credit hours), we emphasized the theoretical foundation and introduced a variety of activities to build relationships between students and their partners. For example, some assignments involved discussing cherished objects (Marx, Solomon, & Miller, 2004) or developing an activity together and presenting it to the class. In the spring (1 credit hour), the students completed their partner's life history utilizing Miller's (2007) *The Journey: A Celebration of Life* and completed the aforementioned sociological imagination paper. The spring assignments were conducted as an independent study with bimonthly visits with one of the instructors. Overall, we fostered primary group relations through long-term, face-to-face interaction.

The Service-Learning Course will not Leave the Seniors without Concrete Byproducts that Celebrate their Lives and Symbolize the Relationship between Student and Senior

We took our responsibilities to the seniors very seriously. In gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for human subject research, we indicated that any risks to the seniors would be balanced by concrete benefits. We in no way wanted to be perceived as exploiting the seniors. We promised them a free life history and cooperative activities with their partner. We had the students aid the seniors in writing ethical wills (Baines, 2006) with the residents.

In our original recruitment sessions, we clearly indicated what would be provided to the participants. However, it became clear through our various assessment strategies, observations, and surveys that the quality of the products was less important than the time shared during the tasks. One resident wrote that “I enjoyed talking to you and learning a little bit about you and telling you about myself.” Likewise, students spoke of “making a new friend” or “adding a member to their families.” The projects became symbolic of the budding relationships fueled by sharing talents and memories.

For example, we noted that the collective activities developed by the senior/student partners often involved gift exchange. For instance, the neophyte weaving student offered a primitive woven bracelet to her skilled senior mentor, and the cross-generational partners shared their poems. We noted enormous gratitude by the recipients. Simmel (1950) states that “gratitude actually consists, not in return of a gift, but in the consciousness that it cannot be returned” (p. 391). In other words, the exchanges that emerged were not a “life history” for the residents and a grade or college credit for the students. Rather, the exchanges represented a shared understanding of the meaning of the object, resulting in gratitude on the part of the receiver.

The Service-Learning Course will not be without Ongoing Assessment Mechanisms

Ongoing, responsive assessment is essential for any kind of cybernetic learning to occur. Argyris and Schon (1974) identify two types of possible learning that follow from cybernetic processes: single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Both rely on the ability to scan the environment and compare this information to operating norms. In single-loop learning, any detected errors are automatically corrected relative to preset operating norms. In double-looped learning,

the error detection also occurs relative to operating norms, but before initiating any corrective action, a critical reexamination of the operating norms occurs. Double-looped learning is clearly favorable to single-looped learning, because the approach questions operating norms that may not be advantageous in a particular context. Revisiting our earlier example, a bicyclist practicing single-looped learning would not jump off his/her bike to avoid a drunken driver but mindlessly attempts to not fall off the bike. In double-looped learning, the same biker would question the original operating norm and jump off the bike to safety.

Remaining true to the cybernetic requirement of feedback, we provided varied and constant monitoring of the class through various assessment mechanisms including periodic surveys and weekly discussions with students, residents, and staff. We attempted to change our operating expectations if they were not contextually appropriate or proved to be inaccurate. Ultimately, the approach shaped a course that was quite different than one that we had envisioned but more satisfying for all parties involved.

Although a variety of minor adjustments were made to the course, we will highlight one major correction to our operating assumptions. The example reflects the dynamics of double-loop learning. As indicated by our course title, we originally assumed that the seniors would be somewhat lonely. However, the continuing care facility that we gained access to was rather upscale with established activities and wellness programs. Furthermore, the seniors were energetic and high functioning.

Our initial survey highlighted the disconnection between the stated goals of the course and the seniors' self-perceived level of boredom and loneliness.

In fact, they did not perceive themselves as lonely or bored. More importantly, we learned from the staff, students, and seniors that they were somewhat insulted by our ageist notions. One senior commented that "your group thought you would be meeting with a bunch of lonely, tired old folks who had nothing to do but lose stuff." Likewise, we received hostility and resistance towards the living will assignment. The title conjured up images of lawyers and death. Overall, the residents felt that the experience was outside their control and that we were treating them in a condescending manner.

As a result of these findings, we changed the nature of the course to allow the seniors to be more active participants. We had several group classes that included the seniors, such as a group discussion of loneliness and how such discussions can help others at the center. In this context, it became clear that some were lonely, but the group

context placed them in a position of giving advice and, therefore, control. Likewise, a group discussion of the living will and subsequent renaming as the legacy letter re-energized a failing assignment. Finally, we empowered the seniors by requesting that the senior and student groups collaboratively create the syllabus or timeline for writing the seniors' life histories. Such actions changed the dynamics between students and seniors. The relationship became more reciprocal, with each party helping one another with life problems. The experienced seniors aided the sometimes isolated students to adjust to life events such as family deaths. By the end of the first semester, the course was one of intergenerational learning and companionship.

CONCLUSION

The specifics of our course are not overly important. However, the syllabus and assignments are available from the authors upon request. The general point is that a cybernetic orientation to service-learning course creation provided many benefits. The process allows for the class to freely evolve within general boundaries of what one does not want as an outcome. The approach fosters ongoing learning that results in responsive modifications in course structure and operation. Our guidelines are unique to our bias and university context. Clearly, we are not advocating our guidelines as universal operating parameters. However, we do recommend monitoring the course dynamics closely through contextually appropriate evaluation instruments, thereby reconsidering the appropriateness of the original operating norms to match emerging contingencies.

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