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Guest Editorial: Serving Students through Service Learning

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Serving Students through Service Learning

by Chris Putman

Students need more than the traditional brick-and-mortar teaching methods in order to capture and sustain their enthusiasm for course material and inspire them to achieve new heights. Something different is needed for these sophisticated Generation Y and Millennial learners, and that something is *service learning*. A teaching method that combines traditional academic curriculum with community service is what service learning is all about, and this type of education through life experience is growing in popularity in higher education circles because of the richness of the learning environment. Students are provided with an opportunity to practice their newly-found skills in real life when involved in service learning projects. Students also have a vehicle through which to invest in their local community. Recently, an opportunity to use design skills in a real-world service learning application was afforded my students in their Advertising Layout and Design class.

After teaching the required advertising principles, design subject matter, and use of design software, I contacted a church that did not have what the advertising world calls *branding*, a distinctive logo and design theme that makes a product, service, or entity distinguishable from the rest. I offered the services of the students to the client in order that they might design a package for the branding and to create communication pieces. These included letterhead, business cards, newsletters, bulletins, and print ad. This would enable the client to inform their constituencies about their organization. After an initial client/student meeting, students had 30 days to create their branding components and put together a presentation. In order to emulate a real-world experience, the students worked individually to land the account, competing like they would in an advertising agency. The client (i.e., church) had the right to choose the branding they liked best or to reject all of the students' efforts. This challenged the students to take the task seriously.

At times teachers may have doubts about students' abilities and the quality of their work. What if the students did not produce the quality of work worthy of a client's review? Would I embarrass myself and the University by making big promises and delivering nothing? What if the students delivered good work but the client was hard to please? Both the clients and students would be disappointed and the experience would leave a bad taste in everyone's mouths. Even with these concerns, I knew this was a faith walk on my part. I believed this service learning branding project idea came from God, and I had to trust that I heard Him correctly and be obedient to walk it out.

During the presentation to the client, one-by-one the students came to the head of the conference table and pitched their branding ideas. The pastor and his staff sat quietly through the presentations and took notes. The client had 48 hours to take the packages to the church, meet with the decision makers, and notify me of their final choice. This decision was ceremoniously announced during the last class of the semester. This real-world experience provided each student with the life experience of producing a branding project for a nonprofit, religious organization.

For this service learning project, students attended a client interviewing session, experienced the pressure of creating an attractive product not only to please the client but also to reach the target market, and pitched their creative designs and sales strategies to the client. Students experienced dressing for business meetings and proper conduct as professionals. They

mastered the software to a higher-level of proficiency than they would have simply following step-by-step instructions in a textbook.

This project became much more meaningful having taken on a client. Only one student landed the account, but all of them had a branding project to showcase in their portfolio. With this service learning project, the students got a taste of the real world within the safety of the classroom and under the guiding hand of a caring professor. As a result, the students' creative abilities surfaced, and with that freedom came ownership of the project. Many students created extra pieces for their presentations, making each project distinguished from the others. I was pleased to see what professional quality designs students were able to create with a little guidance and feedback.

The benefit for the client/pastor was having risk-free access to more than a dozen fresh, creative minds crafting a design package tailored just for his church, which now showcases new outdoor signage sporting the student-produced logo (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. The end result of the service learning project to develop a brand for a real-life client.

Although this may not always be the outcome, the real-world experience made this project a huge success for both the client and the student.

After this initial experience, would I tackle this service learning project again? Although it was chilling not having control over the outcome, I would do it again in a heartbeat. In fact, word has leaked out, and now pastors are contacting me asking to be included in the next branding project—three are on the waiting list. The project had many intrinsic benefits for me, as well. I was encouraged by my client's delight in seeing young people invest in him and the church he loves. But most of all, I was heartened by my students' growth through this experience. I watched as they mixed creativity and theory to produce professional-quality work worthy of presentation. I was tickled as they nervously approached the easel with their product, shook the hand of their client, introduced themselves, and launched into the sale of their ideas. Finally, I was encouraged upon seeing pride on their faces for the products to which they gave birth.

I encourage professors of all disciplines to step out of the classroom comfort zone. Use service learning projects to allow students an opportunity to "try on the role" for which they are training. Having a meaningful project provides these Generation Y's and Millennials with motivation to do their best work. Not only did students benefit from this project, but an

organization lacking the means to compete in the marketplace was given a tool that can reach a lost and dying world. The impact of this type of project can last an eternity.

For more information on service learning and service learning projects, go to http://www.servicelearning.org/

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