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1-1-2010

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Cundall, Michael, "Service Learning and Skunkworks in a Senior Honors Colloquium" (2010). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive.* Paper 109.
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Service Learning and Skunkworks in a Senior Honors Colloquium

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will describe a course and a service learning project related to a course that I had the good fortune to teach when I was new at a university and in an honors college. My point in describing how this course developed, including its structure and year-long project, is to demonstrate that pedagogical environments relatively free from constraints give rise to innovations and worthwhile educational experiences.

In the summer of 2008, I took up a new post as Assistant Director of the Louisiana Scholars' College at Northwestern State University. The Louisiana Scholars' College is a "fully-developed" college with fourteen of its own faculty and roughly 160 students. The students take a series of courses that are specific to the college, and Scholars' College faculty members teach a large number of discipline-specific courses as well as a wide variety of interdisciplinary courses. The college offers a series of "Great Books" courses and includes a strong science education curriculum. The student who graduates from Scholars' will have completed over sixty hours of honors credit. The program from which I had come had, unlike this one, a traditional "program" structure with courses taught by members of other departments teaching honors sections. At my new post, few philosophy courses were offered since the college had no philosophy major (a lamentable fact to be sure), so I had no courses to teach within my specialty. When my director asked me to help teach the senior colloquium, I agreed.

A NEW JOB, A NEW COURSE

The senior colloquium is a two-hour-per-semester course offered sequentially in the fall and spring semesters. All seniors must participate, and the colloquium presents a venue where they can come together and choose a topic that will cap off their undergraduate career. One of the ideas behind the course is that it gives students a chance to reconnect with their peer group in an important way. The class has a mandatory service component and typically has a number of guest lecturers. The students in the course are responsible for

choosing both the topic and texts. Examples of topics that have been chosen are the 90s, drugs, and crime. The topic chosen for the 2008–09 academic year happened to be food. My experience with food, other than as a daily consumer thereof, was as a saucier and a baker while in college and graduate school, so I had some knowledge of food and food preparation, but I was not anything close to an expert in an academic sense. Clearly I had some work to do.

The senior colloquium, I was told, is a course that contends with a number of distractions. The seniors are all working on their theses in addition to their other coursework. The class is not meant to be overly demanding of time and resources, and this is why it is a two-hour course. Further, the class is supposed to provide a variety of educational experiences ranging from guest lecturers to hands-on experiences. To that end, our colloquium had a sommelier, an expert on Creole cooking, a physician, an ecologist and a chef as guest speakers. The class spent two days in a kitchen learning to make a traditional stock and then using it as a component in a dish the students would later prepare. In addition, the class is supposed to be student-driven and include service learning, with which I had little experience.

While I was a bit unnerved at having my first teaching experience in this new college with seniors who already had a strong identity and had chosen the topic and texts for the course, I kept reminding myself that honors instructors need not be experts but can instead be guides in an educational journey. I was a facilitator rather than lecturer, a member of the class not a distinct leader. And though I repeated these reassurances to myself as I began reading the moment I arrived on campus in early July, I was not relieved of my apprehension until after the service learning project was finished in early March of 2009.

The texts that the class had adopted were Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and an anthology called *Food and Culture* edited by Counihan and Van Esterik. All three texts had their merits and were enlightening reads. Having read some of Pollan's work before, I decided that I should begin with his text. The book was easy to read, and Pollan's subject matter was interesting; from this text and its ideas came the idea for a service learning project.

Pollan worries about the environmental and ecological, not to mention ethical, impact of the foods we eat. From the necessary steps involved in harvesting and processing certain crops such as corn to the practices involved in the raising and butchering of the meats we eat, all consumers need to know what is involved in bringing to the grocery our steak, chicken breast, cereal, or potato chips. Many consumers are only dimly aware of what it takes, by way of energy, labor, and capital, to create many of our comestibles. Further, the environmental and ethical costs of the various parts of the meals are often more than we might countenance if we were acquainted with the full facts.

One of the main ways Pollan exemplifies the difference in food production from typical agri-business productions (producers responsible for more of what one might find in a typical grocery store) and more environmentally

friendly or alternative production methods is by detailing the production approach of these more non-traditional operations. Pollan visits a non-traditional grass farm where all the produce and livestock is grown in an ecologically sensitive fashion. This farm becomes an example for the sort of farming practices we ought better to understand and support if we are concerned for the overall health of ourselves and the environment. I have long thought that I should support local farmers' markets and related ventures for both environmental and economic reasons. Thus, as I was reading this text and thinking about the issues, one of the ideas that came to me to fulfill the service learning requirement for the senior colloquium was to have the students create, develop and promote a single-day, free-to-the-public lecture series, hosted by the Louisiana Scholars' College and Northwestern State University, on local foods and local food pathways.

The seminar idea appealed to me for a number of reasons, one of which was to have the "academic" work the students were doing in the classroom find a direct outlet, by way of a service learning project, into the community. Certainly food drives and outreach programs that attempt to ameliorate hunger in some fashion were obvious choices that intersected with our topic of food and were of service to the community, but I was looking for a more direct use of the course materials in driving service learning projects for the course. It seemed important to have the students see how they could make the course readings benefit the community in a positive fashion. Further, as it turned out, the students were generally surprised to learn about their food sources from Pollan's book, and they then tried to eat in more conscious-about-production ways; that is, they found the sorts of issues brought forward in text to be issues they found reasonable and appropriate to bring to the wider community. Given the need to bring this coursework back out into the community, the students liked my seminar idea. They also arranged food drives and worked with the Council on Aging to host a lunch for the elderly, but those projects (laudable as they are) seemed tangential to the topics discussed in class. There remained a need to tie the academic work in the class to the community and find a way to introduce the academic issues covered to the community: a way to really bring the classroom out into the public.

While the seminar idea seemed to be an appropriate project for the service component, I had also hoped for a learning portion from which the students would gain some professional benefit as well. While service learning benefits students, faculty, and the community, students can at the same time develop organizational skills through the project and later demonstrate these skills to a future employer or graduate school; then the students will have achieved both a service and learning goal. I wanted the students to actively promote, organize, and develop the seminar into a highly visible and successful event. In short, I wanted a grand slam: a service learning project that tied directly to the course material, that intersected with the community in a novel fashion, and that gave the students both a philanthropic benefit and a boost to their professional

development. I was asking a lot, but this was a new job, I had a boss to impress, and the resources available locally made the service learning project all the more interesting.

LOGISTICS OF SERVICE LEARNING

Planning for the event began in late August of 2008 after the idea had been offered to the class. The students and I began to develop the seminar more fully by asking what sorts of people we wanted to participate and give talks. As a group we decided that some local growers should be contacted as well as the local city employees who run the Cane River Green Market, Natchitoches' version of a farmers' market. As we made contacts and netted some interest from local growers, one of our prospective speakers knew of another person who might participate as a speaker. Eventually the day would feature local growers who attempted sustainable growing patterns, a nutritionist to speak about the benefits of locally grown and fresh foods, a municipal worker who organizes the local farmers' market, an apiculturist (beekeeper), and a local rancher committed to raising free range cattle to produce beef.

Once the seminar idea had generated interest, I began working on writing a grant to support the service learning project with honorariums for speakers, catering, graphic design and marketing materials as well as travel for a later presentation some of the students would give on the project and any other expenses relative to the project. I wrote the grant with little input from the students because I surmised that grant writing was something a professor should do. This supposition turned out to be wrong, but more on that below

Early during the first semester, the students all agreed that responsibilities for the event should be broken up and distributed among the class members. One student was chosen as a liaison to the speakers and charged with getting relevant information from them for the seminar and making certain that they each had the information they would need for their presentation. The class also decided that public relations and marketing was a large enough set of duties that a committee of four people would make certain that flyers and publicity material were distributed and the proper media outlets contacted. Another person worked with the campus catering company to coordinate food donations from the growers, producers, and caterers. As a group, we thought it ironic to have a seminar about green and organic foods without foods not produced in these ways, so the catering company took the food donations (they could not buy the food as such action would violate state contracts) and created dishes from them. Finally, all students agreed to be present for the day of the event and help with the set-up and arrangement of the room and any other issues that might arise. The final job for the seminar was to create a pamphlet for the conference attendees so that they could have a record of resources they could use if they wanted to.

Once the various responsibilities had been arranged and set forth, the students worked out among themselves who would do what, and I became less

active in arranging the seminar. I did work with the designer (a university student) on the promotional materials, and, since I was the primary investigator on the grant for the seminar, I took care of paperwork and payments through the university's business affairs office.

The projects and work done in preparation for the event began in earnest mid-September 2008 and carried on through March 2009. Some work, such as graphic design work and catering arrangements, were completed by late 2008. Other work, such as contacting media outlets and distributing flyers, was completed in late January and February 2009. The publicity materials were ready for distribution a month prior to the seminar. Many local and regional papers and radio stations had been contacted, and the local paper did an interview with me prior to the event. In addition, three students agreed to present with me on the project at a service learning conference in late March 2009. There was plenty of work to go around, and in general the students kept up with responsibilities; aside from a last-second speaker cancellation, the event planning went well. The arrangements were time-consuming but worth the effort.

The seminar went very well. We had a modest attendance of nearly forty people. The donated organic food used by the campus catering company was terrific and received rave reviews. All the conference attendees expressed their gratitude for the event, and many asked if this would be a yearly event. The students not only attended the various talks but also were important in both the set-up and eventual clean-up efforts. After the event, one student raffled off the honey bears donated by our apiculturist.

LEARNING AND SERVICE

Since this event was not just a service but also a service learning project, part of my job as instructor was not only to guide students in getting the project developed but also to help them become aware of the work they were doing and why they were doing it. I had mentioned early in the project that the "learning" part of the project was to help students develop organizational skills they could use later in their professional life. The other learning component was to help students see why outreach of the sort taking place in the seminar was important. I wanted them to see that the classroom work they had done had direct application to the world in which they found themselves, that the scientific and humanitarian themes the class had covered were of interest to their local community, and that they could help bring these themes out and make them available to the public.

I had each student evaluate the event and its organization so they could develop a better sense of what all they had done and learned in putting this conference together. Each of the students was asked to create an after-action report and evaluate the success of the seminar. Students were able to write about where they saw need for improvements. My hope was that the "learning" portion of the service learning project would help students not only execute but understand the logistical and organizational factors required in a project of this

sort. If they were able to make useful evaluations and suggestions that could be incorporated into later events, their ideas could later become talking points that would demonstrate their abilities to a prospective employer.

Secondly, but not secondarily, the students were asked to reflect in an essay on how they saw this project as a successful form of outreach. I wanted the students to gauge the sort of impact they thought the event had on the community, whether it had any noticeable benefits to local growers and consumers. In general, the students thought the program benefited the local community. One student thought the experience had helped the class work better with a large group of people on a project and was surprised to see how the different talents and abilities in the group benefited the project. Another student was impressed by the group's ability to work through a "multi-leveled communication network," noting that the project "forced" them to learn to manage their time in ways to which they were unaccustomed. Another student found that such a project would have been impossible for one person to accomplish and that not even the professors could have done it on their own. Finally, all students mentioned how they became aware of the effort and energy required to make the project a success.

The students were also amazed at how much they learned from the presenters. They were pleased at how enthusiastic the seminar attendees were about the event and they felt proud that they were asked if the seminar would become an annual event. Perhaps the comment that most sums up how the audience reacted to the seminar came from another professor who attended the seminar:

> Please pass along to the seniors my deep appreciation for the event y'all coordinated last Saturday. I learned so much and have so many contacts for the kind of food I want to buy. I was never really clear on what service learning was, but your event was a great introduction to it!

The students also, though, noted some problems. Several thought that some jobs required more time than others, and some believed that the hours devoted to the project were excessive. Another important criticism was brought to my attention by one of the students: if one of the learning goals of the project was to have students learn valuable skills that could be demonstrated to a future employer, they should have been involved in the grant-writing process. Some of them will have to write grants in the future, and being able to show that they had experience writing a successful grant would be an impressive line on their résumé.

In a subsequent class meeting, I discussed the grant-writing issue with the students. My response, weak as it was, was simply that I had not thought of it as something a student should be part of. I had thought that one of my roles as the professor of the class was to be a grant writer and primary investigator and that a student would have difficulty navigating all the business affairs. Further, I thought that no student would be interested in working on the grant given their

other course requirements. Upon reflection, I can see no valid reason to have kept them from participating in the grant-writing process. If the goal of a learning project is to provide students with opportunities to develop skills they can use later in their careers, then not inviting them to join in the grant-writing process was short-sighted. So I learned something that may make me a better educator in the future. This last bit is, of course, a fact that many honors administrators and teachers routinely tell their professors both new and old and use as a point to sell prospective students on the types of activity and community found in honors.

CONCLUSION

In "Honors as Skunkworks," Paul Strong notes that honors can act as a sort of testing ground for new and creative practices that can be developed in environments relatively free from oversight and constraint. A task is set forth, and those charged with accomplishing it are left to accomplish the goal as they see fit. The senior colloquium was a totally new experience for me as an instructor; I had never taught a year-long course, nor had I ever taught a course where I had no input on the topic. I had very little time to learn from others how they had handled the senior colloquium, nor was I anything close to an expert on food. Further, I was at best only tangentially familiar with service learning, but I had to help the class come up with a project and then accomplish it. For me, this was skunkworks, and I have come to understand that skunkworks is what honors is all about.

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