

COMMUNITY SERVICE THROUGH FACILITATING FOCUS GROUPS: THE CASE FOR A METHODS-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE*

This article explores the utility of focus group methodology as a tool for facilitating both community service and student community-based learning through an examination of a service-learning course, "Community Service Through Facilitating Focus Groups," taught by the authors during 1998-99 at a mid-sized public university in the Pacific Northwest. A methods-based capstone is particularly valuable. By linking a course on research methods to a community-based learning project, students receive hands-on experience in using the method that they are studying in the classroom. The course is broken down into twelve elements, with student comments illustrating each class element, and a timeline for the course is provided. The article concludes with a discussion of how the nature of focus group methodology facilitates students' comprehension of sociology.

PETER J. COLLIER
Portland State University

DAVID L. MORGAN
Portland State University

IN THE PAST 10 years there has been an explosion of service-learning course offerings in American universities. This movement is part of a larger program to increase curricular relevance and engage students in their local communities. Among the benefits attributed to service-learning experiences are positive changes in students' attitudes toward learning, increased community involvement, higher levels of student motivation, improved academic achievement, and the development of an ethic of volunteerism (Collier and Driscoll 1999; Erlich 1995; Giles and Eyler 1994; Harkavy 1992;

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994).

During the 1998 to 1999 academic year, the two authors taught a service-learning course, "Community Service Through Facilitating Focus Groups," at a mid-sized public university in the Pacific Northwest. In this course, we combined training in qualitative sociological methods (i.e., focus groups) with community service to provide unique and rewarding learning experiences for students. While the service-learning projects attached to this course assisted community partners in addressing their local needs, the class also emphasized student reflection and their acquisition of a "sociological perspective." In this article we will demonstrate the utility of focus group methodology as a tool for facilitating both community service and community-based student learning.

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BACKGROUND

Two basic types of community-based learning experiences are internships and service-learning courses. Internships involve students in individual experiences in the community under the supervision of university representatives and advisors at the sites.

Typically, internships help students explore career options and prepare students for work in specific professions (Scheible and Stahl, 1998).

Service-learning courses take a somewhat different approach. In service-learning courses, career exploration is de-emphasized and a greater emphasis is placed on the partnership between the student and the community—between those serving and those being served. The promotion of community change through the meeting of specific needs identified by the community is a central goal of service learning (Scheible and Stahl 1998).

Even though both internships and service-learning courses aim to promote student learning and development by integrating academic study with community-based learning experiences, the courses have different emphases. Internships focus on the development of individual students by placing them in learning situations outside of the classroom that closely approximate the types of situations they may encounter after graduation. Service learning shapes the students' activities around the needs of the community.

Capstone Courses

"Community Service Through Facilitating Focus Groups" was a senior capstone course that combined two elements of learning: acquiring and applying a qualitative research method (i.e., focus groups) and gaining experience in working with community partners to address local needs. There were two inter-related sets of learning objectives for this capstone course. The first set taught students how to conduct focus group research as it occurs in real-life settings. Specific goals for this component included teaching students to formulate research questions appropriate for focus groups, design research projects involving focus groups, write moderator guides to determine the questioning route for the interviews, moderate focus group interviews, analyze data from focus groups, and write reports for focus group research. The second set of

learning objectives related to the service-learning component of the course. Specific goals included development in students of an increased awareness of the range of social support programs active in the local community, the ability to work in a diverse group for a common goal, an appreciation of multiple perspectives on the same issue, the ability to critically reflect upon their own values and beliefs, and the development of a sociological perspective to provide the framework within which students could comprehend, analyze, and reflect upon the structure and organization of the larger community.

Within sociology, capstone courses are traditionally discipline-based and almost universally associated with majors. In a special issue of *Teaching Sociology* about capstone courses, Wagenaar (1993:209) defines a capstone as "a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique, and apply the knowledge gained in the major." Similarly, a 1991 position paper by the Association of American Colleges on capstone courses (in Dickinson 1993:215) suggests that "...at the end of the undergraduate experience, the student takes the knowledge, experience, and wisdom provided by the major and tests these against the perspectives of other fields and challenges the world outside."

While a capstone course does not have to include a service-learning component, a capstone/service-learning course offers students a unique opportunity to apply their course-based knowledge for the greater good of their communities. Since 1994-1995, our university has integrated service-learning experiences into all levels of the undergraduate courses as part of a revised general education curriculum. The culminating experience is a two-term senior capstone course which requires students to apply their course knowledge in community settings. Capstone courses, with their emphasis on community work, tend to be small classes, varying in size from five to 20 students. The limited class size increases the likelihood of student interaction and interdependence. With ap-

proximately 2,000 students requiring capstone placement each year, this university has defined "community" broadly. A wide range of service-learning opportunities are offered in partnership with local government, non-profit agencies, and social service programs in four counties neighboring the university, as well as in the on-campus community. The fact that completion of the capstone is required of all students for graduation has led to the development within the sociology department of capstone courses that explore and address a wide range of social issues. However, our course went one step further than earlier efforts by combining training in a specific research method (i.e., focus group) with community-based service learning.

Sociology and Service Learning

Sociology occupies a central role in the service-learning movement for two reasons. First, key sociological content areas (i.e., social problems, stratification, urbanization, poverty and inequality) are relevant to the development of students' understanding of the underlying elements of the social environment they encounter as part of service-learning projects. Second, sociological theory and methods provide tools for structuring and evaluating service-learning courses (Marullo 1996). For example, sociology supplies students with a conceptual language (e.g., class, race, status, social roles) that allows students to comprehend, analyze, and reflect upon the structure and organization of the larger community. In addition, because of its attention to structural relations, social interaction, and the relationship of the individual to the larger society, sociology has always emphasized the importance of field studies and action research (Marullo 1998:262).

Focus Groups in Service-Learning Classes

Focus groups can serve as a methodological bridge connecting students to real world issues. Focus groups are useful in studying a variety of research topics (Morgan 1996, 1999), including both pedagogical issues in

higher education (Collier and Driscoll 1999) and community development (Krueger and Casey 2000). Although focus groups have been used for a wide range of purposes within a wide range of contexts, focus group use in service-learning courses has been limited to promoting student reflection. Schmiede (1995:64) discusses the usefulness of focus groups as tools for critical reflection—the process of validating assumptions and beliefs which guide students' thoughts and actions. Seeskin (1987) proposes that focus groups could be thought of as a Socratic model for reflection. It is only through students' consideration of multiple viewpoints on a single issue that the themes of the focus group emerge. However, we suggest that the nature of focus group methodology lends itself to a wider range of uses in service-learning classes

Not only focus groups but research methods in general can provide a strong foundation for courses that include community-based learning. By linking a course on research methods to a community-based learning project, students receive hands-on experience in using the methods they study. In addition, the emphasis on research encourages the community partner to think in terms of specific goals that can be met within the time constraints of the course itself. The course we describe relies on focus groups as a specific method, but a similar approach could be applied using other sociological research methods, such as survey research or in-depth interviewing.

Even if any number of methods could be used as the basis for this class, there are several reasons why focus groups and community-based learning make such a good match. Logistical issues are an important part of this fit, starting with the size of the task around which a focus group research project is framed. The amount of work required by this kind of project is not too demanding for the students; at the same time, such a project can deliver useful information that meets the needs of a community organization. The relatively low cost of focus groups also matches the typical re-

source levels of both college classes and community organizations. As long as the community partner is willing to accept as volunteers students who are in the process of learning, then they can get the work done at little or no cost. Aside from these necessary but mundane factors, focus groups also make a useful tool for community-based learning because their flexibility appeals to both students and community partners. The wide range of topics that can be investigated through focus groups increases the chance of locating a goal that will both meet the needs of the community partner and interest the students. Finally, the variety of tasks involved in running focus groups points out the importance of bringing together teams of students, not individuals, to meet a community need; this emphasis on teamwork is also useful for capstone classes and other courses that concentrate on the practical application of previous learning.

DESCRIPTION OF COURSE

The course we taught continued over two 11-week quarters, which followed the university's requirements for capstone courses. The break between the quarters created a useful dividing line; students spent the first term learning about focus groups and selecting their community partners, and the second term carrying out their actual service-learning project. The table shows the various activities that were involved and the time allotment for each activity. These activities provide the basis for our summary of the course content and organization. Actual comments from student reflection journals illustrate the different aspects of the class.

Preparation

Although the students spend first term on campus, this part of the course still requires several unique aspects of preparation. Some of this work is essentially logistical, such as locating a room that allows space for a flexible, group-oriented workshop. The most important preparatory task is lining up potential community partners. The concept

of "partnership" is essential to locating potential community organizations that can work with the class. There must be a match between the needs of the community organization and the degree to which partnering with this organization will provide students with appropriate learning opportunities. This element of course preparation draws attention to two significant differences between a methods-based service-learning course and other types of service-learning courses: the relationship between the instructor and the community partner, and the relationship between students and the community partner.

In many models of service-learning courses, the instructor or service-learning coordinator initially meets with the community partner to determine the nature of service project, desired outcomes, the degree of mentoring students will receive from the community partner, and the criteria by which the student will be evaluated by both the instructor and the community partner. The underlying assumption in these models is that students bring energy and skills to a community organization that addresses a specific social issue (i.e., homelessness, domestic violence, literacy improvement) and the community partner provides expertise and experience in helping to ameliorate the issue. In the process, students learn while serving the community as an extension of the partnering organization.

Two processes are involved in a methods-based service-learning course. The relationship between the instructor and the community partner focuses more on the "front end" of the process, for example making sure the partner's proposed project is realistic and appropriate for the skill level of the students while still providing opportunities for learning and service. In contrast, the relationship of the student and the community partner consists of on-going negotiation and collaboration.

Howery (1999:153), in a discussion of service learning as action research, suggests that "working with community groups on their agenda, [with students] in the role of junior sociologists, demands and engenders

Table. Project Activities and Time Allotment

Activity	Timing
1st Term	
<i>Pre-focus group project: Practice and reflection</i>	
1. Preparation: Classroom space, book supplies, talk to potential community partners	1 week before class
2. Expectations: Review syllabus, class expectations, issues associated with community-based learning	1 class period, 1st week of term
3. Demonstration: Model "how to conduct a focus group" for students	1 class period, 1st week of term
4. Introductions: Introduce potential community partners and projects to students	1 class period, 2nd week of term
5. Content material/practice: Design projects, formulate questions, moderate actual groups, collect data, analyze, report results	Approximately 9 weeks (rest of 1st term)
2nd Term	
<i>Focus group project: Implementation and reflection</i>	
6. Project preparation: form student teams, select projects	1st week of term
7. Initial contact with clients	1st week of term
8. Design project	2 weeks; start during 1st week of term
9. Recruit subjects	Variable, up to 2 weeks; start during 2nd week of term
10. Develop interview guide	1 week, 3rd week of term
11. Conduct focus groups for project	3 weeks; must be done by 6th week of term
<i>Post-focus group project: Synthesis and reflection</i>	
12. Analyze data	2 weeks, 7th and 8th weeks of term
13. Prepare report of project findings	1 week, 9th week of term
14. Report to client	10th week of term
15. Report to class	10th week of term
16. Synthesis and evaluation	Final exam period, 11th week
<i>Note: Table based on an 11-week quarter term</i>	

professional talent that cannot be found in just any *reliable volunteer*" (emphasis added). In a methods-based service-learning course, the issue of "relative level of student expertise" is even more pronounced. In these courses, students bring to a service situation a greater level of specific, method-related skills than those possessed by the typical community partner. This situation is similar to that of a consultant working with a client who has an identified need but

neither the expertise nor resources to address that need. This scheme differs from the more commonly found situation in service-learning course, where students work with the community partner on the identified issue and the partner's expertise and experience determines the direction of the project.

For example, in a "typical" service-learning class, students might frame class-based discussions of social inequality within

the context of a service project involving a local food bank. Students would expect the community partner to direct them as to the best ways to organize collected food, make up individual food baskets, and distribute the food goods to the organization's clients. However, in a methods-based service-learning course, we would expect the community partner to come up with an issue they need explored but not to direct students in the methods of conducting that exploration (i.e., how many focus groups need to be conducted in order to reach saturation, how to segment the groups, or the order in which to sequence questions).

These relational differences have consequences for the instructor planning the course. Throughout the course, class time must be allocated during which the instructor can assist students in developing strategies for responding to clients' requests and how to address any issues that arise as the project moves forward. While ultimately students and representatives from community organizations will make joint decisions about whether to form a partnership, the instructor has to take the initial lead in finding potential community partners and appropriate projects.

As with any course, a core element of preparation concerns assignments and evaluation. Our approach has been to rely on students' journal-keeping and reflection as the primary source of grades; each week, we give the students a concrete set of topics to reflect on and write about. Sometimes they are asked to write about things that happened in the previous class (e.g., did they personally feel comfortable with the techniques that were introduced that week?). They are also prompted to write about topics that will be discussed in the next class (e.g., is this the kind of work that they can see themselves doing within a group project?). In both cases, the general goal of journaling and reflection is to engage students with the material at a personal rather than an abstract level.

Excerpts from student reflection journals illustrate that students made clear connec-

tions between class assignments and the subsequent focus group research projects.

I like the assignments and exercises. I can see their relevance to the topics and our understanding of focus groups which is not always the case with other classes and their assignments.

The projects and assignments were tied neatly into the skills we practiced and the group's final product—moderating actual focus groups. Each assignment provided an essential step in understanding what it took to be successful.

Expectations

Because few students will have prior experience with this type of service-learning course, it is vital to begin by clarifying expectations. Some students will be drawn to the class by the opportunity to work and learn in the community, while others will be seeking the practical skills associated with doing focus groups. In either event, they all need to understand that the course will involve a substantial amount of outside work and some very real deadlines.

In our version of the class, we want students to understand that they will begin with more passive, classroom-based learning experiences and then move into more active roles where they must make most of the decisions and carry out their research project. We also make sure that the students recognize that their success in the class depends almost entirely on teamwork and group products, rather than individual activities.

In their journal entries, students make clear that their expectations were fuzzy coming into the course.

I felt bad about being late and I almost didn't go in...I soon was glad I was in this class. At last, a class that was going to have a practical use—out in the real world! A class where all the Sociology I've studied could be put to work.

I honestly did not know what to expect when I entered [the first term of] this class. If any-

thing, I thought it would be a little more traditional. I REALLY liked the practical application of the class.

Demonstrate Focus Group

Many of the students who take this course have had no direct experience with focus groups, even if the chance to acquire this skill attracts them to it. Consequently, we devote most of the first class meeting to a demonstration focus group in which the students themselves act as participants. An especially useful topic for this discussion is the students' feelings and experiences about working in groups. The first question in this group interview asks each person to think about a positive and a negative experience they have had with working in groups. We begin as a group by discussing positive experiences, which almost inevitably leads to the recounting of negative experiences as well. Later questions ask about the kinds of things that are more likely to make group work more successful or enjoyable, as well as the difference between group work in college courses versus other settings such as jobs and voluntary organizations. Afterward, we "debrief" so the students can share their thoughts about both participating in the focus group itself and what they learned about the topic of working groups. These two themes are also subjects for their first reflection and journal writing assignment.

Introduce Possible Community Partners

Although the first weeks of the course emphasize the acquisition of technical skills related to focus groups as a method, this learning can only happen effectively if students understand why and when they might use this method. Hearing about the needs of community partners gives students realistic experience in thinking about the practical uses for focus groups.

Although one option for this course is to present students with a preselected community partner, we believe that offering the class a range of possible partners and ultimately letting the students select their partner provides important advantages. We de-

vote one class session to presentations from potential community partners (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, the county library system, a food co-op/community farm, the university's Office of Institutional Research¹) along with an opportunity for both the students and the community members to ask each other questions. At a minimum, these presentations show the students a range of real-world uses for focus groups. In addition, the process extends beyond lecturing on the uses for focus groups and engages students in a dynamic discussion about the relevance of this method for a range of practical applications. In other words, they can actually see how the method can be useful outside of the classroom.

Choosing among possible community partners also makes students aware of a number of other issues that occur in community-based research. For example, deciding which project to select often involves issues such as whether the community partner has realistic expectations about what a group of relatively inexperienced researchers can accomplish in a limited amount of time. As a group, the students also need to discuss the different motivations that attract them to specific projects. In this course, students chose which community service projects they wanted to be involved with; the only caveat was that they identify one other student who was interested in working on the same project.² We find that some students

¹While the issues that each community group sought to address were different, they all shared some common characteristics. Within their respective communities each group worked with under-represented populations that lacked the resources to address key issues without assistance, each group had a program-related question that could be best answered by qualitative research (such as focus groups), and each lacked the skills or available resources to conduct this kind of research by themselves.

²While most projects—e.g., the community farm, the watershed project—were undertaken by two-person teams, the transfer student issues project actually involved a group of four students. This adjustment was due to the greater number of focus groups required by this design.

are drawn to a particular topic or to a particular type or community organization; ultimately, however, they need to negotiate a choice that motivates each member of their team. This "choice process" was illustrated in comments from students' reflection journals.

We had two people come in and present us with ideas about possible real-life focus group projects. The first one would be with the Office of Institutional Research here at the university...concerning problems faced by transfer students. The second project would be working with...["community farm"], a city-owned site that is run by a co-op. The farm is bordering a wetland, grows organic food, and serves as an educational resource for the community. The goal of this focus group project would be to discover how to publicize the farm, and what the message to the community should be.

Learning to do Focus Groups

As this class requires students to learn the mechanics of focus groups, it helps if they do so in a way that moves from relatively protected practice sessions to increasingly realistic uses of the method. Our strategy starts with focus groups featuring other students from the class as participants, followed by groups with strangers (students from other university classes). In each case, the students in the class select a relevant research topic and design their own set of interview questions prior to conducting the groups. After the groups are held, students consider how they would analyze and report on the data they have collected.

In our class, practice groups occur near the end of the first term. At first, students are likely to think of focus groups almost entirely in terms of the time they spend moderating the actual group interviews. It is true that the interactions with the participants and the responses they provide consti-

Regardless of the scope of the overall project, in all cases the actual moderating, data collection, and analysis of the focus groups were conducted by pairs of students. In the larger project, sometimes a third student helped with writing group comments on a flip chart.

tute the data in focus groups, but experienced researchers know that the project's success also depends on a great deal of hard work that must be done before and after the groups themselves. The students' focus group training should thus go beyond specific moderating skills to engage students in the full range of tasks that they will need to accomplish.

However, moderating is a unique skill and students can be quite concerned about their abilities as moderators. We address these concerns by concentrating on the positive aspects of what each student does during her or his time as a moderator. This approach emphasizes the fact that there is no "right way" to moderate focus groups. Instead, we encourage each student to develop a personally effective moderating style. We also have students provide feedback to each other with the same positive spirit. Since almost all students will be nervous about their own moderating skills, they can be quite eager in encouraging each other. Students discussed the importance of class feedback in their reflection journals:

Given that I was raised in a culture where obedience and passiveness had been beaten into my bones, I now realize that my "nice manner" could work against me in moderating focus groups. In the practice group with my classmates, when the group carried the discussion way beyond the topic of research interest, I was not able to be assertive and call them back to focus right away.³

I really appreciated having three different kinds of feedback instead of one or two...The students commented on each others' performances with a different eye than the professors. And finally, to observe another [team conducting a focus] group gave me lots of information and advice.

Project Preparation

The second half of the course begins with

³Class feedback emphasized reflecting on how personal traits associated with the student's collectivist cultural background could be used to her advantage when moderating a focus group.

preparation for the actual service-learning projects that students will pursue throughout the term. One part of this preparation involves thinking about the specific activities involved in the project and creating a timeline that will allow students to complete their work by the end of the 10-week quarter. Another part of their preparation involves confronting the reality of working closely with a specific community partner. Students thus need to consider their personal strengths and weaknesses and the cultural stereotypes and background assumptions that they bring to the project about both other students as well as different groups within the community. In their reflection journals, students comment on the importance of mutual acceptance in order to successfully complete their projects.

I didn't realize the gender and cultural differences that would come to play with this project. [My partner] and I both needed to be tolerant and accepting of each other in order to complete the course. I thought we handled differences in a cooperative fashion, no one person appeared to dominate the interactions.

The fact that we had a very concrete goal for the end of the class influenced us to work even more seriously...In previous classes, the only goal was a grade....

Contacting the Client and Designing the Project

During project design, students begin to experience the give and take between the community partner's vision for the project and their own preferences. In their early meetings, students and their community partners work out how they will meet the goals that they have each accepted as the basis for their shared project. This process enables students to apply the abstract lessons that they learned in the first half of the course to a practical situation. Out of all the different strategies that they have learned for doing focus groups, students must determine which research design will work with this community partner on their project.

At this point, students also begin making

decisions about their own team's internal division of labor. Formulating a research design involves more than matching the community partner's needs to the potential of focus groups; it also means matching concrete research tasks to the skills and interests of the team members. If no one on a team wants to take on a particular task, then team members must either find a research design that eliminates that task or reach a compromise wherein a team member will perform the task in exchange for receiving or avoiding other duties in the overall division of labor. In their reflection journals, several students commented on issues involved with meeting community partners' expectations:

Our client actually has more expectations for us than I anticipated. They want approval of our timeline, all tapes, transcriptions, notes, and our own reflections/notes of debriefings, and the rough draft of the report as well as having regular meetings with them. However, I understand that, as clients, they want to make sure they're getting the information they need because they do plan to put this research to good use.

Our client asked if we could get by without taping the sessions and only use notes. I am sure that we can but it will be more difficult to get everything down. The quality of the information collected should be about the same but the quantity of data collected may suffer.

Recruiting the Participants

Many textbooks on focus groups emphasize both the importance and the difficulty of recruiting participants (e.g., Morgan 1997). Selecting appropriate participants for each focus group, and getting enough of them to attend the group, can be a challenging task. This task exposes students to the reality of organizing focus groups. One student articulated one of the issues associated with this process in the following journal entry.

Frustration, frustration, and more frustration around making calls to get participants. I understand that not being able to reach people is part of the job so that doesn't frustrate me. I

seem to find people that are home and are interested in the project and really want to discuss their problems with me over the phone or want me to send them information, yet they don't want to commit to the focus groups.

Developing the Interview Guide and Conducting the Focus Groups

The process of writing questions for the interview guide leads students deeper into the realization that the focus groups must balance the needs of the community sponsor, the interests of the participants, and skills of the students themselves. The first part of the course emphasizes that good focus groups address the research sponsor's topic in ways that not only meet the sponsor's needs but also interest the participants who will be discussing that topic. In the second part of the course, students need to work with their community partners to produce a set of a questions that will be equally interesting to both the partner and the research participants, while staying within the limits of what the students can do as moderators.

By the time students actually begin moderating focus groups, they are well aware of the potentially conflicting demands they face. For some students, moderating the groups fulfills a promise that brought them to the class in the first place. For others, the experience of moderating intensifies their sense of being pushed and pulled in a number of competing directions. Either way, they have lost the safety net that is normally present when they perform simulations in other classes. Excerpts from reflection journals reveal students' dawning awareness of the difference between focus groups "in theory" and "in practice."

When I was reading the books, they made focus groups seem straightforward, I could not internalize some of the difficulties they mentioned as I was reading them. Now I realize that [the] reality [of doing focus groups] was even worse. The books left out the multiple different dimensions of interactions going on—with participants, clients and co-workers—and the psychological stress.

My experience moderating a focus group was very different from any group experience I ever had. I, as a moderator, was different from being a member of the group. I was an "outsider," a non-participant, good in a way. I was not supposed to have any personal input or be judgmental of anything being said in the group. I was simply the data collector. When personal feelings were blocked out, it made it easier to do the job and to be less biased doing the research. At the same time, it took away the joy of "being there" with the group. This was a whole different kind of socialization than I'd previously experienced.

Analyzing the Data

Once the students begin analyzing the focus group data, they encounter the inevitable subjectivity of qualitative research. Many of them will already have confronted this issue while designing the project and writing the interview guides, but in those situations, students could interact with the community partner to be sure that they were "on track." In contrast, qualitative analysis is almost always done as an internal conversation within the research team. Like other beginning qualitative researchers, many of our students found analysis to be the most challenging part of their work.

The text book emphasized "objectivity" in monitoring/recording focus groups, just like any other professional field. I found it difficult to do so...If we were required to take notes and quotes that we believed were important data, [then] we had to make decisions in our heads to "select" what seemed important. Once things were processed "through" our heads, they were biased.

Reporting to the Client and to the Class

The culmination of the service-based learning portion of the course is the report to the community sponsor. At this point, students experience a tension that is all too common in applied sociological research: Will the sponsor really want to hear what they have to say? Since the students have been working with their sponsors for some time, they have a pretty good idea what their community partners are hoping to hear. However, these

expectations may not match what the students are finding in the data. These issues make it clear to students that research involves more than just "finding out the facts."

We should point out a potential problem related to this issue. In their roles as consultants/focus group experts, students can become highly invested in the data they have collected and can become frustrated when the client is not interested in the findings that students consider most significant. If this situation arises, the instructor can use it to introduce a class discussion on the differences between applied researchers' legitimate obligations to the client and ethical obligations to the discipline.

The reporting process is also the point when teams become intensely interested in each others' projects. In the earlier stages of the course, most of the interaction between teams tends to emphasize problem solving and experience swapping as students encounter the day-to-day realities of field work. In our class, we had teams distribute and briefly review in class the reports that they had given to the community partner. However, the core of this in-class presentation was a discussion of the issues each team faced as they prepared their reports and closed out the relationship their community partner. Although the substantive issues were often quite different across projects, this final discussion helped students in the class complete the sense of a shared journey.

It was helpful to bring up the issues each team faced in their process of their research project for the class...The teams' voices on the different problems kind of served as some mentor support.

Interestingly enough, [the client] wanted our subjective interpretation. She wanted to know what it was that we "felt" was important and worth exploring further. Since this project was based on qualitative research, the words mattered.

Synthesis and Evaluation

As a final assignment in the course, all

students write a synthesis reviewing and evaluating their experiences throughout both halves of the course. Looking back at the earlier portion of the course makes students aware of the difference between classroom teaching and community learning. This assignment also asks them to integrate what they have learned through this course. Finally, we ask them to reflect on the goals that they wrote about in their journals as they started the course. The syntheses produced through this exercise clearly demonstrate that the lessons of methods-based service learning go well beyond the technical skills associated with focus groups as a research method.

I feel that my experience in this class was entirely useful for me beyond school. In addition to knowing how to plan/run a focus group, I have more communication skills, planning skills, and a taste of the real world political experience.

My goals at the beginning of the course were really just to learn more about communication and finish my senior capstone requirement. Of course as the class continued I got more involved in the subject matter—particularly this quarter working with the "watershed summit." Here was a topic that inspired some personal interest beyond "just" learning to me. I felt like I was in a position to do something positive for the local environment...even though it was a small part in a long, on-going process, I still feel that I helped do something positive for the local environment. That to me means more than the grade.

This project has been a good experience for me. I have gained new skills as a focus group moderator, and I have gotten some more practice in qualitative research. This has also been an interesting look into the processes of group dynamics, both in terms of the actual focus groups and in terms of this research team....I'm glad I took the class and I appreciate what I've learned.

DISCUSSION

We approached the "Community Service Through Facilitating Focus Groups" course

not simply as an opportunity for students to learn a method or acquire experience, but as a vehicle for putting sociological principles into practice. There are several ways that the nature of focus group methodology facilitates a sociological understanding that would be more difficult to achieve through other kinds of courses.

First, focus group methodology requires that students think in terms of groups (including sub-groups or segments), not just individuals. For example, in a service project aimed at identifying transfer student issues at our university, the capstone student team's research design included conducting separate focus groups for students who had transferred from community colleges and those who transferred from other four-year universities. This design feature (segmentation of focus groups) allowed the capstone students to experience and compare multiple perspectives on the same issues in order to gain insights into how context and educational background affected subjects' perceptions of the relative importance of various issues.

Focus group-based service-learning projects also emphasize sociological understanding through the need for students to work with a sponsor (in this case, a community partner). This relationship with a sponsor raises questions that students do not typically encounter in classroom-based courses: What does the sponsor want? What is reasonable for the sponsor to expect? For example, in a service project associated with a community "summit" on watershed issues, the frustration that one student team experienced due to ambiguous sponsor goals became a class learning experience about how to anticipate and negotiate potential sponsor-related issues.

To be successful, focus group methodology requires that students work with participants, which raises issues of group dynamics. How can students get good participant interaction on their topic? The students found that facilitating (and not dominating) group interaction during actual community service projects was not as easy as it had

been during in-class exercises. This led to a class discussion on how cultural background and differences in communication styles impacted the moderation of focus groups.

The course also reveals that focus group methodology involves working *in* groups as well as working *with* groups. The real-world projects associated with this course provided students with more realistic experiences of teamwork, as opposed to the more artificial nature of group work and papers found in other courses. In conducting an actual focus group, it was critical for the success of the project that each student carried out his or her assigned responsibilities. While the moderator facilitated interaction among the participants, the assistant moderator took notes on the session and monitored the tape recorder. A third capstone student team member recorded the main points from the discussion on the pages of a flip chart and subsequently taped the flip chart pages to the wall to make the information visible to focus group participants. All three team members had to pay attention to anything that might be important in their analysis of their group.

As another aspect of learning, the design, data collection and analysis stages of focus group research force students to think in group terms. While the focus group participants provided their views on the topic in question, the analysis of these data required capstone students to focus on "themes" that cut across groups. This methodology's emphasis on group-level explanations encouraged students to look for similarities among subjects rather than focusing on individual differences.

Finally, making sense of focus group data requires students to deal with the emergent nature of conclusions drawn from qualitative data. Focus groups provide students with an almost prototypical experience with *verstehen*, or understanding the experiences of a group in terms of that group's social context. For example, two of the capstone students on the team working on the "university transfer students' issue" project were transfer students themselves. When it came time for their team to analyze the

focus group transcripts in order to identify within- and across-group themes, these students became increasingly aware of how their own experiences affected their interpretations of the focus group participants' responses. Students' realizations about how difficult it was to put aside their own perspectives in order to understand those of the participants led to a lively class discussion on the importance of interpreting participants' responses in terms of their own social context.

Issues to be Considered

Several important issues must be considered by an instructor during the design and implementation of a methods-based service-learning course. First, it is important to recognize that the balance between two sets of inter-related course goals—those relating to service learning and those relating to conducting focus groups in real world settings—will vary, depending upon the instructor's pedagogical orientation and class vision. The course we have described emphasized both service-learning experiences and the acquisition of focus group skills immediately before graduation. Small adjustments could easily allow a shift in class emphasis. For example, if the professor provided the class with community partners instead of letting students choose their own projects, this would free up class time to cover additional course-related topics such as community development or organizational theory.

Second, the instructor must be prepared to handle situations where students encounter unexpected difficulties with the community partner of their choice. Even when the instructor pre-screens projects for appropriateness, students may find that their partner's proposed project has grown into something which cannot be completed in the allocated course time or that the partner interferes with the level of professionalism and expertise required by the course. We encountered this situation when a group of students initially choose to work with community partner on one project, only to find

the organization's project timeline incompatible with class demands. Fortunately we had several "back-up" projects available for just this situation, and the team of students went on to have a rewarding experience working on another project. Therefore, we encourage instructors preparing to teach this type of course to line up surplus potential service projects with community partners. In addition, instructors must continue to monitor the progress of student projects in order to ensure that students do not get too deeply enmeshed in a project they will not be able to complete due to course-related time constraints.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have described the development of and rationale behind our "Community Service Through Facilitating Focus Groups" capstone course. We suggest that methods-based service-learning courses provide students with valuable opportunities to apply their research methods skills in situations that can actually make a difference to their local communities. In addition, these types of courses tend to provide students with experiences that are closer to those in the "real world" than those in a typical college classroom.

A methods-based service-learning class inherently involves negotiations between student teams and their potential community partners. This scenario mimics what students will encounter in real life after graduation. As one of our students noted, "I learned a lot about the 'real world' through the project we completed. I learned about dealing with government agencies, committee planning, community involvement and many other issues...."

The variety of tasks involved in administering focus groups points out the importance of bringing together teams of students, not individuals, to meet a community need. This emphasis on teamwork is a fundamental component of many courses that concentrate on the practical application of previous learning.

A methods-based service-learning class also demonstrates to students the value of research. The needs of both the community (as a group wanting to address specific issues) and the student (as apprentice researcher and involved citizen) are met. This issue of meeting needs underlies a larger discussion of community-based learning. At one extreme, the needs in community-based learning come from the university, in that an instructor may seek a particular experience for a class of students. At the other extreme, the need comes from the community partner who seeks a particular expertise.

With the current increased emphasis in higher education on providing a range of community-based learning experiences for students, we encourage faculty to consider the possibility of offering methods-based service-learning classes, such as the capstone course outlined here. By combining skills building, group projects, and practical application of knowledge, methods-based service-learning courses can serve as vehicles for simultaneously promoting student learning and civic engagement. We close with a student journal entry that captures this dynamic nicely.

In the beginning I thought the capstone courses were just for "PR" [public relations] between the school and the surrounding community, using the students as forced labor. But now after going through the system I can see the benefits outweigh the amount of work we put into it. I have gained new skills as a focus group moderator, and I have gotten some more practice in qualitative research. And several thousand people stand to benefit from what we have done if [our recommended] changes are made.

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