

Moving Service Learning Beyond the Studio to History-Theory Courses

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Service learning can be used to strengthen student learning outcomes in non-studio courses for architects, such as history-theory seminars. The author's experimentation with assignments provides a foundation for this pedagogy. Institutional support, diverse student skills, willing community partners, and questionnaires have resulted in a variety of interdisciplinary, collaborative, active, and real-world projects. A decade's worth of statistics and written student feedback clarify that service-learning projects helped to raise student performance and enthusiasm, in addition to the benefits that community outreach brings to the academic program and to the university.

While service-learning for architecture students occurs logically when faculty link their studio courses to community design centers and design-build projects, service experiences can also be woven into non-studio courses. A survey of architecture programs' websites confirms that the studio experience frequently intersects with community-based projects. However, there is little evidence in course catalogues or publications that faculty teaching related non-studio syllabi are doing the same,¹ with the notable exception of historic preservation courses.² My own curricular experiments at Philadelphia University in architectural history-theory seminars, which serve as capstones following a four-semester sequence of history of architecture and interiors courses, have revealed the varied benefits and challenges of engaging in service learning in this other venue.

Beyond the goal of teaching architectural history and theory courses so they are as relevant to aspiring professionals as possible, several other factors have shaped my upper-level undergraduate courses. First, I have found many institutional incentives for active, multi-disciplinary, and collaborative learning. Our Center for Teaching Innovation provides helpful workshops on improving teaching methods as well as grants to facilitate experimentation and improvement. I also consult with faculty colleagues who are tasked with providing support for innovative pedagogies and their assessment. Next, our location in a large city provides access to both financially challenged and wealthy communities with significant historic cultural landscapes and thus many potential external "clients."

Finally, although my courses primarily enroll students in our professionally accredited Architecture Program, I also have smaller numbers of students majoring in landscape architecture, historic preservation, industrial design, and allied disciplines. This population provides a useful spectrum of skills that facilitates working with community groups or non-profit organizations.

Having for over a decade taught conventional history-theory seminars in which research assignments aimed to hone students' research, thinking, and writing skills within the confines of the ivory tower, a few years ago I began to network with the managers of nearby historic sites and other potential partners to discover if they needed the skills my students could share. As a result, over the last six semesters my students and I have assisted nine "clients." These clients have included two colonial-era sites of regional if not national significance, a town wanting to document a mid-20th-century bank slated for demolition, three local preservation societies, and a group renovating a theater famous as a nexus of African-American culture.

Students primarily used their skills in researching the built environment, communicating information digitally, and presenting their findings in oral and graphic forms. Their deliverables included photographs and measured drawings that documented historic sites for archival collections,

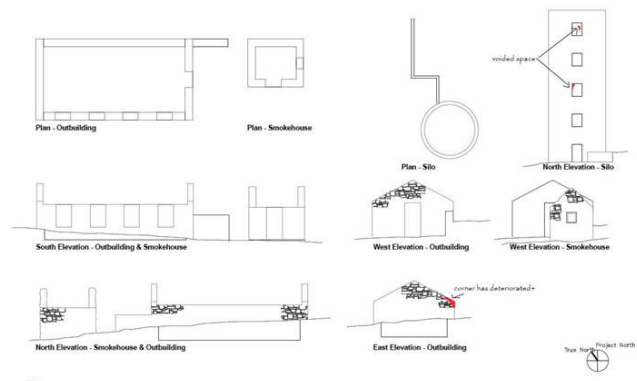


Figure 1: Portion of a student Power Point presentation for Vernacular Architecture, Spring 2014

as well as reports, analytical drawings, and diagrams that enabled an organization to upgrade its website and improve its on-site educational materials for visiting school groups.

Three iterations of the service-learning project are worth a brief mention. In the spring semester of 2014, one team of students in the Vernacular Architecture course did a condition survey of a complex of agricultural structures that survives in a suburban park in Lower Merion Township, Penna. (see Fig. 1); their work extended to offering conjectural proposals on the original uses of the vernacular buildings. In the spring semester of 2015, student groups prepared nominations to the state's list of historic sites in Newtown Square, Penna., a more distant ex-urban community, working with the descendant of the original early-18th-century Welsh settlers. That project involved searching for the original layout of the farmsteads and recording their physical transformations over the last three centuries. In the fall semester of 2015, students assisted a neighborhood group near campus, the Chestnut Hill Historical Society, with the goal of updating its database for a large national historic district. First, the students researched and wrote papers on the context of the neighborhood's growth by uncovering the accomplished architects, high-end developers, and fashionable styles that created the community as it now appears. Next, working in pairs, the students canvassed the area, taking field notes on how the pre-World War II buildings had changed since the previous survey, as well as documenting the several important post-war residences that had been built and that are now distinctive enough to contribute to the district.

At other times, student groups provided the boards of historic sites with drawings meant to accompany fund-raising campaigns and to communicate with contractors about preservation projects, to nominate a culturally significant site to the city's Register of Historic Places, and to prepare drawings for a homeowner who was restoring an 18th-century log house.

Studies have long shown the value of active learning in terms of long-term retention of information and skills.³ Furthermore, scholars who have examined the unique characteristics of the Millennial Generation (those born in the last two decades of the 20th century) have discovered that they respond positively to research-based learning rather than lectures, relevant experiences rather than learning for its own sake, and personally engaged rather than aloof faculty.⁴ Those are primary reasons studio faculty have revised their syllabi over the last few years to include service-learning projects, which in turn can prepare students for community-based endeavors in non-studio courses. Regardless of the type of course they are in, all students and student groups need a client who clearly articulates his or her expectations, who allows access to a site, who works with the academic timetable, and who provides the helpful feedback students need to improve their performance.

Nevertheless, a service-learning project in a non-studio course naturally poses its own set of issues. Unlike a studio course that meets for as much as 12 hours weekly, my three-credit courses meet for (nominally) three hours weekly, over a span of 15 weeks. A further restriction is that the service project only supplements – it does not replace – the lectures

and group discussions that comprise the remainder of the course, so the project cannot be all consuming. Sites must be reasonably accessible to students, many of whom rely on carpools for transportation, and none of whom have unlimited time to devote to travel. The tasks must be within the range of what undergraduate students are prepared to do. Especially for the students majoring in design, it is essential that the project ignite their engagement in my course, because they tend to view all parts of their lives as obstacles to spending time in studio. Finally, the subject matter must support the student learning outcomes of the course – in my case either the American Architecture, Vernacular Architecture, or Archival Research seminar.

Whatever format the service-learning project takes, it must address the course's student learning outcomes. The projects, like most assignments, provide opportunities for improved communication skills, including the ability to think critically and reach appropriate conclusions. Over and above that objective, the projects confront students with how differing



Figure 2: Students presenting their findings in a public venue, Spring 2014

cultural values and societal settings affect the role of the architect as well as recognizing and analyzing the relationship between human behavior, the built environment, and the natural environment. Sometimes the assignment also addresses the ability to collaborate with others to produce finished projects.

When appropriate, establishing student teams is a challenge I address by examining students' academic history before my course begins. If possible, I make each student team interdisciplinary. Beyond the benefit of exposing the architecture students to peers in other fields, the different courses they have completed ensure that the team will possess varied skills and knowledge bases. Those students experienced in historic preservation issues, for example, will complement those with more advanced digital visualization skills or those with a background in landscape architecture. After a few semesters, it also became obvious to me that all students in a group must share at least one block of free time during the week in order for them to collaborate effectively, especially when the project involves a site not adjacent to the campus.

I also experimented with the format and length of the service project, because most of my seminars require a capstone research paper. The most compartmentalized solution was to dedicate the first half of the semester to a conventional experience, with lectures and discussions that introduced students to the subject matter while they simultaneously prepared a succinct (typically eight-page) paper; we then tackled the service project during the second half of the semester. Two advantages of this compartmentalized arrangement come to mind quickly. One, we could adopt service projects even if they were only moderately connected to the course focus – for example, documenting mill workers’ housing, though it wasn’t a topic otherwise covered in the Vernacular Architecture syllabus. Two, it allowed students to be exposed to a variety of research projects. On the other hand, the disadvantage was that seven or eight weeks often were inadequate for the preparation of a conventional research paper and sometimes even for the service project. That problem encouraged me to try linking the two assignments. As already mentioned, during one semester students wrote individual research papers on the historical context of the neighborhood that they later surveyed for existing conditions. Another semester, in the Archival Research course, we were able to combine the request by a local historical society to produce measured drawings of a large dwelling with our own agenda of researching the significance of the same site. We then used the combined work to prepare a nomination to Philadelphia’s Register of Historic Places.

Whether the service-learning project was short or long, students concluded the semester either with brief oral presentations on individually completed projects to their classmates or with a lengthier group oral presentation to the client as well as their classmates. The clients (and other stakeholders such as neighbors) offered useful criticisms which students were encouraged to incorporate before they submitted the final version of the project for a grade and eventual distribution to the client.

One important motivation for incorporating a service-learning component was to enhance student performance (see fig. 3). Therefore, I have tabulated the grades my students earned on conventional papers (2007-16) versus service-learning projects (2013-16). The average grade over ten semesters on conventional papers was 83.7 out of 100, whereas the average for service projects was 89.3, a significant difference of 5.6 points. Compare that number to the typical increase of 4.3 points for capstone courses as reported by researcher Amy Strage.⁵ Recognizing that the learning outcomes differ, that students may strengthen one another’s skills by working in groups, and that I may have evaluated the diverse assignments unevenly, I also calculated the average final grade over ten semesters, which was 85.0, to try to find a meaningful pattern. Figure 3 reveals that because service project grades were always higher than research paper grades, final grades also rose. What is not evident on the chart but partially responsible for the higher grades perhaps is the practice of students meeting a presentation deadline for an external audience; it has ended the occasional late submittal of their work, thereby forfeiting part of the grade, when the audience was only the instructor. Furthermore, having graded the projects, I noticed that students produced more thorough and polished work when they were required to present it to a client. Whatever the exact combination of

reasons, the higher grades do point to the students achieving at a higher level when engaged in service learning.

Another motivation for the service-learning component was to increase students’ enthusiasm in the history-theory course. Among the few documentable measures of success in this regard were the written student evaluations, which also may be in keeping with Amy Strage’s research. In summarizing the vast literature in this field, she notes that the academic value is modest in the short term but valuable in the long-term. Figure 4 reveals that in the numerical responses to my seminars on course evaluations, students did not self-report marked differences in their overall learning experience or in how the course related material to the profession, whether the semester was limited to a conventional paper

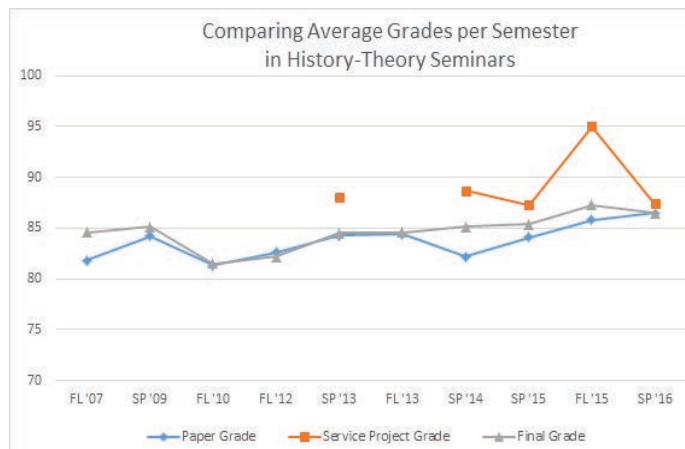


Figure 3: Comparing average grades in history-theory seminars. In semesters with the service project, final grades were higher.

assignment (2007-12, plus Fall 2013) or included a service-learning project (Spring 2013, plus 2014-16). The only notable change is a modest improvement in their rating of my overall effectiveness as an instructor.

On the other hand, if one reads their short answer responses on course evaluations, it is surprisingly clear that students were satisfied by the requirement of a service-learning project. Prior to the introduction of the service project, their evaluations commented on the quality of the lectures, value of the discussions, or suitability of the assigned readings. Once the service-learning project was incorporated into the syllabus, only a very few students expressed negative comments about it and the vast majority recorded overwhelmingly positive reviews. For example, at the end of the first semester of the new assignment (that is, Spring 2013), a student wrote: “The project [was] a good way to break up the class structure ...” though added that it could have been more integrated with the rest of the course. The following year (Spring 2014), almost 75% of student respondents praised the assignment, writing:

I loved having a real client to work with, and I enjoyed being a part of a community discussion about the preservation of historic buildings. I wasn’t expecting this real-world application, and it was a very rewarding experience.

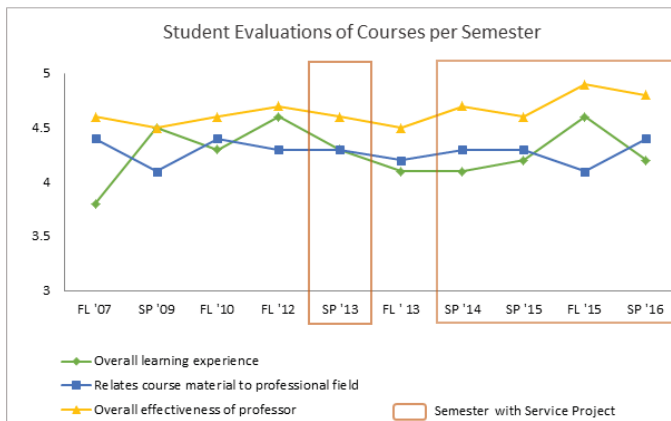


Figure 4: Student evaluations of courses. While students rated my effectiveness as a professor slightly higher during semesters with the service project, there was no significant change in how they rated their overall learning experience or how they thought the course related material to the professional field. They communicated positive feedback largely through short answer responses.

I enjoyed the hands on project that we did. It allowed me to see historic preservation work from a different perspective.

Completing real life projects with clients.

I enjoyed our case studies that allowed us to do our own investigations of vernacular examples ...

Recommendation: more interactive learning such as on site visits ...; extend the length of the on site project ... research paper tends to not be very interesting.

There were limits to this enthusiasm, however. When students were asked to update state survey forms for individual buildings as part of the assignment (Spring 2015), one student voiced displeasure: "It felt like we were just filling in boxes not learning anything new" The very next semester with a different assignment (Fall 2015), a student disagreed: "The ... survey was the most exciting and effective assignment in this course ... [it] allows students to see American Architecture for what it is and not just on a Powerpoint." Regarding a project that students started from scratch and submitted for review to the Philadelphia Historical Commission (Spring 2016), an enthusiastic student wrote that it "... has been an absolute joy for me to be involved in and I'm loving every minute of it. The hands-on nature of the project helped me put research into practice, rather than simply talking about researching."

In order to elicit responses more focused on the courses' learning objectives, I am now instituting a post-project questionnaire in class, with the following questions to prompt reflection:

Do you feel the service learning project improved your learning experience in the course? How or how not?

Did the project strengthen your ability to research historic architecture? How or how not?

Did it improve your overall knowledge of the larger subject matter? How or how not?

Do you feel better prepared to undertake a related project in the future?

Do you recommend that the project be continued in the future as a requirement for this course?

Answers to these questions should be able to guide future improvements to the service-learning projects as well as how they are integrated into each course.

Yet another motivation to support a service-learning project has to do with the university's place in the larger community. The experience ideally would be mutually beneficial to students and to our neighbors. So far, clients' responses have been very positive, but they are informal; so I have created a questionnaire for clients that should provide useful feedback for future semesters. My first attempt to standardize this aspect is limited (again) to five issues:

1. Was the planning process leading up to the students' work well organized, timely, and appropriate?
2. Did the students conduct themselves in a professional manner? Did you notice a change in how they related to you as the project progressed? Please elaborate.
3. Were the students' oral presentations clear, informative, thorough, and on target?
4. Were the research and/or graphic materials useful to your organization? If so, how did you use it?
5. Please suggest any improvements that could be incorporated for similar projects in the future with your or another organization.

Responses to these targeted questions will also provide information to improve the experience for all stakeholders. In the future, I will include additional questions to help me evaluate the role of the service learning project as a means of preparing my students to be life-long learners and valued professionals within the larger community.⁶

My experiences have shown that it is not only possible to expand service learning for architecture students beyond the studio, but it is advantageous. The community members they work with and the skills they hone may be different than those associated with design-based endeavors, but of course both skill sets are beneficial to them in the long term. Furthermore, these projects stimulate enthusiasm among the millennial students, making for an improved learning experience, and simultaneously they help bridge the gap between the university community and its neighbors. Once I have processed the new questionnaires, I will be able to implement additional improvements to the courses.

ENDNOTES

1. The literature on the subject dealing with architectural education is almost exclusively about the design studio experience. Examples of this, which are excellent but solely focused on studio, include articles in *From the Studio to the Streets: Service-Learning in Planning and Architecture*, AAHE and Campus Compact Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2006), particularly those by Anthony W. Schuman, Mary C. Hardin, Scott Wing, Paula Horrigan, and Joongsun Kim and James Abernethy. See also Carla Corroto, "When You Have a Hammer in Your Hand, Everything Looks Like a Nail: The Architecture of Service Learning," *Qualitative Research Journal* 14.2 (2014): 103-118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-07-2013-0043> (accessed Sept. 7, 2016).

2. Martha Sonntag Bradley, "Serendipity in the City: Service Learning and Architectural Studies: The Gateway Service Learning Project," in *La Città Nuova – The New City*, 1999 ACSA International Conference Proceedings, eds. Katrina Deines and Kay Bea Jones (Washington, D.C.: ACSA Press, 1999), 120-22, discusses projects that map communities. Keith D. Alexander, "Reflections on Eight Semesters of Employing Service Learning in an Undergraduate Historic Preservation Course," *Preservation Education & Research* 4 (2011): 83-92. <http://www.ncpe.us/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Alexander-OffprintPERvol4.pdf> (accessed Sept. 11, 2016). Alexander provides a carefully considered insight into his achievements in historic preservation courses.
3. For the former, see the often-cited article Gregory B. Markus, Jeffrey P.F. Howard, and David C. King, "Integrating Community Service and Classroom Instruction Enhances Learning: Results From an Experiment," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15 (Winter 1993): 410-19, and esp. 418. For the latter, Linda J. Sax and Alexander W. Astin, "The Benefits of Service: Evidence from Undergraduates," *The Educational Record* 78 (Summer/Fall 1997): 25-32. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225292466/F69C685731FD47B5PQ/1?accountid=28402> (accessed Sept. 13, 2016).
4. See, for example, Christy Price, "Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy?" *The Teaching Professor* 23 no. 1 (2009). <http://www.drtoimplivendahl.com/Millennial%20Characteristics.pdf> (accessed Sept. 22, 2016).
5. Amy Strage, "Long-Term Academic Benefits of Service-Learning: When and Where Do They Manifest Themselves?" *College Student Journal* 38 (June 2004): 257-61. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=b7ff50f6-cf0d-434e-a018-cae48c2773c8%40sessionmgr4007&vid=0&hid=4206&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZwZT1zaXRl#AN=14098761&db=aph> (accessed Sept. 7, 2016).
6. I thank one of my anonymous paper reviewers for encouraging me to expand the inquiry in this direction.