

Ancient Mesopotamian history has everything to do with local Oregon history. I didn't realize this in a specific way when I first started teaching History of Western Civilization courses, but the addition of service learning options for my students has linked these disparate places and eras in a striking manner. Service learning, for those unfamiliar with the terminology, is a teaching method that connects students with a community organization so that the student not only renders useful volunteer service but also learns concepts related to course work in a practical manner.

In 1998, Portland Community College began to formally urge instructors to incorporate service learning assignments into their courses. A number of inspirational testimonials were offered on the efficacy of this teaching approach. While I could appreciate the added dimension such hands-on assignments might contribute to students' overall learning experience, I had an intellectual problem rationalizing the connection with my courses. The only opportunities I could think of would be focused on Oregon history. These seemed irrelevant to the subject matter in Western Civilization courses.

Furthermore, I just couldn't see adding to the burdens of my already overloaded students. The great challenge in these surveys is to cover 5000+ years in a comprehensive yet meaningful way. As they enter my classroom, many students have no idea where Augustus and Napoleon, for example, fit in the grand scenario. Were they contemporaries? I felt and still feel the importance of communicating this foundational content, and students work hard to absorb it.

Yet I could not dismiss the nagging thought that the personal engagement inherent in a Service Learning experience was valuable. When PCC offered \$300.00 to help

instructors who wanted to launch into this great unknown (funded by a grant from Campus Compact), I wrote a proposal – still mulling over the puzzle of how to incorporate a service learning assignment into my courses – and received this mini-grant. So I got out the phone book and began to make contacts. There are actually a surprising number of local organizations interested in and committed to preserving local history, and of these a sizable few were interested in experimenting with the idea.

Ultimately, the solution to my enigma emerged as a focus on process. After all, did not a project such as this meet a number of the standard Intended Learning Outcomes and Competencies we list for history courses? Among these are included:

- Analyze and evaluate primary and secondary sources
- Recognize and evaluate historical processes
- Connect past and present information through critical analysis and evaluation

And was this not a way of reaching students who learn in a kinesthetic rather than theoretical manner?

I set up the projects as an alternative option for interested students, a substitute for the essays and oral reports I normally assign to build a percentage of the student's grade. They were required to fulfill ten hours of service, keep a journal, receive a site evaluation of their work, write a 3-4 page essay according to certain specifications, and tell the class about the experience. I still required them to take exams that represented the content of the course, so I felt it was a justifiable substitution.

I was amazed, as certain students chose this option, at how meaningful the projects could really be. The following excerpts from representative students' essays

illustrate some of the ways in which service learning can go beyond theoretical study and become a real and vital learning experience for the student.

(Sellwood-Moreland Improvement League (S.M.I.L.E.): research on a historic Sellwood building for database; Summer 2003)

I can imagine that leafing through City Directories at a public library is a veritable cakewalk compared to the research that goes into discovering ancient civilizations, but it was still pretty involved work. Certainly I was no Indiana Jones; aside from a little eyestrain from viewing microfiche and being a pedestrian downtown, my life was never even remotely in danger. Nonetheless, it was still pretty exciting to be able to trace people's lives through the thick, musty smelling directories. . . .

. . . I also learned an immeasurable amount about doing research. Not the kind of research where you use a little search engine on the internet while you sip hot tea and listen to music. The kind of research where you have to work; you have to sweat; you have to get paper cuts! Dealing with primary sources is definitely a lot different than dealing with nice, concise analyses. Although I hadn't ever really noticed a disparity between primary sources and the breakdowns provided in books about history, I am aware of the discrepancy now. This project has actually taught me a lot more than I expected it to. I don't think that I will write a book about the house at 7805 SE 13th Ave., but I sure know enough about it to.

Oregon Sports Hall of Fame Museum: research on sports figure, Summer 2002

. . . . Greek sports in Athens were surprisingly relatable to present time because of the unifying nature of the games. I also learned that the way people saw their favored athletes are still [sic] the same as in our time, and that was as an earthly god. . . .

Now that I have completed this project, I can see how necessary it is to have accounts and collections on people's outstanding achievements. Although I struggled to find certain information, I appreciated the quality of my experience, and also learning about six people who [sic] I had no prior knowledge of, who have touched a portion of my community."

Service learning not only can complement the required subject matter but also enhance it in a powerful way. And it does indeed connect ancient Mesopotamian history – or shall we say – the process of preserving and communicating history in all times and places – with local Oregon history.

For further information: process, caveats, other student testimonials, or just questions, please feel free to contact me at msgray@pcc.edu.