


2024

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Recommended Citation

Kieran, Laura and Haack, Sally (2024) "PRELOAD: A Rubric to Evaluate Course Syllabi for Quality Indicators of Community Engagement and Service-Learning Components," *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholars.indianastate.edu/jcehe/vol10/iss2/4>

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PRELOAD: A Rubric to Evaluate Course Syllabi for Quality Indicators of Community Engagement and Service-Learning Components

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ABSTRACT

Faculty development programs have proven successful in teaching faculty how to develop community engagement and service-learning (CES-L) courses. Evaluating the outcomes of these programs can occur through assessment of course syllabi for CES-L elements. The PRELOAD rubric was created, which includes the following facets: Partnership, Reflection, Engagement, Logistics, Objectives, Assessment, and Definition. The rubric can support faculty developing CES-L courses and community engagement offices documenting the scope of CES-L opportunities across campus.

Keywords: service learning pedagogy, faculty development, course evaluation, program evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement and service-learning (CES-L) opportunities are frequently designed to increase students' critical thinking, civic engagement, and cultural competence. Service-learning (S-L) is defined as a high-impact practice (Flinders, Dameron, & Kava, 2016; Kuh, 2008); it leads to greater retention, integration, and transfer of information and skills (Kuh, 2008). When implemented well, students will understand the authentic applications of the course content and skills (Howard, 2001). High-quality service learning has student-centered outcomes embedded in the CES-L coursework (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990). Elements of student-centered learning include authentic problems, exploration and engagement, direct contact with community members, reciprocal relationships with others, reflective learning tasks with multiple feedback perspectives, and connected or integrated service-learning experiences (Hull, Kimmel, Robertson, & Mortimer, 2016; Smith et al.,

2011; Yang, Luk, Webster, Chau, & Ma 2016). Research in CES-L indicated that students experience the deepest learning and greatest change when uncomfortable and transformational experiences are paired with critical reflections (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Brown, 2005; Harrison & Clayton, 2012; Mezirow, 1998; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). To increase learning, faculty must devise experiences that will benefit their students and community partners as well as include the noted elements of quality CES-L. Syllabi include a description of learning outcomes as well as the course materials and experiences necessary to meet those outcomes and are therefore a natural artifact by which to examine the integration of CES-L into a course. The researchers sought a rubric to evaluate the quality and depth of S-L components found in instructors' syllabi, and found two tools designed to guide course development: the OPERA rubric (Welch, 2010) and the IUPUI Taxonomy for Service-Learning Courses (Hahn, Hatcher, Price, & Struder, n.d.).

OPERA and IUPUI Taxonomy for Service-Learning Courses

The OPERA checklist (defined as a rubric by Welch) covers five elements of quality S-L syllabi: Objectives, Partnerships, Engagement, Reflection, and Assessment (Welch, 2010). Each element was described within the accompanying article, but there was not a rubric present with the article. In a personal communication with Welch (August 8, 2017) to clarify how to use OPERA to rate syllabi, Welch indicated,

You can “qualitatively” assess the “quality” or depth of evidence with this scoring rubric. Explicit, clear, language that reflects evidence or existence of each component gets a 2. A marginal or “hint” of the component, perhaps without explicitly naming it gets a 1....it’s “there” but just barely. A score of 0 is given if there is no clear evidence/existence of any component of any kind.

The researchers felt a weakness of OPERA was that it could not be used in a stand-alone manner; CES-L practitioners must refer back to the accompanying article to understand the nuances for each of the five areas. Further, based on the literature review, OPERA does not thoroughly cover all elements of a quality CES-L course. The IUPUI Taxonomy for Service-Learning Courses does follow a rubric format, and would be usable as a stand-alone tool by course developers to integrate service-learning components. The IUPUI Taxonomy wasn’t designed specifically to evaluate course syllabi.

The researchers found gaps in both OPERA and the IUPUI Taxonomy. Neither evaluation tool required the inclusion of a definition of S-L or the explicit benefits of the S-L pedagogy for course outcomes (Jacoby, 2015). Additionally, the CES-L logistics should be clearly defined for students. This includes expectations regarding time commitment, required activities, safety considerations, and behavioral expectations (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Porter-Honnet &

Poulsen, 1990). To provide more structure and defined criteria for syllabus and course review processes, the authors created the PRELOAD rubric, which includes the following facets: Partnership, Reflection, Engagement, Logistics, Objectives, Assessment, and Definition.

High-Impact Indicators of Community Engagement and Service-Learning Partnership.

Creating healthy relationships between academic and community partners is a foundational aspect of successful S-L courses. Harrison and Clayton (2012) discussed the need for reciprocity to bring about transformative learning with students. S-L is most beneficial for all parties when completed with a community partner instead of for a community partner. Therefore, the community’s needs must be articulated and defined by the community partner (Tinkler, Tinkler, Hausman, & Straus, 2014). Welch (2010) described partnership as a “joint effort of sharing resources and expertise to meet mutually defined goals” (p. 78). While these are necessary aspects to consider when developing a service-learning partnership, the nature or extent of shared resources will not typically be stated in the course syllabus. Porter-Honnet and Poulsen (1990) indicated that one of the fundamental principles for well-implemented S-L is the mutuality in the S-L exchange. Students have an active role in planning, implementation, and reflection of CES-L activities. When students are involved, at least in part, during the planning stages, they feel increased ownership, motivation, and engagement in the CES-L activities. Therefore, the PRELOAD rubric criteria emphasize the reciprocal nature of the work and learning that will occur between the community partners and the students. Throughout the experience, students and community partners teach and learn from one another with integrity while simultaneously meeting students’ learning outcomes and the community partner’s needs.

Reflection.

Critical reflection is a defining element of S-L and enables students to connect structured service activities to the course's desired learning outcomes (Jacoby, 2015). Reflection activities can take various forms, but all should be rigorous as reflection is integral to the S-L experience. Disorienting experiences paired with a reflection of assumptions are transformational for students' understanding of complex issues (Mezirow, 1998). Purposeful, structured reflection allows students to deepen their understanding of the course material, the local issues, and the role of community engagement to address those problems.

The PRELOAD criteria emphasize the need for reflection that occurs before, during, and after an experience to promote and deepen critical inquiry (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler, 2002; Mezirow, 1998; Welch, 2010). This continuous cycle of reflection prepares students for CES-L experiences, allows students to evaluate new understandings against existing beliefs, and guides students to deeper or more profound understandings of the issues addressed or the populations served. Feedback to students should be multifaceted, with opportunities for feedback from instructors, peers, and community partners so students may receive guidance from different perspectives (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990).

Engagement.

CES-L courses offer multiple opportunities for student engagement and student-centered learning. The course syllabus should carefully articulate these opportunities and expectations. Unlike traditional classes where the students' primary involvement is with their instructor, CES-L courses incorporate student engagement with classroom content, while concurrently addressing issues in the community.

When the teacher takes on the role of facilitator or guide, students are put in charge of their learning. With CES-L, students are active on multiple levels: with themselves through critical reflection, with peers through collaboration and feedback;

and with community partners through organized service activities and feedback (Jacoby, 2015; Welch, 2010). The PRELOAD rubric challenges faculty to purposefully design learning opportunities that promote autonomy, experiential learning, and reflection throughout the project (Kolb, 1984).

Logistics.

Faculty must consider many aspects of CES-L in building productive partnerships and learning experiences for their students. Some logistics are addressed "behind the scenes" related to selecting, building, and maintaining community partnerships and, therefore, are not a part of the rubric. However, other logistics need to be communicated with students to increase students' success with the desired learning and community-based outcomes. Therefore, the PRELOAD rubric points explicitly to student-centered logistics. Carefully designed CES-L courses include service commitments that are flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990). Along with an orientation or training, the S-L syllabus should also outline clear expectations for students, such as the required time commitments, expected behavior, dress codes, safety, and security (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). With faculty extending their classrooms into the community, it is essential for students to be aware of logistics to ensure that the service activities are safe and effective. The PRELOAD criteria for this component also indicate that time commitments should be stated explicitly, including if the service activities are required or optional and what training (if any) is necessary. Contingency plans that address the consequences of unsatisfactory work in either the course or the community should also be included in the syllabus to anticipate challenges that may arise with students.

Objectives.

Kolb (1984) indicated that CES-L is well integrated into a course if the project meets essential needs of the community partner while concurrently addressing the

course knowledge, skills, values, and goals. Without compromising the academic rigor of the course, learning objectives should align with CES-L activities (Howard, 2001). Both content-centered learning (academic outcomes) and student-centered goals (behavior or affective outcomes) should be incorporated into a CES-L course syllabus (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990). Traditional course outcomes extend students' content-area knowledge and academic skills (i.e., writing, public speaking, leadership, etc.). Behavioral or affective outcomes include relating to others with diverse backgrounds or experiences, advocating for marginalized populations, or understanding the value of community engagement. It should be noted that with CES-L, some behavioral and affective outcomes may be unpredictable. Students' growth will vary depending on their baseline level of understanding and dispositions, depth of reflection, and level of engagement.

Assessment of students' outcomes.

Throughout the process of selecting potential S-L partners and relationship-building, academic and community partners need to complete multiple assessments including an evaluation of the goodness of fit in goals and values, partner expectations, and availability of resources. These assessments, while part of the process of building a CES-L partnership, would not be evident in the course syllabus. Syllabi should outline how and when student outcomes are evaluated.

The PRELOAD rubric offers guidance regarding the frequency and types of assessments that align with S-L pedagogy. Evaluations that occur before and during the service activities allow instructors to gather information regarding students' baseline performance and provide guiding feedback to students. More frequent assessments allow faculty and community partners to provide feedback to students regarding the depth of critical reflection and dispel possible misunderstandings or stereotypes.

Post-service assessments are an indicator of students' achievement level with the learning outcomes (Welch, 2010). Traditional evaluation methods are most often used to assess academic learning outcomes; reflections are most often used to evaluate growth in affective and behavioral outcomes. Syllabi that outline a plan to measure students' academic, affective, and behavioral outcomes through multiple points in the semester would rate excellent with the PRELOAD rubric.

Definition of service learning (S-L).

Most syllabi outline the types of activities that learners will engage in throughout the semester, but may not then discuss the pedagogical approach or the rationale for its use. Students may not have experience with S-L; therefore, it is essential for the course syllabus to define S-L, provide justification for its use, and describe S-L's alignment with the university CES-L goals and values. Increasing students' knowledge of the value and use of S-L in their course further leads students toward the intended learning outcomes (Jacoby, 2015). Students may have misconceptions about S-L, or they may not appreciate the rationale for service as an essential component of the course. In defining S-L, instructors create a shared understanding of course activities and expectations (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

PRELOAD

The authors created the PRELOAD rubric to evaluate course syllabi for quality and evidence-based indicators of S-L components as found in the literature (Table 1). Two raters applied the rubric to six syllabi from colleagues in a CES-L professional learning community (PLC), the PRELOAD rubric for clarity and inter-rater reliability at this time. The authors independently rated the most recent syllabi versions and compared their ratings for inconsistencies. The rubric areas that were not consistently rated were revised to have more precise de-

scriptors. A third PLC member from the Office of Community Engaged Learning

provided additional expertise in cell refinement.

Table 1. The PRELOAD Rubric

| Reflected within the course syllabus | Excellent <i>Thoroughly incorporates key components of S-L pedagogy</i> | Satisfactory <i>Aligns with the research base for S-L pedagogy</i> | Developing <i>Does not clearly include key aspects of S-L pedagogy</i> |
|---|--|---|---|
| Partnership (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990; Tinkler et al., 2014; Welch, 2010) | <i>All of the following are evident:</i> Students have an active role in planning S-L activities AND Students have multiple opportunities to work with the S-L partner (in the classroom and/or community) AND Activities are aligned with partner’s needs and course’s learning outcomes | <i>Two of the following are evident:</i> Students have an active role in developing S-L activities OR Students have multiple opportunities to work with the S-L partner (in the classroom and/or community) OR Activities are aligned with partner’s needs and course’s learning outcomes | <i>0-1 of the following are evident:</i> Students have an active role in developing S-L activities OR Students have multiple opportunities to work with the S-L partner (in the classroom and/or community) OR Activities are aligned with partner’s needs and course’s learning outcomes |
| Reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler, 2002; Jacoby, 2015; Kolb, 1984; Mesirnow, 1998; Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990; Welch, 2010) | <i>All of the following are evident:</i> Students have multiple opportunities for reflection, based on observations and shaped by instructor and peer feedback AND Students reflect on assumptions, make meaning from their experiences, and apply new understandings AND Reflection connects instructional and civic engagement outcomes | Reflection is ongoing and occurs at multiple points of the project AND <i>Two of the following are evident:</i> Reflection is shaped by instructor or peer feedback OR Students reflect on assumptions, and make meaning from their experiences to develop new understandings OR Reflection is connected to instructional objectives/learning outcomes | <i>0-2 of the following are evident:</i> Reflection occurs at multiple points in the project OR Reflection is shaped by instructor or peer feedback OR Students are encouraged to make meaning of their experiences OR Reflection is connected to instructional objectives/learning outcomes |

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| <p>Engagement (Jacoby, 2015; Welch, 2010)</p> | <p>Students are active participants throughout the S-L project: They are engaged with the instructor, themselves (reflection), peers (collaboration and feedback), and the community partner in organized activities designed to facilitate learning.</p> | <p>Students are mostly active participants throughout the S-L project: They are engaged with 3 of the following: the instructor, themselves (reflection), peers (collaboration and feedback), and the community partner in organized activities.</p> | <p>Students are not active participants throughout the S-L project: They are engaged with 2 or fewer of the following: the instructor, themselves (reflection), peers (collaboration and feedback), and the community partner OR There are not clearly organized activities related to the course outcomes and/or the community partners' needs.</p> |
| <p>Logistics (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990) (Note: Many logistics must be considered in setting up S-L partnerships; the logistics within this rubric are specifically related to the project implementation with students)</p> | <p><i>All 3 are evident:</i> Students have varied ways in which they can engage in S-L; the time commitment expectations are clear (required vs. optional service activities are clearly stated) AND Expectations regarding behavior and dress are outlined. When applicable, students' safety or security precautions are addressed AND A statement regarding failure to satisfactorily meet expectations is included (i.e., incomplete service, inappropriate behavior)</p> | <p><i>Two of the following are evident:</i> Students have varied ways in which they can engage in S-L; the time commitment expectations are clear OR Expectations regarding behavior and dress are outlined. When applicable, students' safety or security precautions are addressed OR A statement regarding failure to satisfactorily meet expectations is included (i.e., incomplete service, inappropriate behavior)</p> | <p><i>0-1 of the following are evident:</i> Students have varied ways in which they can engage in S-L; the time commitment expectations are clear OR Expectations regarding behavior and dress are outlined. When applicable, students' safety or security precautions are addressed OR A statement regarding failure to satisfactorily meet expectations is included (i.e., incomplete service, inappropriate behavior)</p> |
| <p>Objectives (Howard, 2001; Kuh, 2008; Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990; Welch, 2010)</p> | <p>The learning objectives are clearly tied to S-L pedagogy and S-L activities. The objectives are content-centered (academic) as well as student-centered (behavioral or affective outcomes).</p> | <p>The learning objectives can be met with S-L pedagogy. The objectives are either content-centered OR student-centered (behavioral or affective outcomes).</p> | <p>The learning objectives cannot be met with S-L pedagogy.</p> |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Assessment of students' outcomes (Howard, 2001; Welch, 2010)</p> | <p><i>Both of the following are evident:</i> Assessment occurs before, during, and after service activities to provide a baseline and evaluate students' progress formatively during the service activities AND Assessment is used to evaluate affective and behavioral growth, as well as cognitive growth on academic standards</p> | <p>Assessment occurs at multiple points of the S-L project BUT The assessment does not evaluate students' affective, behavioral, <i>and</i> cognitive growth</p> | <p>Assessment occurs at one point of the S-L project OR Assessment evaluates only one of the following: affective, behavioral, <i>or</i> cognitive growth</p> |
| <p>Definition of S-L (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jacoby, 2015)</p> | <p><i>All of the following are evident:</i> The institution's definition of S-L is clearly stated in the syllabus AND Stated benefits of using S-L pedagogy to meet the intended learning outcomes AND There is a statement connecting the S-L pedagogy in the class to the university's S-L goals or values</p> | <p><i>Two of the following are evident:</i> The institution's definition of S-L is clearly stated in the syllabus OR Stated benefits of using S-L pedagogy to meet the intended learning outcomes OR There is a statement connecting the S-L pedagogy in the class to the university's goals or values</p> | <p><i>0-1 of the following are evident:</i> The institution's definition of S-L is clearly stated in the syllabus OR Stated benefits of using S-L pedagogy to meet the intended learning outcomes OR There is a statement connecting the S-L pedagogy in the class to the university's goals or values</p> |

DISCUSSION

CES-L experiences are complicated to devise, implement, and facilitate. The PRELOAD rubric was created to evaluate course syllabi for quality indicators of S-L components. Through a combination of CES-L research and experience, the authors developed the PRELOAD tool for community engagement offices and faculty en-

gaged in CES-L. The authors aligned the rubric criteria with foundational aspects of CES-L; these elements reflect the complexities of a well-designed CES-L course. The PRELOAD rubric has several possible applications: as a tool to guide and assist with new course development or course revisions, to demonstrate the research base behind CES-L pedagogy, to evaluate the quality and depth of CES-L components, and to guide faculty development in CES-L.

Higher education institutions' initiatives in CES-L must demonstrate a positive impact on students' learning, the campus climate, and the communities served. To increase the quality and depth of CES-L experiences, community engagement offices often provide professional development for faculty and course designers. The PRELOAD rubric could be used to benchmark the degree of S-L elements infused in courses across campus and provide an accurate picture of how many courses are genuinely rooted in CES-L pedagogy. This rubric provides an objective, consistent method for evaluating courses across campus in a systematic, efficient manner. This data would support community engagement offices to specifically design training to meet faculty needs and the university's civic mission.

To further align course outcomes and community needs, universities may offer professional development in service-learning pedagogy (Bowen & Kiser, 2009). Bowen and Kiser (2009) noted that seminars in S-L pedagogy had a positive and robust influence on participants' teaching skills and motivation, collaborative relationships with students and colleagues, and an overall change on campus toward community engagement. PRELOAD could be used to evaluate the outcomes of a CES-L professional learning community. Course syllabi are a natural artifact of such training and could be used as a measure of professional development (PD) effectiveness. Scores on each rubric component could inform PD developers about programmatic strengths and areas for improvement as well as to demonstrate to stakeholders the value of resources invested in CES-L training.

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