

e-Service-Learning: Best Practices, Pitfalls to Avoid, and Recommendations

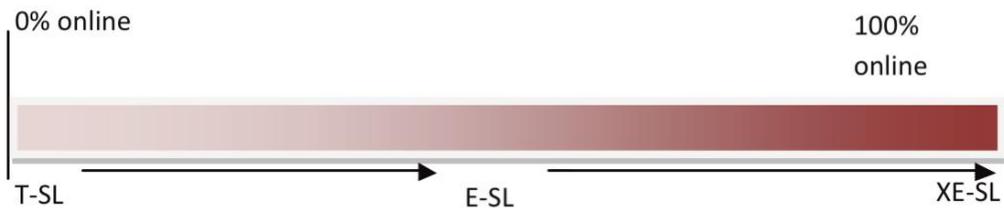
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INTRODUCTION

“E-service-learning occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online” in a service-learning class (Waldner, McGorry, and Widener 2012). The field of e-service-learning (e-S-L) has become increasingly relevant over the past decade as the higher education landscape changed in response to shifting markets, reduced state government contributions (PEW Trusts 2019, Hebel 2010), increased economic pressure due to a global pandemic (Jesse 2020), and higher demand for flexible and accessible learning opportunities. As Figure 1 illustrates, e-service-learning comes in multiple forms: Fully online courses with a fully on-site service component; fully on-site courses with a fully online service component; blended courses with elements of instruction and service online and on-site; and “extreme e-service learning,” where 100% of instruction and service occur online (Waldner et al 2012).

Having any or all components of a service-learning course online requires technical and social skill (Moore and Kearsley 2012; Goertzen and Greenleaf 2016). As such, it is a critical realm of professional development and growth for faculty—one that supports institutional health, high-quality student experiences, and the ability of academia to preserve the benefits of high-impact S-L practices in the face of external challenges. E-service-learning is arguably a “facilitator rather than a barrier” to widening service opportunities because it can free S-L from geographical barriers and “equip online learning with a tool to promote engagement” (Waldner et al 2012: 123).

Figure 1. A Continuum of Service-Learning (Waldner et al 2012)



T-SL: traditional service-learning; E-SL: e-service learning; XE-SL: extreme e-service-learning

Source: Waldner et al., 2010.

E-SERVICE-LEARNING BEST PRACTICES

Growth rates in online course and degree offerings currently outpace growth rates for on-campus instruction (Lederman 2018). To remain viable, service-learning pedagogies must go online. Moving an S-L course online can be simpler if divided into areas of focus to be tackled one at a time. Be reassured: Many “best practice” approaches for e-S-L mirror those used in traditional S-L classrooms. They are merely executed using different tools. By breaking the work into four broad areas, you can figure out what you already have done and what work remains. These four areas include: tools and technology, course design, communication strategies, and relationship building. You may focus on one more than the others, depending on your institution’s specific service mission (Guthrie and McCracken 2010).

Tools and Technology

To ensure students, faculty, and community partners can successfully engage with one another in an e-service-learning course, all parties need access to the proper tools and technology and training to use them. Most educational institutions ensure students and faculty have access to the tools and tech they need to take and teach courses when everyone is on campus. However, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gaps in access that must be addressed institutionally for students, faculty, and community partners to remain connected. Faculty, especially, can work to: (1) make sure community partners can communicate with students; and (2) make sure everyone is trained to use course-required tools.



PHOTO: Saturday Night Live cast poking fun at the awkwardness of Zoom calls

A first step is to **talk with partners about the tools they have**. If they cannot collaborate on Zoom or FaceTime or Skype, it will be important to consider other options, such as phone conferencing. If they do not want to share their phone number, there are still plenty of options for communication. You might choose videoconferencing or asynchronous discussion boards, emails, or team-building spaces such as Google Drive. LSU offers its faculty and students access to online courses through Moodle. [Click here for directions on how to request a Guest Moodle account](#) for someone (such as a community partner) who is not affiliated with LSU so they can access Moodle. All LSU-affiliated persons have access to [free tutorials and answers about Moodle tools via Grok](#). Also, students can get help with online tools from the LSU Help Desk by emailing servicedesk@lsu.edu or calling 225-578-3375.

Faculty can get help and 1-on-1 consultation with the Faculty Technology Center by emailing ftc@lsu.edu or calling 225-578-3375 and selecting option 2. Finally, tools such as Zoom, FlipGrid, and other online collaborative software programs typically offer their own help desk services. Before using a tool that is new to you, watch LSU-provided or YouTube tutorials and/or do trial runs to make sure everyone knows how to use the tool. Faculty can provide access to the program’s help desk contact information for emergencies in a course syllabus or LMS. It is important to always be flexible when technological hiccups happen. Providing multiple options for communications can help with that.

Course Design

When approaching course design, consider the following questions: Have you taught online before? Are you new to service-learning? If either answer is yes, consider **starting small** (Strait and Nordyke 2020). Starting out simple is an excellent way to break into the world of e-service-learning (Strait and Sauer 2004). Core components of service-learning courses include:

- **Reciprocity** – students, community partners, and faculty all benefit; it is a “win-win-win”
- **Serving a community-identified need** – community members (not outsiders) articulate the need(s) they have and want support with
- **Working toward the public good** – service performed works toward enhancing quality of life, broadly speaking, for the public
- **Integrated learning** – credit is given for achieving course goals through service work and assignments, not simply for completing service hours
- **Asset-based** – views of and approaches to interacting with the community are informed by careful study of its existing strengths rather than focusing solely or primarily on its challenges
- **Reflective** – through critical reflection on self, service, and course content, students achieve course goals and enhanced learning outcomes

Faculty who have already taught service-learning courses are familiar with these practices. Moving them into a different space changes the landscape. However, it is a chance to develop a new skill. It can also open up opportunities for non-geographically-bound collaborative partnerships with new community partners. In addition, it can potentially increase the number of students who can have service-learning experiences because their work, home, school, and family schedules no longer make service-learning assignments impossible to complete. They can do it on their own time.

One of the first decisions to make when approaching course design is how to lay out content. LSU offers many [resources to support faculty in their construction of online class content](#). These include, but are not limited to:

- [Training courses](#)
- [Explanation of basic terms for teaching remotely or online](#)
- Advice on how to prepare for your online class
- Basic tips for effective online teaching
- Video tutorials on creating assessments, moving a F2F course online, making videos, embedding resources on Moodle, creating online instructor presence, and providing timely and meaningful feedback
- Alternatives to LSU tools
- Live support from the Faculty Technology Center and LSU Online teams

Once you have determined how you want to present content online, carefully think about how to fold in a service component. Scholarship on the e-service-learning suggests the following are best practices for including a service component in an online class (Waldner et al 2012):

- Tie service closely to your learning objectives
- Have multiple reflection exercises and types
- Get student input
- Provide frequent and meaningful feedback

Linking service experiences and assignments to course learning goals is a longstanding component of S-L instruction. In face-to-face courses, S-L instructors often utilize impromptu moments in lecture or discussion where students, guest speakers, or they themselves connect course content to shared service experiences. When a class moves online, however, these “aha” moments need to be intentionally prepared. You might consider one or more of the following strategies: (1) Create multiple small assignments for the service work that carefully correspond to course material for a particular week or unit; (2) Make connections between course service and course materials clear in online lectures; or (3) Structure class discussions (live, written, oral, synchronous, or asynchronous) in ways that require students to pull together their service experiences with particular aspects of the class. These approaches are simple to adopt and allow students to be continually reminded of links between what they are learning in class and what they are practicing in their service work.



Beyond linking service to class content in assignments, lectures, and readings, being explicit about the course’s service-learning purpose and its relevance to participants’ careers, lives, and/or communities goes a long way to enriching learning outcomes. When people can see direct connections between what they are doing and changes to society (Moely and Illustre 2014) or the meaning it adds to their own life (Frankl et al 2006), they benefit. Providing space for individual and group discussion and reflection on the relevance and meaning of course service can help make it clearer to everyone involved.

Using multiple types of reflection also enhances service-course connections and student learning outcomes (Pigza 2010, Waldner et al 2012). The goal of critical reflection, generally, is to enhance student learning by linking theory to practice and by developing an appreciation for the complex relationship(s) between social issues and their potential solutions (Jacoby 2015). Reflection should “[deepen] learning by encouraging students to examine their assumptions, avoid facile conclusions, and ask more complex questions” (Jacoby 2015: 29). Easy-to-do online critical reflections include:

- Pre-lections and Reflections: Students begin by writing about their pre-existing beliefs, thoughts, or feelings about a social issue their service aims to address, the population their community partner works with, or a broader concept such as civic engagement. These exercises help ensure students are aware of, explore, and document their pre-existing beliefs about a topic, concept, idea, social issue, group, neighborhood, or country, for example, before doing service related to it. This approach creates room for critical discussion about where our beliefs and feelings come from. When paired with later reflections, done after students have direct experience with a community partner, assignments can be fruitful for self-exploration and critical analysis. Students might reflect on why people stereotype, for example, and what consequences it has, or how people come to misinformed beliefs about a social issue and how using data can help change it.
- What? So what? Now what? Reflections: Students begin by recalling what happened in a service encounter (eg. What did you see, hear, say? What did you feel? Can you tell the story of the experience from beginning to end?). They reflect on what they learned because of it (eg. What do you understand differently now? How does what you have learned related to prior knowledge, ideas, theories?). They also write thoughts about what comes next (eg. Now what will you do differently? Why? Why does all this matter? What will you avoid doing? Why?) (Rice 2010, cited in Jacoby 2015: 49).

Reflection can be structured in many ways in an online class. It can be written and shared with peers in a discussion forum, shared with peers via video applications such as [FlipGrid](#), happen in live small-group or full-class Zoom meetings, or written and shared with just the instructor. Maximizing students' connectedness to you, the class's community partner, and to each other is of heightened importance in online classrooms (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones 2014; Steele, Robertson, and Mandernach 2018). Putting learning goals to work can help identify appropriate reflection assignments for a course. For sample reflection questions or extended discussion of reflection options, see Chapter 2 ("Understanding and Facilitating Critical Reflection") in Barbara Jacoby's (2015) *Service-Learning Essentials* or visit online repositories of sample approaches (such as those published by [UCONN](#), [Learn and Serve America](#), [Northwest Service Academy](#), or University of Waterloo's [Centre for Teaching Excellence](#)).

Soliciting student input and providing frequent feedback can help fine-tune a teaching approach, ensure students are engaged, and help them learn to be a part of the process. When students provide feedback, it cultivates their agency and leadership skills. We recommend using student assignments or an (anonymous or non-anonymous) poll or survey mid-course to gauge student experiences with your course's service component. Simple feedback can be structured into a reflection assignment, for example, asking students to write a short essay in response to prompts such as the following:

Sample Midterm Check-in Reflection Assignment

- How are you doing? How is class going for you? How is the service component going?
- What is working well? What things about the service component are working well so far?
- What things are not working well? What things about the service component are not working well so far? What would you change if you could?

Online courses have a more intense need for instructor feedback (Waldner et al 2012). Without the physical classroom to structure their time, students can lose track of assignments more easily and/or feel disconnected from their professor in a way that might lead them to believe the faculty member is not invested in their success. Creating frequent, small, graded assignments is one way to ensure students are engaged throughout the semester. These assignments also ensure a community partner is getting high-quality deliverables (if you grade them as assignments prior to students delivering) and that your students have a good idea where they stand in the course as the semester progresses. [Time management resources](#) offered by LSU's Center for Academic Success are a further resource for keeping students engaged in an online class.

Communication Strategies

“The professor who uses an e-service-learning activity needs to remain actively engaged from start to finish” (Hunter 2007 and Tabor 2007, cited in Waldner et al 2012). Clear and frequent communication with all parties helps make a course successful and does not have to be a huge burden for you. Something as simple as setting reminders in your phone or on your work computer to send Moodle announcements—which deliver an email to your students/users *and* appear when they log into Moodle to do coursework—can be hugely beneficial for making students feel like you are present, connected, and invested in their success. Groups on Moodle ([see this link](#) for a Grok article on building them) can also facilitate communication between students, partners, and yourself throughout the semester. They are especially useful if your class is service-learning optional and only some students need to get updates about service work.

It is good practice with any service-learning partnership, regardless of delivery mode, to have a strong shared understanding of what everyone will bring to the table and expect from one another (Jacoby 2015). [Making sure a community partner has access to your Moodle course shell](#), for example, can keep them updated and involved. Also, many practitioners utilize memorandums of understanding (MOAs) to facilitate shared understanding of responsibilities and expectations. They can be simple or complex, depending on what a course, student, and/or partnership requires. See [CCELL's webpage](#) for examples of agreements. With remote service opportunities posted by existing non-profit organizations, where their needs and directions are clearly spelled out online, your class may not need an MOU. If students work directly with a partner whose expectations are already limited, clear, and publicly available, you might not make an MOU. Instead, a clear set of directions for students to ensure they keep you in the loop about all their work and that they fulfill class requirements would be critical to develop.

Relationship Building

Relationship-building is a core component of successful service-learning approaches. Strong S-L courses help students develop interpersonal skills (Astin et al 2000), strengthen university-community ties (Leiderman et al 2002), grow bonds of mutual respect (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Lima, 2005), and enhance social-emotional learning outcomes (McKay-Jackson 2014). Building in relationship-growth-focused events, meetings, and/or assignments for your course can help secure these kinds of outcomes. You might consider the following:

- A “community partner reveal” (Waldner et al 2012) where the class learns who their community partner is via an exciting announcement or Zoom meeting or where students who found partners or chose one from a pre-approved list reveal to one another who they will be working with.

- Assignments that get students and community partners, or the people they serve or work with, to meet one another and find spaces of mutual connection.
- Modeling your willingness to bond personally with students and community partner(s) by using short icebreakers in meetings or sharing your thoughts or feelings about the work they do and how it connects to your own life, job, or sense of purpose.

Critical S-L scholars have long pointed out an additional factor to consider when thinking about relationships in the field of service-learning. When students and/or faculty, who often come from relatively privileged backgrounds, enter into S-L partnerships, there is a risk they will bring unnecessary stress to community partners or less privileged peers if they interact in ways that communicate deficit-oriented views of marginalized populations' capabilities (Cole 2012; Mitchell and Donahue 2009; Mitchell 2008; Hollis 2004). In addition, without historical, contextual, and data-driven understandings of community challenges and the assets communities have mobilized in response to them, S-L work risks reproducing individualistic ideologies that justify existing inequalities rather than helping ameliorate them (Becker and Paul 2015; Davidson 2009; Hattery 2003; Lum and Jacob 2002). Scholarship suggests these issues can be amplified in online classroom settings and/or online service work because of "online disinhibition," or "a reduction of self-regulation that occurs when communication becomes digital" (Shah et al 2018: 190).

However, when properly harnessed, critical approaches not only feed accurate understanding of social issues and the work people have done to address them, but also can help build movements supporting human equality (Swords and Kiely 2010; Love 2008; Sulentic Dowell 2008; Lewis 2004). Studies suggest the following good examples of "best practices" for navigating these issues in service-learning classes:

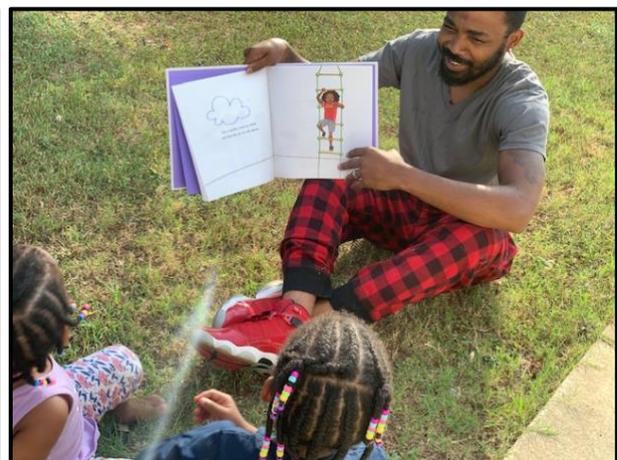
1. Using a critical service-learning model better equips students to understand root causes of social issues their service addresses and/or to think about the importance of longer-term community engagement (see Mitchell 2008; 2013).
2. Adapting digital Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) models (i.e. using "eABCD") to ensure students have a robust understanding of community assets and community members' past and ongoing efforts to transform local social and physical environments (see Shah et al 2018).
3. Fostering critical conversations about social action and change can help students better understand the role human agency plays in the transformation of our communities (Guthrie and McCracken 2010).
4. Utilizing "pre-flection" assignments allows students to be clear with themselves (and you) about the beliefs they bring into the course about the population or geographic area their community partner works with. These can be a starting point for encouraging students to critically analyze those belief systems and their sources using data-driven studies during the course (Ashworth and Bourelle 2014).

5. Collaboration with colleagues in other departments (such as history, sociology, African and African American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and other social sciences) can be fruitful. These faculty are familiar with research on the social, structural, and interactional dynamics our modern community challenges are rooted in. Connecting with them is an easy way to ensure your students have access to materials that help them critically deconstruct stereotypes, misinformation, and non-data-informed views of people and/or communities your class community partner work alongside.

HYBRID AND HYFLEX LEARNING MODELS

You may find yourself in a position where you are required to teach using a hybrid or hyflex learning model for Fall 2020. Hybrid (or blended) models merge classroom time and online instruction (Shaw 2018; Mironesco 2014). Hyflex models use multiple forms of course delivery (in-person, recorded sessions, for example) to allow students maximum flexibility (Kyei-Blankson, Godwyll, and Nur-Awaleh 2014). LSU Online has a training module available on how to develop a course using the hyflex model: [Click here to access it.](#)

CCELL piloted two summer online service-learning classes to assess best possible methods of service and course delivery for Fall 2020: Sociology 4465: Drugs and Society and African & African American Studies / Sociology 2511: Race Relations. SOCL 4465 had a service-learning option. Students could choose to serve remotely or in-person with a local community partner. That community partner met current S-L practice guidelines for LSU at the time: they were accepting face-to-face (F2F) volunteers, abiding by CDC and state rules for F2F contact, and students could opt-in (or out). AAAS/SOCL 2511 was entirely online with remote service and online instruction.



PHOTOS: Students Courtney Williams (left) and Ervin Smith (right) in AAAS/SOCL 2511 created “[read-aloud](#)” videos from home for community partner [Zeiter Literacy Center](#). They and their course peers also did a read-aloud to a child/children in their own life. Photo credit to Courtney Williams (left) and Aleshia Smith (right).

The following challenges emerged:

- In the S-L optional course, significant time investment was required from the local community partner to develop remote work students could do to support their mission and to provide feedback and direction to remotely working students through the summer session.

- In both courses, significant instructor time investment was necessary to create guidelines for tasks such as choosing a service option, switching from F2F to remote service when student health was compromised due to COVID exposure, providing guidance to students as they navigated their choices, creating online content to expose remote-service students to the community partner in ways they missed without F2F contact, and (for the S-L required course) designing and delivering an entirely online class and remote service requirement.
- In the course with a F2F option, students contracting or being exposed to COVID-19 demanded instructor and community partner flexibility and created instructor worry over risk of exposure for community partner(s).
- In the course with F2F or remote work options, students working entirely from home expressed feeling a comparative lack of connection and depth/quality of experience compared to peers.

The following highlights stood out:

- Large numbers of students chose the F2F service-learning opportunity when they were given the option, even with fears about COVID-19 circulating this summer.
- The course with the S-L requirement required upfront planning and connection with a new (remote and temporary) community partner. However, student reflections and conversations suggested their experiences were more uniform, which bonded them with one another and the broader service goal.
- Some students in the S-L-required remote service course contracted or became exposed to COVID-19 and had to go into recovery and/or quarantine. With minor adjustments to due dates, they were able to focus on self-care and recovery while they needed to, but easily continue their successful service-learning work in the course once they were able to engage again.
- Multiple students in both classes expressed a desire to continue service work after class ended.

Reflecting on these piloted courses, existing scholarship on e-service models, and the uncertainty of how COVID-19 will shape fall instructional delivery modes lead us to the following **recommendations for Fall 2020 service-learning classes:**

1. If/when existing partnerships can be adapted to remote service delivery, prioritizing preservation of ongoing collaborations is desired.
2. If/when existing partnerships cannot be adapted for a remote option, but still retain openings for F2F service, courses must be service-learning optional so students are not forced into a situation that causes them anxiety or where they cannot fulfill class requirements due to their geographic location.

3. If/when existing partnerships cannot be adapted for a remote option, but partners are willing to suspend collaboration for one semester, choosing a temporary 100% online community partner for the entire class could make the most sense for faculty and students; it requires some up-front planning, but significantly reduces the likelihood of having to make complicated (and/or repeated) pivots to requirements and due dates for students during the semester if COVID-19 challenges their ability to complete coursework.
4. F2F class time, if you have any, can be used to *enhance* service experiences by, for example:
 - ◇ Including discussion-based activities linking service work to course concepts
 - ◇ Allowing students to “decompress” through physically distant group activities
 - ◇ Providing time to watch films relevant to the community partner or service
 - ◇ Having guest speakers from local organizations who work on causes similar to the one your (temporary or longstanding) community partner does (in-person or via Zoom)

CONCLUSIONS

In the face of all the challenges 2020 has delivered to LSU faculty, students, and service-learning community partners so far, it would be understandable if you felt overwhelmed at the prospect of developing an entirely online S-L course for Fall 2020. However, we know you choose this work for a reason. We also witnessed your incredible capacity for ingenuity and growth in Spring 2020. With mutual support and guidance, Fall 2020 can yield similarly proud moments for us all as a team of people committed to making a practical difference in the world around us through teaching, learning, and connecting with one another using service-learning.

Developing an online delivery method for your S-L course and partnership offers the opportunity to cultivate an increasingly relevant professional skillset. More and more students are pursuing online education, LSU’s own online degree programs are growing, “yet few are exposed to service-learning in their online coursework. **To remain relevant, service-learning must also go online**” (Waldner et al., 2012: 123, emphasis added). Indeed:

“The next decade and beyond will necessarily be shaped, and is already being shaped, by rapid, expansive, and disruptive technological innovations. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, have provided platforms for every voice and view. Across the globe, we have **new, technology-assisted ways to form communities among people who will never meet in person, but who feel attachment and affiliation as new ways are discovered to organize geographically disparate individuals into unified, collective, and booming voices**” (Janke, 2019: 240-241).

While we must remain mindful of digital divides that inhibit participation when designing our courses, more and more people are connecting virtually in educational systems and in their daily lives. Creating a way to move service-learning teaching and/or engaged scholarship online opens up possibilities for more students to be exposed to the experience, for more community partners to be engaged, and for you, your students, and your community partner to acquire new skills. We look forward to supporting the great things you do in the midst of the challenges and changes this moment has produced. If you have any questions or need additional support, please reach out to the CCELL team at ccell@lsu.edu.

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