USING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AS PROBLEM-SOLVING EXPERIENCES FOR MULTI-DISCIPLINARY DIGITAL ARTS STUDIO CLASSES

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Abstract

Downtown community development potential is enhanced by attractively designed infrastructure such as road medians and verges, landscaping, pocket parks, seating, and wayfinding signage. Restoration of historic buildings and active public arts initiatives also make cities more attractive to potential business owners, developers, and visitors. Implementing these projects are, however, very expensive and time-consuming, with much of that time and cost spent in the planning stages. The development of ideas and design solutions for specific problems, and the visualization of those ideas, is part of the planning process, and the part that this study addresses.

In predominantly rural East Tennessee, there are many small cities and towns where the downtown areas have fallen into decline. Johnson City, Tennessee, is one of those cities. Even though East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and the large regional medical center are very close to downtown, there was little incentive for visitors to spend time there. Now it is undergoing a revitalization, and there is a commitment among the city leaders and the community to preserve the essential identity and history of the downtown area.

This has provided an opportunity for students in advanced multi-disciplinary digital arts classes at ETSU to engage in projects that involve real-world problem solving, collaboration, and an understanding of how their particular skills can be used for social and economic development in their own community. Over the course of several years, undergraduate and graduate students in digital media classes have produced visualization materials that range from interactive wayfinding products, to promotional campaigns for downtown hangouts, to the design of playground features for the city park, to façade renovations. These products were used by the city to promote discussion; evaluate and test multiple solutions; help funding grantors understand a project’s goal; and persuade stakeholders to invest.

By integrating community needs with the need to help students understand how their studies and skills can influence the growth of a community, the city can be saved time and money getting to a clear idea of what is needed and desired before contracting with design firms or contractors. The projects have also resulted in continuing work with the city after graduation for some students, recognition in the community in creative awards programs, and portfolio work that demonstrates students' understanding of projects that involve multiple community stakeholders and complex variables in the ideation process. This paper outlines the process by which we put this program into place, and specific results and benefits gained by both the students and the community.

Keywords: Economic Development, Interdisciplinary Classrooms, Service-learning. Cooperative Education, Experiential Learning, School Community Relationship.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Challenges for multi-disciplinary classrooms

When working with a multi-disciplinary class, with students from different areas of study, it can be challenging to come up with meaningful curriculum that can be relevant to all, and still give each student opportunities to produce portfolio work appropriate to their individual skill set.

In the Digital Media Program at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), the Advanced Raster-Based Imaging class is composed of senior and graduate students engaged in diverse areas of study including 2D and 3D animation, graphic design, game design, 3D modeling, photography, programming, digital illustration, videography and filmmaking, cinematic visual effects, product design, web design, costume design, fine art, scriptwriting, and others. Since the portfolio requirements for
each of these disciplines is different, assignments must allow students to produce creative product appropriate to their discipline, so an independent-study approach to the projects was implemented. Over many years, this class has evolved to emulate a professional studio work model in which students produce an extremely high level of work that combines real-world problem solving with external review, iteration and formal presentation.

For the instructor, this type of class can present challenges. When students are working on very different types of projects, class coherency can be affected, and feedback and grading can become cumbersome for the instructor. Formal instructional elements of the class—technical demonstrations, lectures, etc.—need to conform to common denominators within the varied disciplines, while still allowing for more individualized instruction to help with discipline-specific problems. Student perceptions of the relevance of the course material can suffer if the material does not seem to be useful for their own discipline. Project rubrics must be designed to allow for a wide variety of project types, and even skill levels, yet still be fair to everyone.

The instructor’s skill set may not intersect with all, or even most, of the students, potentially resulting in uneven or unequal levels of feedback. To some students, the instructor may seem to favor those who work within the instructor’s area of expertise.

In a high-tech, advanced imaging class such as this one, course material changes as the technology changes, so there is an additional burden on instructors in our program to be cognizant of software and process updates, and to be prepared to introduce and demonstrate the most current information available.

1.2 Meeting multidisciplinary classroom challenges using service-learning opportunities

For this instructor who has, for over two decades, been charged to develop and teach multi-disciplinary classes, and has had to find ways to manage all these issues, a “professional studio” approach demonstrably produced the most successful results. The instructor is not only the instructor, but is also acting as creative director and client liaison. Students are the creative team and must treat the class as a professional work environment. They are responsible for managing their time, and juggling multiple projects with overlapping milestones, critiques and deadlines. Peer-to-peer feedback is continuous, with progress presented to the entire team and the creative director in regular team meetings.

For this approach to be meaningful, real-world projects, preferably with real clients, worked best. Finding those projects, especially those that could fit within a semester timeline, was difficult, particularly since multiple clients were usually needed to accommodate the various types of work students needed to produce for portfolios. Also, working with real clients came with serious problems, such as unrealistic client expectations, projects that didn’t fit well with instructional objectives, and legal issues over rights and use of university resources. Simulating real-world projects worked, but did not have the impact on the students’ experience afforded by the real projects where they could see actual results from their efforts.

A switch to service-learning types of projects, where students could work with community non-profit organizations, provided more flexibility. While retaining the opportunity to work with a client as a collaborator and external reviewer, money was taken out of the equation, and expectations regarding deadlines and work scope could be more easily tailored to the classroom experience. There was still the problem of having to seek out multiple projects, but since non-profits tend to have many needs that are often not being adequately addressed, it was easier to find a situation where the class could work on multiple projects for the same client.

A service learning strategy also offered additional benefits. Service learning, an experiential teaching and learning strategy common in many universities and colleges, combines classroom instruction with service that addresses a community need. Universities in the U.S. include some form of service to the community as a mission component, which is often difficult to achieve in a time of soaring costs for education, and more demands on faculty and student’s time. Much of traditional faculty service activity involves external volunteer activities which take place outside of time required for teaching and research. Bringing community service into the classroom can help institutions of higher education sustain this historical commitment to service by combining time spent in the classroom with a tangible benefit to the community served. Faculty can more easily meet service requirements for tenure, the
university can connect better to the community it serves, and students gain opportunities to use their talents in ways they may not have considered, while fostering a sense of social responsibility.

Students can benefit from service opportunities that allow them to apply learned knowledge to a real-world application by requiring them to discover and consider impacts of issues on diverse populations, while learning to work with community leaders and community stakeholders to discuss issues, collaborate, and respond with ideas for solutions.

According to Frank Newman, “If there is a crisis in education today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most significant responsibility of the nations’ schools and colleges [1]. The Wingspread Group on Higher Education recommends that universities should “wholeheartedly commit themselves to providing students with opportunities to experience and reflect on the world beyond the campus” and that service learning opportunities are a way to do this [4].

Service learning programs, which are structured to promote learning about larger social issues behind the needs to which their service is responding, foster a deeper understanding of the historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political contexts of the needs or issues being addressed. The needs of the community defines what the service tasks will be [3].

According to principle findings by Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee, service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college. They found that better than four service-learning students in five felt that their service “made a difference” and that they were learning from their service experience. [2]

The current literature suggests that experiential learning is a necessary component of formal instruction in colleges and universities for several reasons. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning has found that faculty are concerned with optimizing the chances for their students to more easily enter their chosen professions or meet their desired goals upon graduation from the college program due to decreasing job markets and increasing competition among college graduates across most all fields of study [3]. Teachers and employers are concerned about the effectiveness of preparing our future generations for the American workforce at all levels, technical and professional. It is also indicated that the typical college student is changing. More nontraditional learners are opting for college study, and are demanding more varied modes of learning [3].

The literature reveals some not-so-obvious outcomes of experiential learning as well. Colleges, and their faculty and students, develop a closer relationship to their communities, and through these newly formed linkages proactive economic development outcomes can emerge. These include better educated and trained students as potential employees, technology transfer from faculty to entrepreneurs via business development consultation, and the like. [5]

Over the last 15 years at ETSU, service-learning projects were incorporated into several of this instructors’ multi-disciplinary digital media courses with varying levels of success, but overall the experiences were positive. The challenge to provide the most flexible range of project choices for students continued to be biggest hurdle. The more limited the choices available, the more difficulty some students had in engaging fully the skill set they wished to apply.

An opportunity to work with the City of Johnson City, TN through the Johnson City Public Art Committee in 2015 provided an interesting model for a multi-disciplinary service-learning experience that allowed for a large variety of project options, and has provided a framework for a continuing relationship that can benefit the city, the students, and the university.

As in many cities, Johnson City’s downtown district experienced a long decline which started in approximately the late 1970s. The reasons for this decline vary, but as in many American cities, migration to the suburbs, and the relocation of retail and entertainment establishments from downtown to suburban malls resulted in loss of traffic and jobs in the downtown area. There were periodic efforts to try to revive the downtown, but prevailing attitudes in the city government, and among much of the population was, “if it looks bad, or if it requires a lot of work and money to repair, then tear it down and replace it with something new.” Building owners were not willing or able to take on the expense to renovate and bring buildings up to current code, and there was no local public funding available to assist with preservation of historic buildings. During this time, a lot of the buildings that had architectural interest, and historical significance, were torn down and replaced with parking lots or
cheaper, nondescript modern buildings. By the time of this writing, a number of these newer buildings had already deteriorated, and are in turn, being torn down.

Frequent flooding during storms from three streams that converged under the city contributed to businesses abandoning the downtown. The flooding made it so difficult to sell or rent the buildings left vacant, and had become such a large problem for existing downtown merchants, that funding was finally approved for flood abatement in 2012 to solve the problem. The stream beds in the affected area were widened, warehouses and parking lots were demolished to open up stream sections that had been built over, and flood plain areas were re-contoured to make water containment basins. This opened up the opportunity to create a public park in the flood plain to the west of downtown (Founders Park), with an additional park in the King Creek basin, currently under construction, near the center of downtown. [7]

Also in 2012, the Johnson City Public Art Committee (JCPAC) was commissioned with a mandate to create a public art program for the city, and in the soon to be completed Founders Park. Since the committee was also under the Johnson City Department of Public Works, the committee was also charged to oversee the aesthetic development of the city’s historic district public infrastructure. Founders Park, completed in 2014, provided a space for public sculpture that was easily accessible to a large part of the population, and it was hoped that the addition of sculpture to the park would help bring people in to the downtown area. After 3 years of a successful leased art program, and a series of city improvement projects proposed by the JCPAC, including the new farmers’ market pavilion, an updated landscaping plan for the downtown’s historic district, Johnson City has seen a significant increase in traffic, particularly among families from the nearby neighborhoods, and from the university [6]. The increased traffic was good for business, and spurred a desire from the community to support more development projects. Increased industry and private sponsorship has provided support for the purchase of public artworks, and events, and new developers have contributed to the restoration of some of the more significant historic buildings, such as the two downtown train depots, and the old General Mills flour and seed mill [9]. A grant program to help fund the renovation of historic facades is now available to encourage the sale of some of the older buildings, and other grant monies are being sought for a variety of other downtown development initiatives.

Even though East Tennessee University (ETSU) and the large regional medical centers are very close to downtown, until about 5 years ago, there was little incentive for visitors to spend time there. Now, because of the success of the new park, and new downtown development, there is a renewed commitment among city leaders and the community to preserve the essential identity and history of the downtown area. With the revitalization process still in the early stages, there are still many issues facing downtown that need to be addressed, and almost unlimited opportunities for projects.

In 2014, this instructor was appointed to the JCPAC and became actively involved in the revitalization process on the Art of Infrastructure subcommittee. This is where the Johnson City Visualization project began. Over the last 2 years, students in the Advanced Raster-Based Imaging classes have produced a series of ideation projects that have not only addressed a variety of issues that are under the purview of the Public Art Committee, but have given the city a way to use the class as a “think tank” to identify and preview possible solutions to specific problems.

2 METHODOLOGY

The Johnson City Visualization Project has been implemented twice in the Advanced Raster-Based Imaging class (spring semesters, 2016 and 2017) as one of three major projects. It was also implemented once in the graduate-level class, Experimental Media (fall semester 2016) with students who were previously enrolled in the imaging class. The project started with a proposal to the Johnson City Public Art Committee to consider having students work with them to help identify issues in the downtown area that could be addressed using their digital media skills. The students would be charged to become familiar with specific needs of the community’s revitalization efforts and help identify opportunities for improvements, and to provide visual representations of possible solutions, or prototypes of possible media-based products, for consideration.

It was observed that many of the projects proposed or discussed in JCPAC meetings were not original ideas, but adaptations, or copies, of ideas that had been implemented in other cities. There was a tendency to look outside of the community rather than looking locally for creative input. This was partly because committee members were not (for the most part) designers and, though they were able to identify and articulate a need, and help facilitate the process, they were not able to generate the work
product needed to concept and visualize a solution. Though there are many firms that could be hired to do this, when much of the funding for implementation is provided by grants, sponsorships and donations, the up-front investment in the design phase is often sacrificed in favor of a tried and true idea. This was discussed in committee on several occasions as not being the most desired approach, particularly since building an identity based on Johnson City’s unique history and natural assets was deemed a priority [10]. This was the catalyst that led to the involving students in the ideation process as part of a service-learning experience.

In shaping the curriculum for this class, Objectives for the student projects had to be considered and implemented in concert with best practices for a service learning experience.

In the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Bulletin, Chikering and Gamson articulate seven principles which point clearly toward service learning [11]:

1. Encourages student-faculty contact.
2. Encourages cooperation among students.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

The community needs must be real and both the pedagogical objectives and community objectives must be considered. Kendall recommends avoiding placing students in a community setting based only on desired student learning outcomes, providing services that do not meet actual needs, or perpetrating a state of need rather than seeking and addressing the causes of need. This “reciprocity” creates “a sense of mutual responsibility and respect between individuals in the service-learning exchange” [3]. All of these ideas were intentionally built into the project guidelines.

Evaluation for city visualization projects created by the class was based on successful implementation of the following criteria:

1. Provides an aesthetic approach to the solution.
2. Appropriate and functional for purpose.
3. Addresses a known community need.
4. Responds to community brief.
5. Presents solutions in a clear and informative manner.
6. Connects messages or design goals to the unique physical or historical attributes of the city, when possible.

Feedback from the Johnson City Public Art Committee’s sub-committee on the Art of Infrastructure, the group responsible for exploring solutions for improvement of city infrastructure by use of artistic means, and for recommending to the Johnson City government projects that enhance the visual aspects of the city, was included as a key factor in determining success.

An advantage to the approach taken with the visualization project was that projects’ goals were not necessarily end-game solutions. As concept visualizations, the projects were intended to promote discussion and give stakeholders ways to understand why something needed to be done, and offer potential solutions.

The class is structured to operate as a professional studio work environment. The instructor is the creative director and client liaison. Since we are working with a real client, the role of creative director for the instructor is literal, not simulated. Students are the creative team and must treat the class as a professional work environment. They are expected to attend all class meetings, be available to attend meetings with the client when necessary, and be responsible for managing their time and juggling multiple projects with overlapping milestones, critiques and deadlines. Peer-to-peer feedback is continuous and all of the students are expected to participate fully in discussions on each project. Progress on work is presented to the entire team and the creative director in regular team meetings, and iteration of ideas in response to feedback is expected. Nothing is shown to the client until the
instructor has signed off on the work. It is expected that the students’ best efforts must be presented, and that the project is not finished until the end of the semester.

For the Johnson City Visualization project, we used a simple memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Johnson City Public Art Committee defining the nature of the class as an idea-generator rather than a product producer. This MOU also defined timelines, meeting and feedback obligations, and how communication between all involved would be established. The MOU stated that, if any project was to be considered for actual production, the student would at minimum receive credit for the idea, and would have an opportunity if they so desired to negotiate outside of the university with the city to continue as a consultant or contractor to produce the work.

To begin the project, the students are taken on a walking tour of the downtown with a representative of the JCPAC, usually the committee member appointed to represent the Washington County Economic Development office. They are introduced to the projects that have been completed, those that are ongoing, and those that are on the city’s “wish list.” Problem areas for the district are pointed out, and ideas being discussed in committee are related to the students. They are also given a brief on the committee’s desires for downtown, historical highlights and sources for local historical information, and city guidelines and restrictions for the historic district. Using this information, students choose a problem to tackle. By giving them a choice, students can select a challenge in which they have an interest, and employ their unique skill set.

In “How Service Learning Affects Students,” it is suggested that the single most important factor associated with a positive service-learning experience appears to be the student’s degree of interest in the subject matter [2].

It is noted here that this project is only one or three major projects in the class. The other projects in the Advanced Raster-Based Imaging class are not client-based, but do have external guidelines and deadlines since they are designed to be entered into competition. At the end of the semester, all of the work completed in the class is publically displayed in the annual Experimental Digital Media Exhibition which occurs as part of the ETSU spring graduation weekend activities.

In previous classes of this type conducted by this instructor, deadlines for the major projects were staggered over the course of the semester. It was observed that, in any given semester, 30-60% of the class would get a grade on a project before the end of the class, and even though they were encouraged to improve the project for a better grade, would never get back to the revisions. Since this was offered as an optional course of action, students would often choose the path of least resistance and accept a lower grade on the project.

In a professional environment, the “reward” in a proposal or pitch comes at the end, when the completed work is finally presented to the client. Either the pitch is successful, and the firm is hired to continue the work, or the firm is paid for the work to date. Even in pitches where the project is not selected, and when the proposal was “on speculation” with no expectation for payment, for many firms the reward is the opportunity to show what they can do for the client, which can lead to invitations to submit proposals for future work. The work presented can also become portfolio work for the firm, even if it is not used. The copyright still belongs to the creator, so the work can potentially be resold to a future client.

In this class, the grade (reward) does not come until the end. This increases the risk for the student, but spurs them to continue to improve and respond to feedback rather than stopping before the full potential of the project is achieved. Students know that all of their work is going to be externally reviewed and publically displayed, and that there is a potential for their work to either be used, result in a contract or a job offer, or be entered into competition. This incentive, and the risk of the work not being accepted or reviewed well, is similar to the professional work experience in the creative industries.

Since the MOU was signed, we have been able to work with the community on a continuing basis. To date, over 25 projects have been reviewed by the committee. These projects have included the redesign of the breezeways to Main Street and Roan Street from the main downtown parking lot, new proposals for the design of benches, bike racks, and other public use infrastructure in the historic district, play elements such as playground structures and splash pads for the parks, ideas for façade renovations, media campaigns to promote downtown, and ideas for public art. Examples of these projects include:

- Poster campaign for Downtown Johnson City brew pubs, pizza restaurants and coffeehouses

  Brianna Morelock (graphic design) and Bethany Carson (photography), This campaign was
well-received by the committee. It was entered in the 2017 ADDY Awards Competition and received both a Gold Award and Student Best of Show. Morelock, as a result of the recognition received, was offered a position at Creative Energy, the premiere advertising agency in Johnson City.

- Dragon “monkey bars” for Founders Park by Wylliam Yoder (3D Modeler). This is a project that has been selected for production when the playground area of the King Creek basin park is ready for implementation.
- “Explore Downtown”, by Justin Bergan, a video to promote business and activities of interest to the student population to encourage them to spend time in the downtown area. This video was displayed on the Johnson City website, and when funds are available, Bergan is expected to be invited to submit a proposal for a new video to promote downtown Johnson City. The video also received a Silver Award at the 2016 ADDY Awards competition.
- Splash pad by Devin Dukes (3D artist and animator), inspired by the pollinator project that has been manifested in other community projects to promote bee preservation, and by the old Johnson City water tower.
- Façade renovation for Campbell’s Music Store designed to not only improve the façade, but attract traffic from Founders Park to the throughway to the new Kings Creek basin park. Daria Greenlea (digital artist). This will be presented in June to the store owner who is planning to renovate.
- Mural design to reflect natural assets of the North Tennessee region by Julie Woodburn (graphic designer, animator). The artist was asked to submit the mural design to the JCPAC for their Request for Proposals for the first downtown mural to be created as part of the new city murals program. It was not selected from the 26 proposals submitted, but it did receive a Silver Award at the 2016 ADDY Awards competition.

Compared to community service, taking a service-learning course is much more likely to generate student-to-student discussions. [2] This was found to be true in this class, where students gave each other regular feedback in ongoing critiques in class. Since they were familiar with each other’s independent work for the visualization project, and since there was a common thread in the goals and content for all of the projects, they were able to offer suggestions and insights transferred from discoveries made in pursuit of their own projects.

In Service-Learning in Higher Education, Concepts and Principles, Jacoby offers nine principles for good practice for combining service and learning [9]. If we look at how this project addresses those principles, consider the following:

1. An effective program engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
   Participants in the Johnson City Visualization project were engaged in tasks deemed to be important by the JCPAC. Students were required to look beyond their previous knowledge or experience, be willing to take risks, and experience the consequences and/or benefits of their performance.

2. An effective program provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience.
   Through discussions with stakeholders in the downtown revitalization, which in many cases extended beyond the committee to input from business owners and residents who frequent the downtown area, students were able to develop a better sense of social responsibility, advocacy, and active citizenship within the community. The opportunity for feedback provided from those persons being served, as well as from peers and program leaders gave students a much clearer perspective on the potential benefits and consequences of their designs.

3. An effective program articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
   From the outset of the project, participants and service recipients alike were clear on both the service and learning goals which were articulated in the MOU. These goals were intended to consider the creative and imaginative input of those providing the service, as well as those receiving it. Attention to mutuality in the service-learning exchange protects the "service" from becoming patronizing charity.
4 An effective program allows for those with needs to define those needs.

This collaboration with the JCPAC defined needs in a way that insured that the service provided by the students service would not take jobs from the local community, and would involve tasks that would otherwise go undone. As stated in the introduction, without the student involvement, there would be no reasonable way for the committee to contract this work to a professional provider since funding would rarely be available for this purpose. When funding is available, starting with a much clearer idea of a solution is desired can make the funded process much more efficient and cost effective.

5 An effective program clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.

Roles and responsibilities of all parties involved were negotiated with the JPCPAC prior to starting the project, and rare reviewed after each iteration of the project.

6 An effective program matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.

Ideally, participation in the service partnership affects personal development in areas such as intellect, ethics, cross-cultural understanding, empathy, leadership, and citizenship. In effective service and learning programs, the relationships among groups and individuals are dynamic and often create dilemmas that may lead to unintended outcomes. They can require recognizing and dealing with differences [9]. There have been a few instances where this has affected a project, particularly when dealing with the small homeless population that frequents the downtown area. Students have had to balance design solutions that addressed concerns by local merchants and city officials, while being empathetic to the needs of the homeless population that used the area.

7 An effective program expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.

This commitment has up to this point received verbal administrative support, but is not supported in the budget, has not been allocated dedicated physical space or equipment other than what is available in the classroom, and there is no scheduled release time for participants and program leaders. These things have not, however, been an impediment to the success of the project. The most effective service and learning programs are linked to the curriculum and require that the faculty become committed to combining service and learning as a valid part of teaching. In this case, the instructor has combined her own community service with classroom activity and has been able to promote university involvement in the community in both the service and instructional realm.

8 An effective program includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.

This is a reciprocal responsibility and requires open communication between those offering and those receiving the service. The project has been successful in including all parties in training, supervision, monitoring, support and evaluation goals, but the recognition has not been as public. That is partly due to the fact that the program is in its early stages. This will most likely change in the next few months as a compilation of projects is being prepared for the new appointees to the committee to consider. It is expected that the next review of projects from the past semester will result in action on some of them by the community, and that public recognition will follow.

9 An effective program insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.

In order to be useful to all parties involved, some service activities require longer participation and/or a greater time commitment than others. Sometimes a program can do more harm than good if a project is abandoned after too short a time or given too little attention. This requirement is alleviated in this situation by the fact that these projects are considered to be conceptual springboards for designed solutions rather than end products. These visualized ideas can be easily transferred to a committee, firm or individual for further exploration and ultimately, final implementation. In some cases, the student will have the opportunity to be involved in that continuing work if they so desire after the completion of the service-learning class experience.
An effective program is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations. Those responsible for participation in a program should make every effort to include and make welcome persons from differing ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, as well as those of varied ages, genders, economic levels, and those with disabilities. Less obvious, but very important, is the need for sensitivity to other barriers, such as lack of transportation, family, work, and school responsibilities, concern for personal safety, or uncertainty about one’s ability to make a contribution. This is an underlying principle in everything we do as a university. In this class, it is an intentional practice to make allowances and accommodations when required to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to express their views, be included without exception, and to be successful.

3 RESULTS

The revitalization of downtown has been a boon to Johnson City, particularly in the last five years. A large number of new businesses have moved into the community, and people are finally coming back into downtown to eat, play and shop. An additional benefit to the community has been a renewed interest in Johnson City’s unique history. By preserving historic buildings, and by creating projects that educate the community, the historic character of the city is preserved, as are the stories and the collective historic memory of the community. This project has provided the city with a way to continue to generate ideas that can help boost economic and cultural development in the downtown district in a way that utilizes the relationship with the university in a combined community effort to improve the city.

Findings from research on service-learning provide strong support for the notion that service learning should be included in the student’s major field. [2] This project has provided one way of doing this for some of our students in the Digital Media program. In the three years since this instructor has been implementing this strategy, the overall quality of the work product in these classes has shown dramatic improvement. Students continued to put effort toward the work on all of the projects right up until the end of the semester, and they had to learn to reflect on feedback from their creative director, their colleagues in the class, and the client, appropriately assess what modifications needed to be made, and be able to articulate the reasons why the revisions were necessary.

Service-learning offers students a way of acquiring a set of transferable skills that go beyond preparation for a single lifelong career. It provides a framework that gives students opportunities to synthesize information, engage in creative problem-solving and decision-making through teamwork, negotiation and compromise, and accept the necessity for adaptability and empathy. Students gain more social awareness and responsibility.

Even though the students were working with a real client, the clients’ expectations were not tied to concrete and necessary end products since the project goals were not end-game solutions, but concept visualizations. The projects created were intended to promote discussion and give stakeholders ways to understand why something needed to be done, and offer potential solutions. Since the ideas presented could be springboards to actual solutions, instructional objectives were not sacrificed to a narrow business timeline or monetary objective.

This approach also allowed community leaders and stakeholders to consider multiple solutions for specific problems over time, decide on an approach, and when money became available, to be able to share those ideas with contractors for either a starting point for a design process, a refinement of the idea, or even as a specific design to build or implement. The client is relieved of the obligation to pay for or produce the work, while still having the ability to provide guidelines and feedback, and to use the ideas at a later date if desired. Legal issues over rights and use of university resources were minimized, since contracts did not have to be written.

This approach combines the advantage of flexibility provided by simulated real-world projects, with the benefit of real community input, and the potential for the student for their work to be produced. This could provide recognition at the least for their work, and their interaction with the community on the project could result in contract work, or even full-time positions upon graduation.

By treating the class as a working studio, students could experience working within a professional environment with professional expectations. Since grades were not assigned during the semester, the feedback was constant, in real time, and students were made aware at critical intervals when the work was either on track or not, with direction on how to proceed with the next iteration. Without the burden of grading during the semester, the instructor could deal with the wide variety of projects more easily,
making the class management simpler. The final project results were of high enough quality at the end of the semester that additional time spent on evaluating poor projects was nearly eliminated. Students had already received enough feedback over the semester that written commentary was not required, and students already had a clear understanding of reasons for the grades they received.

Actively including students in community projects can help them gain confidence in their ability to make a difference that may impact their desire and ability to become a better, more involved citizen. Educational institutions may also benefit through improved community relations, where strong ties, partnerships, and mutually beneficial activities can take place.

REFERENCES


