

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 32 *Winter 2021*

Article 3

January 2021

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Recommended Citation

Begley, Gail S. and Sahli, Nadia "Service-Learning Success Rooted in Networks of Partnership Centered on Teaching Assistant-Instructor Collaboration," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 32 (2021), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss32/3>

SERVICE-LEARNING SUCCESS ROOTED IN NETWORKS OF PARTNERSHIP CENTERED ON TEACHING ASSISTANT-INSTRUCTOR COLLABORATION

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Introduction

Gail: Service-Learning (S-L) is always about partnerships—relationships developed through shared goals and built on reciprocity. Faculty members connect with leaders of community organizations to create mutually beneficial partnerships in which students provide service designed to meet community-identified goals, while achieving the faculty-identified learning goals of an academic course. At Northeastern University, faculty also have an opportunity to work with an undergraduate student trained to support the S-L component of the course. I have been teaching biology courses with S-L for 17 years and have benefited from interacting with colleagues in our institutional S-L Program, who have helped me find community partners and provided resources to support those partnerships and enhance student learning through reflection. But, like many of my colleagues, I feel that I would not be able to continue teaching with S-L without the essential support of the undergraduate S-L teaching assistants (S-L TAs) who are trained and mentored by the university S-L program. Importantly, although the S-L TAs could be viewed as student workers to be supervised, the relationship typically grows into more of a collegial partnership (Begley et al., 2019). For me, this partnership is critically important to the work that I do to integrate S-L into my teaching.

Nadia, my co-author, took Inquiries in Biological Sciences with me in her first semester in college. This is a small, seminar-style course that includes a service-learning component in which the students design and deliver biology programming for local community organizations. The course also includes independent research on a topic of interest in microbiology, critical analysis of the scientific literature, and discussion of biological advances and their societal implications. After successfully completing the course, Nadia accepted my invitation to serve as S-L TA the following year. She was only a first-semester sophomore when she took on the TA role, but several factors allowed us to accelerate the development of our relationship from supervisor-student to senior-junior colleague: (1) we already knew each other well due to the interactive nature of the course, (2) Nadia was familiar with the structure of the course and how S-L integrated into that structure, and (3) she had undergone training before the semester began in support of the responsibilities that she would be assuming.

Nadia: From my experiences, the S-L TA role varies greatly from that of a traditional undergraduate course assistant. In other courses as a student leader, my role was purely supplemental. The professor took care of structuring the course, teaching, and leading while I helped students by answering simple questions about course concepts and assisted the professor with tasks where they may just need an extra hand. As an S-L TA, I worked alongside the

professor to co-manage a part of the class that was incorporated into the coursework, but occurred largely outside of the classroom.

Beginning the summer before my term as an S-L TA, I participated in a variety of trainings along with all S-L TAs at the university. Regardless of the course, there are key objectives that we all identify and develop as S-L TAs before incorporating them into the classroom. The S-L training emphasized our roles as liaisons of communication and guided me through identifying what I was comfortable with and what I needed help on as I took on this role. Before the trainings, I felt comfortable articulating “Why Service-Learning?” from my experience in Gail’s class: S-L not only deepened my understanding of microbiological concepts by my being able to teach them to kids, but it also helped me feel more at home in Boston through serving local communities. The kids I taught sparked even more excitement for me in studying biology by being so inquisitive and curious during our activities, often asking questions that I’d never even thought of. Being a student and a teacher goes both ways during our service, which is another aspect that emphasizes the effect of partnerships in service-learning.

These are all reasons why I decided to return to the course as an S-L TA when Gail reached out to me about the opportunity. As a student in the course, however, I hadn’t realized how many moving parts there were behind the scenes in making our course partnerships work. A particularly daunting task to me was how to establish communication between each member of the S-L network: S-L TA, students, S-L course faculty, and our community partners. The training helped shape my initial interactions with Gail as an S-L TA because it helped me solidify the big picture of S-L and the S-L TA role as a starting point to then focus on what the details would look like for our course specifically.

Gail and I had begun meeting virtually during the summer to prepare for the upcoming semester. Having been with the S-L program for years, Gail was able to answer any questions I still had about the role after training and guided me through the process of reaching out to partners early on. By the time the fall semester rolled around, we were connecting with community partners and establishing the nature of service between the student groups and each community partner, making sure to abide by guidelines for service set forth by the partners. After initial establishment of our partnerships, I became the main point of contact for our community partners throughout the semester.

Being new to the logistical side of service-learning myself, I found it challenging, initially, to figure out the most effective way to communicate with each different partner. Some community organizations had been working with Gail’s course for years, and some were brand new. Having both Gail and my S-L team helped me navigate this by offering advice based on their experiences with each partner, and I was able to tailor my communication with each partner. For example, not all community partners speak primarily English, so I made sure to have native Spanish-speaking students review my e-mails before they were sent—another form of partnership that honored community partners’ primary language and Spanish-speaking students’ expertise. Gaining comfort in how I chose to communicate, I was able to take the lead in connecting each member of the S-L network.

Another responsibility I had was establishing my role in the classroom by discussing what service-learning is, assigning students to groups based on the number of partners we were working with that semester while accounting for each student's schedule, and leading reflections about the students' service-learning experiences throughout the semester. Although I did not expect to have so much independence in the placement and in-class reflection processes, I felt comfortable taking on these responsibilities because Gail and I constantly communicated throughout the process.

Gail: Nadia took on responsibility for management of critical pieces of S-L, and the importance of these logistics cannot be overstated. Establishment and maintenance of community partnerships requires careful attention to the details of student placement and oversight. I have found that a dedicated and well-prepared S-L TA is essential to running an effective S-L course. This preparation is largely a direct result of the training and peer mentoring that S-L TAs receive. Before the course begins, they have learned about their assistant role and been provided with guidance on the required logistical responsibilities. Because the TA is prepared and has the bandwidth to attend to the details that may slip through my hands, the S-L placements and feedback tend to run smoothly, and that was certainly true with Nadia. Although we met weekly and emailed often, I felt confident turning over primary responsibility for student placements and community partner communication to Nadia very early in the semester. This confidence arose from the convergence of my knowledge of the TA training curriculum and my personal interactions with Nadia over time—first as a service-learner, then as a prospective TA, and then as a working TA.

Centrality of the Teaching Assistant in the S-L Network Leads to Authentic Student-Faculty Collaboration

Nadia: At the beginning of the semester, I was nervous about taking on this leadership role after only just having completed my first year of college. At the same time, I was excited since I had especially enjoyed the service-learning aspect of the course when I took it, and I was grateful for the opportunity to have a role in assisting that part of the course. The nature of the S-L aspect of the course greatly depends on communication and collaboration between different parties in the S-L network. From my experience, consistent communication with Gail throughout the course allowed us to tackle any problems together as they arose. It was essential to our partnership's success that we were adaptable, and this is something Gail and I discussed in our first meeting. Being open to changing how things were done and quickly addressing issues was key to being adaptable. In both of our roles, we were able to communicate when we identified issues and worked together to solve them in the scope of meeting our partners' needs and our own limitations.

As a primary point of contact between students, partners, the S-L program, and the instructor, I took on a position of relaying information between each group to collaboratively plan, execute, and reflect on our service. In one instance, two student groups worked with a community partner to teach young kids about microbes. In most cases, two groups assigned to the same partner will work with different students, but this semester both groups worked with the same group of kids. This was important to realize because we had to make sure that activities weren't repeated, so the

student groups and I figured out a way to log activities that were done each week. Additionally, while some student groups did weekly service activities, some groups put together larger service projects that were shared with their community partner towards the end of the semester. For these groups, my role as the primary point of contact was especially important in figuring out scheduling between students and community partners.

Gail and I worked together as well to provide checkpoint ‘deadlines’ to review students’ work and offer feedback before completing their service. I would also send rough outlines of the students’ work and timeline to the community partners for review. This web of communication ensured that all parties were in the loop and allowed adjustments to be made along the way.

As the semester progressed, I also found that my role as an S-L TA expanded. Since I had taken the class with the same instructor only a year prior, many students reached out to me with questions and concerns about the course outside of S-L. I was happy to help directly when I could and to bring issues to Gail’s attention when I couldn’t. This opened an avenue of communication where the instructor was able to address concerns that students, especially as first-semester freshmen, might have not felt confident asking about in class. Whether the concern was S-L related or not, Gail gave me the opportunity to voice my opinions as a student who has taken the course previously and as her S-L TA. When students asked me to clarify concepts or guidelines for assignments, I discussed with Gail about what might not be clear from the perspective of a student based on their prior experience. Gail would then raise the issue in class and clarify, giving students the opportunity to ask questions. When issues that students brought up to me were addressed specifically by Gail during class time, I felt it gave them more confidence to ask questions in class. Through our teamwork, we were able to adjust and adapt aspects of the course and service work to best fit everyone’s needs.

Gail: From my perspective, the unpredictability inherent in trying to balance the needs of learners, the goals of community organizations, and the learning objectives of the course drove a shift towards true partnership with Nadia. When I teach with S-L I am keenly aware of that unpredictability and depend on the efforts and insights of the S-L TA to help me manage it. But it is exactly in this zone of uncertainty and discomfort where the magic happens—where teacher becomes learner and student becomes teacher. Because Nadia was so indispensable to the set-up and management of the community partnerships that introduce so much uncertainty into the course, she became not just an assistant, but also a trusted colleague who helped me to overcome the inevitable challenges and joined me in celebrating successes large and small. Nadia came to the role of TA with two critical experiences—as a student in the same course and as an S-L TA trainee. She knew the course; she knew my teaching style and learning goals; and she knew what was expected from an S-L TA. Being confident in that background allowed me to relinquish control for many of the basic elements of S-L management, which opened up a space for deeper reflection on the course overall.

When problems arose, I could ask Nadia for her input and advice. She had personally experienced and succeeded in the course, and she understood what it was like to be a first-year student navigating the transition to college along with the added dimension of community engagement, so she could honestly tell me what students were struggling with and why. Nadia’s contributions extended into all aspects of the course, not just S-L, as her official role would

suggest. Because Nadia had proven herself as a conscientious student and a dedicated S-L TA, I even felt confident in handing over sole leadership of a class session to Nadia fairly early in the semester and subsequently asked her to share her insights directly with the students in areas such as studying for quizzes and exams, managing workload, and planning their academic programs.

High quality S-L demands critical reflection in which students question their assumptions, connect their service experience to the classroom, and ultimately make meaning of their service experiences. Nadia excelled at facilitating this reflection process, which can be very challenging for students as it challenges them to dig deeper than they otherwise might. Nadia's contributions in this arena may have helped to set the stage for critical reflection on all aspects of the course that we undertook together as the semester unfolded.

Nadia: I found the reflection portion of service to be extremely valuable and a notable aspect of all our partnerships. On the students' side, whether the students completed weekly visits to community partner sites or less frequent larger projects, we were able to reflect in class and on class discussion boards about how the students felt about their service, what they were able to teach, and what they were able to learn from their experiences. Coupled with feedback from the instructor, the community partners, and me, these reflections helped partnerships flourish into meaningful experiences for everyone.

The seminar style of the course enhanced receptiveness because discussions allowed feedback to be a multi-way street. With feedback from Gail, the students were able to solidify course concepts and connect foundations of science and research with their service-learning experiences. On the other hand, I was able to help students think about how their service affects them and the Boston community while adjusting to being a student at Northeastern. Our different perspectives fostered different areas for growth.

Reflection not only helped the students, but it was also a valuable feature of my partnership with Gail. We had weekly meetings where we discussed both course and service-learning updates. In these meetings, we could reflect on the semester so far, discuss what was running smoothly or not, and introduce new ideas to each other to make sure that we are constantly improving. These meetings allowed us to share our perspectives and be receptive to feedback. From my experience, these moments of reflection and collaboration elevated our partnership from the traditional professor-assistant dynamic to colleagues whose strengths are different but equally important in enhancing learning.

Lessons Learned

Gail: I always struggle with the desire to control all aspects of my teaching—through training and experience to become an expert in both subject matter and teaching practice. I know that these are unreasonable expectations, but they are hard to shake. Because I am in some sense too far removed from the student experience and my frame of reference is different, I can benefit from a TA telling me when my expectations or assumptions are off base. For example, I learned that students perceived or valued particular assignments differently than I imagined. Partnering with an undergraduate TA who is very close to the experience of my current students shows me

time and again just how unreasonable it is to think that I have mastered the intricacies of effective teaching or that I might hope to do so in the future without allowing continuous improvement informed by student voices.

Nadia: From this partnership, I gained a lot of experience in working as a team and as a leader. As student assistants, we can have such a great impact on the courses we are involved in. Being comfortable giving and receiving feedback between student and professor is a powerful tool for improving courses because teaching and learning goes both ways. Through my role, I also felt that I could help bridge the gap by making sure student voices, as Gail mentioned, are heard. Student voices carry a lot of weight, and knowing this allows me to be confident and active in shaping my own learning experiences as well.

Reference

Begley, G., Berkey, R., Roe, L., & Schuldt, H. (2019). Becoming partners: Faculty come to appreciate undergraduates as teaching partners in a service-learning teaching assistant program. *International Journal for Students as Partners, 3*(1). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v3i1.3669>