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Reflections on Eight Semesters of Employing Service Learning in an Undergraduate Historic Preservation Course

This article describes the author's experiences using service learning in an undergraduate historic preservation class over eight semesters. It also provides advice and offers suggestions for those considering implementing service learning in their own classes in historic preservation. Students enrolled in an undergraduate introductory level historic preservation class participated in one of several service learning projects involving cemetery preservation. Reflection essays emphasized service learning's hands-on nature and the importance of interaction with the community. Quantitative surveys showed that service learning was most effective in developing knowledge about what preservation work entails and building students' confidence in their ability to do hands-on work on a historic preservation project. They also revealed very strong support for continuing service learning. Judging from the author's personal observations, the student surveys, and additional research, service learning has a promising role to play in preservation education. While the projects described here were designed for undergraduates, they could easily be adapted for students at other levels.

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Reflections on Eight Semesters of Employing Service Learning in an Undergraduate Historic Preservation Course

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This author introduced a service learning component for Shepherd University's undergraduate historic preservation program in early 2007.¹ Since then, service learning has been a key part of Shepherd's historic preservation curriculum. Partnerships with local churches, historical societies, and individuals have provided students with hands-on experience preserving historical resources, working with historical documents, and researching and presenting local history.

This article describes the author's experiences using service learning in an undergraduate historic preservation course. It also provides advice and offers suggestions for those considering implementing service learning in their own classes in historic preservation. Judging from the author's personal observations, as well as student surveys, service learning has a promising role to play in preservation education. While the projects described here were at the undergraduate level, they could easily be adapted for students at other levels.

SERVICE LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

There are numerous definitions of service learning — one researcher, Amy Strage, counted more than 150 — and there have been many more applied in the decade after her study was published (Strage 2000, 5). Over the last ten to fifteen years, interest in service learning in a higher education setting has skyrocketed (Jacoby et al. 1996). For a long time, though, little attention was given to the potential for service learning to contribute to heritage education and historic preservation curriculums. In 2008, however, the Advisory Council on

Historic Preservation recommended employing service learning projects as a way to involve and educate students and the general public regarding their heritage (National Service-Learning Clearing House 2011). This is an appropriate time to take a preliminary look at service learning and preservation education, and Shepherd University's preservation program offers an ideal opportunity.

SERVICE LEARNING AT SHEPHERD UNIVERSITY

Shepherd University has been employing service learning in its courses for nearly a decade, with its first application in the fall semester of 2002 as part of an education course. Since then, more and more faculty have employed service learning, and in 2008, 2009, and 2010, the university was named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll in recognition of its service learning programs, as well as its commitment to volunteering and civic engagement.

As practiced at Shepherd University, service learning has six key components. These relate to institutional and community needs but also reflect important findings in service learning scholarship. First, the service performed must be tied to the learning outcomes of the course. This distinguishes service learning from volunteerism. Amy Strage (2000) notes that unlike the latter, service learning "is explicitly linked to curricular objectives" (Strage 2000, 5). Second, the community partner must be a nonprofit entity. Third, both partners must benefit from the project. As Strage writes, "the service and the learning components of the course should enrich each other." In other words, students should learn better as a result of their service

projects, and their service projects will be improved as a result of what they are learning in the course (Strage 2000, 5). Fourth, some form of structured reflection is required from the students. Having the students complete a reflection assignment provides the service learning project with “a certain degree of academic rigor” (Strage 2000, 5). Fifth, the student may receive no financial compensation for the project. Finally, the project must address a social, cultural, or economic issue (Shepherd University Service Learning 2011).

At Shepherd University, service learning projects are now part of two historic preservation classes: Oral History and Introduction to Historic Preservation. For the course in oral history, students partner with the local historical society to transcribe past tape-recorded interviews and to produce additional interviews covering local history. This article describes the service learning component of the Introduction to Historic Preservation course. My experiences have been positive enough that I am gradually introducing service learning as a central component of additional courses in both historic preservation and public history.

PROJECT CONTEXT

Shepherd University is a small, public, liberal arts university in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. The historic preservation program is relatively young and small but growing, with approximately fifteen undergraduate students. The program at Shepherd is an area of concentration within the environmental studies major, which means that the Introduction to Historic Preservation class serves not only historic preservation majors but also students with concentrations in resource management, aquatic science, environmental studies, and other outdoors-oriented fields.

Shepherdstown itself is a charming college town about an hour-and-a-half west of Washington, D.C. It contains a historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to several hundred historically significant structures, there are also four major historic cemeteries with graves dating back to shortly after the town's founding in 1762.

GENESIS OF THE PROJECT

During my first semester teaching an introductory class in historic preservation at the undergraduate level, I realized that a crucial hands-on component was missing. Historic preservation students need a chance to apply their classroom lessons in some kind of field experience, whether that involved restoring a historic structure or performing archival research. As a member of a learning community for new faculty members at Shepherd, I attended an information session on using service learning in the classroom. I realized that service learning could supply that missing hands-on experience.

Admittedly, my initial foray into service learning was less than successful. The project fell short in a number of ways, and indeed, one of the incentives for writing this article is so that others can learn from my mistakes. In my case, the choice of partner was especially problematic. For one thing, that partner was located approximately twenty minutes by car from the university. This posed a logistical challenge for students. More seriously, the partner and the instructor disagreed as to what constituted preservation work, and the partner asked students to work on menial tasks that did not have a clear relationship to the course.

While that initial group of students certainly learned some of the less-than-glamorous aspects of managing a historic structure, the experience was not what it should have been. The importance of Shepherdstown's cemeteries to its history, as well as their proximity to campus, made cemetery preservation a logical choice for a second attempt at conducting a service learning project. At least in part because I applied the lessons learned from my initial experiment, the cemetery preservation projects have proven far more successful.

CEMETERY PRESERVATION AS HISTORIC PRESERVATION

There are numerous reasons to preserve cemeteries. As Lynette Strangstad (1995) points out, early stone carvings provide some of the earliest art and historical

texts in the United States. The materials used can give clues to status, trade patterns, and changes in trade and transportation. In addition, gravestones are sources of genealogical, social, and cultural information. Gravestone motifs can show changes in iconography according to time and location. Furthermore, graveyards are egalitarian: all lives are recorded, not just those of the elite. Cemetery preservation also preserves cultural and historical resources that would otherwise have been overlooked. Finally, Strangstad asserts that cemeteries that look well cared for are less likely to be vandalized (Strangstad 1995, 1-6).

Shepherd's Introduction to Historic Preservation students actually participate in one of several projects involving cemetery preservation. One of these projects is gravestone cleaning (Fig. 1). Cleaning gravestones removes biological growth that can damage the stone and erase the historical record. The materials required

for gravestone cleaning are both simple and affordable, as well as portable and environmentally friendly (Table 1).² Water is particularly important. Proper gravestone cleaning requires copious quantities of clean water, though it need not be potable. Many historic cemeteries do not have ready supplies of water. For work at the New Street and Lutheran cemeteries in Shepherdstown, we installed a rain barrel, an attractive and environmentally friendly solution.

Typically, students tour the cemetery where they will be working early in the semester and receive an orientation from the instructor, the service learning coordinator, and the community partner. The instructor demonstrates proper cleaning procedures before the students begin their projects. The instructor also provides a printed set of instructions for proper gravestone cleaning techniques that remains on site for student reference (Table 2).



Fig. 1. Shepherd students clean gravestones (All photographs by author).

Table 1. List of materials needed for gravestone cleaning

Materials Needed

1 large plastic pail
 Safety goggles
 Latex/rubber gloves
 Soft-bristled scrub brushes (never metal-bristled!)
 Toothbrushes
 Q-tips
 Popsicle sticks
 Spray bottles/misters
 Household ammonia
 Non-ionic detergent
 1-cup measuring cups
 Large sponges
 Cameras for documentation (less of a concern in the age of the inexpensive digital camera and the near ubiquity of the camera phone)
 PLENTY of water

Table 2. Instructions for gravestone cleaning

Instructions

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1. Remember: First, do no harm!
 2. Document the gravestone by photographing it from all sides.
 3. Make sure the stone is stable.
 4. Remove loose, dry materials with a soft-bristled brush.
 5. Wet entire surface with clear water.
 6. Working from the bottom up, use a soft-bristled brush, water, and appropriate cleaning solvents.
 7. Use cleaners strong enough to do the job, and no stronger.
 When using non-ionic detergent, use about the same amount you would for dishwashing.
 When using ammonia, be sure to wear safety goggles.
 Use four parts water to one part ammonia.
 8. Use Q-tips and popsicle sticks to clean out recesses in hard, stable stones.
 9. Flush with clear water after using each cleaning agent.
 Be careful not to let cleaning agents dry on the stone.
 10. Document the results by photographing the stone again.
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Another activity puts students to work documenting the cemeteries. This consists of mapping gravestones, transcribing inscriptions, and assessing their condition. Working in teams, students apply triangulation to produce a working map of the cemetery.⁹ Another team works on transcribing the stones. If enough students participate, a third team should work on transcriptions independently for verification. The transcription teams and the mapping

team then produce an integrated map with codes referring to specific stones and their inscriptions. This information is sent to the state historical society for archiving, so it would be available for future researchers. In addition, students presented the map and the inscriptions to the project partners at the end of the semester in a public forum, where they shared their experiences, showing pictures of the stones before and after cleaning.

Probably the most successful, and certainly the most visible, of the cemetery preservation activities came in the form of a living history program, first presented in the fall of 2008. In conjunction with Shepherdstown's Halloween activities, Shepherd University students presented first-person living history interpretations of prominent citizens who were interred in the cemetery. Students performed the historical research themselves, developed their own scripts, and produced their own costumes. In three years, more than 250 visitors watched the living history interpretations, learning about the history of their community in the process.

RESEARCH METHOD, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

For the eight semesters in which the service learning projects were undertaken, students wrote essays reflecting on their experiences, fulfilling the structured reflection requirement of service learning. Because the reflective essays were graded, it was not possible to preserve student anonymity.

Responses given in students' essays reflected several broad themes. By far the most frequent responses involved the projects' hands-on approach. Examples of representative responses are given below:

It gave us a chance to see first hand how historic preservation worked in the field. Seeing and applying what was learned in the classroom helped in further understanding what was taught. Real-life examples show how these things are located/being done in the community.

Touching the stones and finding incredible details and designs carved on the gravestones was also an inevitable [sic] feeling.

At first I felt that the service learning project was going to be another mandatory boring project that we had to do in order to pass a class. It turned out it was a very enjoyable undertaking and tremendously worthwhile for us as students

to complete. The hands on activities gave us a better appreciation for just how much work it actually takes in order to keep these historic places clean and safe from deterioration.

This sort of work requires preservationists to be well-rounded and shows that anyone with an interest in history can be successful in this field... even if they aren't necessarily book-smart.

This project put me in a place where I had [to] make certain decisions on which type of cleaning materials should be used and what instruments should be used, as well as what was appropriate to clean and what should be left alone. These are all real decisions that someone in the historic preservation field would be faced with.

Students frequently commented on the advantages of interacting with the community. They found that having to hand in an assignment to a group, rather than to their instructor, proved powerfully motivating:

[G]iving the presentation to the people of the church gives a very real life spin on a class. To have a place within the community that needs the work the class is doing helps show what the field of history preservation can really be like.

It was really cool to talk to [our partners] too because it made it seem like we were actually doing a service that someone appreciated rather than an assignment for a class.

The service learning was actually my favorite part of the class and all of the work was worth it in the end when we got to talk to [a community partner] and she said how appreciative she was.

[F]eeling that the data we gathered would be archived for posterity made the experience more exciting.

The responses were not all positive. The most frequent complaints concerned perceived inequity in terms of time the respondents spent on the project versus time spent by his or her peers. One student wrote, "Please try to make the projects more fair next semester. Even on the same project type, some were horribly lazy in their work." Another commented, "I think the jobs were unfairly decided. I spent a lot more time working on my part than others had to."

Other respondents expressed dissatisfaction with issues relating to communication and planning: "It didn't really enhance my learning, it was nice to help out but I felt it was just busy work." Another student wrote, "[the project] needs more organization beforehand so certain students don't get bossy and other students don't want to leave." One commented, "I was led to believe (as were others) that we were only cleaning one gravestone – not an entire graveyard." While it is tempting to dismiss these comments as resulting from students not listening, they serve as a reminder of the importance of clear, frequent communication which, after all, is a two-way street.

For four of the eight semesters featuring a service learning project, students completed a quantitative survey of their experiences. A total of fifty-three students responded to various statements using a Likert scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree," 3 being "neutral," and 5 being "strongly agree." The quantitative survey preserved the anonymity of the respondent.

The results of the survey are summarized in Table 3. Students felt that service learning was most effective in developing knowledge about what preservation work entails and building their confidence in their ability to do hands-on work. Eighty-five percent of the students felt that the project built upon the material covered in the classroom, 83 percent found that it enhanced their course experience, while 87 percent recommended that another service learning experience be offered in future courses. While 77 percent of respondents found that the project increased their knowledge of Shepherdstown's history, 83 percent said that the project contributed to their appreciation of that history.

LIMITATIONS AND NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study can provide only a preliminary look at service learning's potential contribution to a historic preservation curriculum. Because service learning has only recently been used in the field, preservation educators are still in the early stages of service learning research. Ziegert and McGoldrick (2004) note that problems inherent in these early stages include an approach that is anecdotal and limited to descriptions of various service learning projects in assorted disciplines. They also cite a concern regarding selectivity bias, which results when "those who are more likely to be benefited through service-learning practices are indeed the individuals who choose such experiences" (Ziegert and McGoldrick 2004, 25). While the present study attempts to be more than purely anecdotal, it is largely descriptive in nature. Selectivity bias is less of a concern, however, as all students were required to participate in the service learning project as part of the course, and the course is a graduation requirement for students majoring in historic preservation, as well as several other fields within environmental studies.

Several additional factors further limited this study. First, there is the danger of bias in favor of service learning in the reflective essays. Because the essays were graded, students may have felt pressured to give positive feedback regarding their experiences. This is significantly less of a concern with the quantitative responses, which were gathered anonymously, although these results have the limitations inherent in self-reported responses. It seems probable that the responses to the quantitative study reporting increased knowledge are significantly less credible than responses indicating increased self-confidence or those in support of continuing service learning.

Second, the responses presented here do not distinguish among specific project assignments. Students performing living history interpretations, those doing cemetery mapping and documentation, and those cleaning gravestones all may have had very different experiences with, and reactions to, their service learning projects. These differences were not captured in either the surveys or the essays.

Table 3. Results of service learning quantitative survey

Statement (N=53)	Strongly Disagree (number/percent)	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing
The service learning project built on material covered in class.	2/4	1/2	5/9	23/43	22/42	45/85
The service learning project enhanced my overall learning experience in the course.	3/6	1/2	5/9	19/36	25/47	44/83
After the service learning project, I feel that I have a better idea about what historic preservation professionals might do.	0/0	2/4	1/2	20/38	30/57	50/94
The service learning project contributed to my understanding of the ethical dilemmas a historic preservation professional might encounter in the field.	0/0	3/6	9/17	18/34	23/43	41/77
The service learning project contributed to my knowledge of Shepherdstown's local history.	1/2	1/2	10/19	13/25	28/53	41/77
The service learning project contributed to my appreciation of Shepherdstown's local history.	2/4	1/2	6/11	19/36	25/47	44/83
After completing the service learning project, I feel more confident about my ability to work with my hands on a historic preservation project.	1/2	0	4/8	17/32	31/58	48/91
I would recommend a similar service learning project be undertaken for future courses in historic preservation.	1/2	2/4	4/8	11/21	35/66	46/87

In addition, the lack of baseline data on students who have not participated in a service learning project makes it impossible to compare learning outcomes to students enrolled in an identical course without a service learning component. This is an important point. While service learning has been repeatedly shown to foster civic responsibility and engagement on the part of participants, the impact it has on achieving learning objectives is less clear (Strage 2000, 5-6). Indeed, this is one of the lingering questions in service learning research (Giles and Eyler 1998, 65-72).

CONNECTING STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY TO HISTORY

The results summarized above suggest that a service learning component can bring many benefits to a historic preservation program. In addition to providing a hands-on component, cemetery preservation has most impressed me by its ability to reveal the stories that historic objects have to tell and by the appeal that these stories have for my students and the greater community. One of my students discovered and cleaned the gravestone of a girl who died in Shepherdstown in

1859, a few weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday. The gravestone lay buried for decades, perhaps longer, before my student uncovered it, along with its story. The stone, beautifully carved in bas-relief, depicts a grieving mother on her knees before a grave under a weeping willow (Fig. 2). The student, herself not much older than the deceased, was also a young mother-to-be. Deeply moved by the experience of uncovering this story, the student spent many hours carefully cleaning the stone, determined to decipher the badly-worn epitaph. It is not unusual for my students to bring their friends or significant others to the cemetery to show off their stones and to share their stories. Community response to the service learning projects has also been very positive, and the cemetery living history project, in

particular, has opened up an opportunity to reach far beyond my students to educate about the rich heritage of the area.

This raises an important point about who — or what — actually benefits from the projects. While the official partners for the service learning projects were churches and other nonprofits, the real beneficiary was, arguably, Shepherdstown itself. As Janel M. Curry, Gail Heffner, and David Warners (2002) noted, “The scholarship of engagement may need to expand to include service to a place, not just a people” (Curry et al. 2002, 59). Curry, Heffner, and Warners promote service learning to benefit a certain place as an alternative — perhaps as an antidote — to an approach in higher education that has traditionally emphasized instruction by what



Fig. 2. A gravestone after cleaning.

Eric Zencey has called “rootless professors” — those to whom ideas, not places, are important (Zencey 1996). As they point out, education enhances one’s understanding of the local community: “When we deepen our understanding of the places where we live, we gain a greater understanding of who we are, the intricacies of our place, and our responsibilities as citizens of these places” (Curry et al. 2002, 59). Put another way, one of the goals of service learning can be “to develop a habit of stewardship based on attentiveness to place” (Curry et al. 2002, 61). Ultimately, service learning can perhaps help “students and faculty [become] better caretakers and citizens [...] and that we may in turn learn what it means to take care of the other places we encounter throughout our lifetimes” (Curry et al. 2002, 66). These are surely worthy goals for a historic preservation curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS AND TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

Questions remain about the impact of service learning participation on students’ ability to learn and apply course knowledge. Strage’s (2000) study of the impact of participation in service learning projects was inconclusive regarding outcomes. Significantly, however, Strage predicts that students with service learning experiences “will do better [...] in contexts where their ability to think critically and apply knowledge to new problems and situations is assessed, as opposed to contexts where their ability to learn and remember factual information is valued” (Strage 2000, 12). While my evidence at this point is largely anecdotal, it supports this prediction. In the field of historic preservation, where no two projects are the same, a curriculum with an outcome that enhances critical thinking and the ability to be flexible and creative in new situations would be highly desirable. Even without the experiences presented in this article, this would be a good reason to employ service learning.

In that spirit, this article concludes with ten tips for those interested in integrating a service learning project into their own historic preservation program. These are based on my own specific experiences with cemetery preservation.⁴

1. Begin with the end in mind. Select a service learning project that contributes to a major course objective.
2. Make it personal. Keep close contact with the partner — have the students get to know the partner, and vice versa. If it can possibly be arranged, have a member of the community partner enroll in the class.
3. Keep the service learning component central to the course, don’t let it be marginalized. While the service learning can be an add-on, at least initially, the more central it is to the course, the more effective. Refer back to the service learning project in discussing class concepts, and refer to class concepts when discussing and implementing the service learning project.
4. Use the talents and resources available. Which students have which skills and interests? What needs and resources are present in your community?
5. Keep it local. Transportation and logistics can be tricky. Keeping it local makes it less of a burden on students.
6. Get feedback early and often and show that you are willing to act on it. Be sure to poll both sides in the relationship — the students and the community partner.
7. Choose partners carefully. Much will flow from this decision.
8. Define and communicate goals and expectations early, often, and clearly. Make the goal and project clear at the outset; let the students decide how to get there, but be sure to give them the tools they need.
9. Don’t be afraid to get your own hands dirty! Show your students that you’re not asking them to do anything you wouldn’t do yourself.
10. Publicize your efforts. This is good for your institution, your partners, your students, and for historic preservation.

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ENDNOTES

1. I would like to thank Holly Frye, Director of the Office of Student Community Services and Service Learning, and Amanda Hanson, Service Learning Coordinator, for their help and support with the service learning projects described in this article.
2. Because one of the emphases in Shepherd's historic preservation program is the overlap between historic preservation and environmental sustainability, it was especially important that the materials and practices be environmentally benign.
3. See Strangstad 1995 for the description of the proper technique. Although GIS and GPS systems are getting more accurate, they are not quite accurate enough for cemetery mapping and are not affordable. Moreover, by doing it the old-fashioned way, students learn the principles of triangulation and measurement on which GPS and GIS rely.
4. There are many other suggestions and best practices available in the service learning literature and online. While written for students, Cress et al. 2005 provides a very accessible, basic overview of service learning.

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