Q & A with Dr. Theresa Hest

Q. Could you please provide some basic information, (your name, department, courses taught that have a service-learning component, how many years teaching at MSUM)

A. Name: Dr. Theresa Hest

Department: Communication Studies

Courses taught with SL component: Leadership Seminar, Group and Team

Communication, CMST 100, Teaching Methods for Communication Studies

Years teaching at MSUM: 11 Years

Q. What is your background in service-learning (mention any courses you have taken as a student that has a SL component, research done, etc.)

A. My campus organization involvement in college, and graduate school was primarily related to service organizations. I’ve observed that these types of activities are similar to the experience our students bring when they come to campus. Many of them have a background with organizations and events such as Key Club, STLF, Pay It Forward, food drives, and mission trips. Service activities were part of the impetus for incorporating an academic service component into my first teaching experiences as a Master’s student teaching the basic public speaking course. Later, I connected class readings to service experiences in care centers with my middle school language arts students. After that, as a PhD student, I participated in two Campus Compact national workshops on academic service-learning. These were hands-on experiences in large cities combined with training in the latest service-learning research. I also was the co-coordinator for the academic service component of the National Communication Association’s New Orleans Convention. As a faculty member at MSUM, I served on the Academic Service-Learning Committee and chaired the committee. During that time, we co-hosted two tri-college service learning conferences for area secondary and post-secondary educators and non-profit leaders. I currently incorporate academic service-learning projects into many of my courses. I also had a fantastic time raking leaves with the learning community students this fall!

Q. Why do you continue to incorporate service-learning into some (or all) of your courses?

A. There are multiple advantages to a service-based element in the classroom. First, we know that students learn in different ways. For some students, the connection to the material comes from seeing it in action and/or personally experiencing it. A student may not understand how to develop a supportive communication climate, for example, but after conducting trust and team-building activities with a group as part of a service project, this student may realize how climate building happens. Second, members of the community benefit from our efforts. Service projects must be carefully chosen so that they are connected to course content, are productive, and meet a specific community need. Service projects should not just “feel good,” they need to actually “do good.” Third, effective facilitation of service projects is a way to develop relationships between students and community members. It is also a way to build networks between MSUM and the surrounding area. Fourth, these projects help to create a culture of life-long service. Students likely did some volunteerism in high school, but this may disappear once they get to college. Incorporating these projects successfully increases the chances of students continuing to serve in the future. Finally, whether the students enjoy the service or not, I have found these projects to be a bonding experience for the class (or a particular group) – and it is not something they forget. Even if their experience at “Santa’s Village” becomes “Satan’s Village,” it is a story that they will share and remember.

Q. What do you think are the major benefits for students by having them participate in service-learning?

A. Because the students need to make contacts and arrange service time schedules, there are some basic organizational/administrative skills the students develop. Students also have the opportunity to meet people and, perhaps, meet people that are outside of their normal network or comfort zone. These experiences cultivate interpersonal communication skills. Further, when you extend learning outside the classroom, students are more likely to remember and apply the course content. Service projects also frequently involve teamwork which provides the chance for students practice leadership, conflict mediation, listening, and other group communication skills.

Q. What do (one or two) of your service-learning projects look like? (Explain the course it is linked to and what part of the curriculum you believe the students would learn best through their service experience, hours of service, expectations you have for the students i.e., reflective journals or final reflective essay or other)

A. Leadership 498 is a capstone course for Leadership Studies Minors. In this class, students are asked to apply and develop leadership knowledge and skills they have learned in previous courses to benefit someone else. They are required to develop and implement a service project that involves at least 30 hours of service connected to (but not limited to) the academic elements of: team-building, administrative leadership, group communication skills – listening, problem-solving, conflict-mediation, etc. – as well as effective interpersonal communication. The students may work with a partner in the class, but they also need to work with a group in implementation of the project (e.g., if they are planning a fundraiser road race – they might pull in other runners to volunteer). The students are required to keep a log of hours and activities, record a journal of reactions during the process, write a final reflection/summary paper, and create a formal presentation for the class. The projects vary greatly, but most involve fundraisers to benefit a local non-profit and involve events such as a bike race, ice-fishing derby, “pie-your-professor,” volleyball tournament, student dance, etc. Some students have created programs through their workplaces such as donating gently used prom dresses to high schools for students who can’t afford to buy a dress (these programs then continue after the project is complete). The students are required to address all requirements in terms of any legalities, procedures, and fees. After the students select and consult with a potential non-profit, they submit their idea for approval, conduct research on workability issues, and create a project prospectus. After this has been approved, they can move ahead with project implementation. When the projects, papers, and presentations are completed, we discuss and reflect on the experiences as an entire group.

Q. What is some advice for someone who is considering adding service-learning into their courses?

A. Get examples of project descriptions, rubrics, reflection forms, evaluation forms, etc. from others – you don’t need to re-create the wheel or start from scratch. Think carefully about how this is connected to your curriculum and make sure it is a strong connection and will be a meaningful experience and not just an “add-on.” Allow the students to have input so that the experiences have a connection for them. Be prepared for failure – I have had many projects simply not work. Students still learn something from the process even if the product was not what everyone had hoped for. You need to be very organized up front, but try not to micro-manage the experience – let it be organic (keeping in mind that you need to maintain a positive relationship with your non-profit). It will be stressful – and that’s OK – learning is always a stretch.