



English: Service learning through a multidisciplinary course on intolerance in America

A Capstone course entitled "Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America" taught by Dr. Beth Grodd, Department of English, Portland State University (1999)

Course Design:

Beginning in 1992, Portland State University reshaped its General Education curriculum around the concept of service learning. The curriculum combines the arts, sciences, and social sciences into thematic units of study. Freshmen work with faculty teams and peer mentors in Freshmen Inquiry courses, which focus on critical thinking, communication, and social responsibility. Sophomores and juniors take clusters of courses related to a particular theme that connects academic content with community service. Seniors take one of several capstone courses; these courses are designed to address pressing community needs while enabling the students to demonstrate proficiency in both the general education requirements and the requirements of their major.

One such capstone course addresses intolerance in America and in Portland. "Us and Them" explores the hatred and intolerance expressed by ordinary individuals that leads to tragic expressions of prejudice. The course examines not only the fear, anger, and suspicion that fuel prejudice but also the hope and heroism that arise from true moral conviction. These themes are addressed in coursework as well as in team-organized outreach activities (four hours minimum per week) and in the final class project of creating the "Tolerance Fair." The class meets weekly for discussions of the readings as well as presentations of team projects. Team projects include debating, presenting research, role-playing, drafting reform initiatives, and arranging for community leaders to serve as guest speakers. The course culminates in the "Tolerance Fair" organized by the class as a whole. This fair is hosted by the PSU students at several local elementary, middle, and high schools in order to provide the younger students with the opportunity to examine issues of intolerance in their environment and be better equipped to devise techniques for promoting interracial and intercultural understanding. As a whole, the course addresses disciplinary themes and

methodologies from a variety of academic departments, including History, Linguistics, Business Administration, Criminal Justice, and Psychology.

Higher Level Learning:

The course promotes communication, cooperation, and critical thinking skills by focusing on the importance of appreciating diversity and accepting social responsibility (**Caring**). Students integrate the course readings, class discussions, and individual research with their experiences in the team-organized outreach activities, and they communicate their insights to others in the "Tolerance Fair" (**Connecting**). The course strengthens individual skills while promoting a deeper understanding of the experiences and values of others in the community (**Others**) and a clearer concept of students' personal role within that community (**Self**).

Active Learning:

Students complement their research, reading, and discussions with active participation in community projects and the "Tolerance Fair", both designed and implemented by student teams (**Doing**). Inside and outside of class, students maintain extensive contact with others with whom they discuss projects, experiences, and ideas (**Dialogue with Others**) and from whom they learn about alternate perceptions and solutions (**Observing**). Throughout the course, students keep a journal which encourages them to make connections between coursework, outside projects, and their own experiences (**Dialogue with Self**).

Source: Grodd, B. (1999) "Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America," a course syllabus provided by the teacher; the course is also described in: Driscoll, A. (1998) Comprehensive Design of Community Service: New Undertakings, Options, and Vitality in Student Learning at Portland State University. The foregoing chapter appears in: E. Zlotkowski (Ed.), Successful Service-Learning Programs (pp.150-168). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.