

# eLearning by Doing: A Geographic Approach to Service Learning and Building Community

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I describe the experiences of incorporating community service-based learning (CSBL) with an upper-division urban geography course taught at California State University, Stanislaus. Integrating a service-learning component into an existing course or creating a new course with CSBL activities and projects, one that reaches beyond the traditional classroom environment, offers a practical example of how participatory fieldwork can be applied in an urban setting. Service-learning enjoys the added benefit of engaging students from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom possess an array of skills and learning styles. Furthermore, students gain valuable experience in dealing with real-world problems in a local setting, and CSBL provides the ideal platform for applying geographic skills and knowledge to reach that goal. As educators we are increasingly asked to improve the quality of education, with fewer resources to support our creative endeavors. One possible solution is to explore the benefits of linking service-learning with geographical inquiry. This paper provides an overview of the logistics and pedagogy involved in creating CSBL field projects and activities for an upper-division urban geography course. It also highlights the project results and benefits to the community, student reflections on urban-CSBL projects, and ongoing work linked to this initial effort.

## **A Serendipitous Beginning...**

IN FALL 2007, I began to prepare course materials for an upper-division Urban Geography course, to be taught the following spring semester. My initial idea for providing a field experience in the course was to take students on a day-long tour of some nearby "big city," say, Sacramento or San Francisco, where students could experience and document urban patterns and city landscapes firsthand. Another goal for the course was to provide students with an opportunity to develop and practice skills for doing urban-based geographic research. Near the end of the semester, I was contacted by the Di-

rector of Service Learning on my campus about a possible community partnership and service-learning opportunity with Habitat for Humanity based in Modesto, California. While I initially had little knowledge of service-learning as a pedagogical strategy, I have always supported a hands-on, “learning by doing” approach to teaching geography; therefore the opportunity for students to collaborate with community partners on pressing urban needs and community issues fit perfectly with the goals and student learning objectives of the course. Since the focus of the course typically emphasizes case studies and examples from leading world cities, working on a local urban project helped to create an importance balance—spotlighting urban processes and issues in our own region.

With two weeks remaining before the beginning of the semester, the structure of the class was coming together. I met with Habitat for Humanity and visited their facility in nearby Modesto. I toured a number of Habitat’s current housing rehabilitations in Modesto’s Airport Neighborhood and began to generate a list of ideas for class participation and projects. I shared my ideas with the Office of Service Learning, and they took care of the painstaking tasks of risk-management and coordinating a series of student visits to the Airport Neighborhood.

Based on my meetings with community members and Service Learning staff and my initial field work, I developed a CSBL project outline for the course. A main objective of the project was for students to work with Habitat for Humanity and the community group Modesto Airport Neighbors United (ANU) to produce a needs assessment for the Airport Neighborhood. Students would also participate in a number of different activities to reach this goal, including (1) the collection and analysis of census data (income, demographics, housing); (2) collection of qualitative data with an emphasis on field work (interviews, participant observation, location, landscape, and land use analysis); (3) participation in community meetings; and (4) collection of archival information on the Airport Neighborhood from local and county libraries and archives (theses, photographs, interviews, newspaper reports). Ultimately, all the collected materials and data would be incorporated into a community geodatabase where GIS software and other geospatial tools would be used to analyze urban spatial patterns and to create maps from the gathered information.

## Location and Setting

The unique site and situation of Modesto's Airport Neighborhood make it an ideal laboratory for observing urban issues, as well as an excellent case study for a CSBL project. The district known as the Airport Neighborhood encompasses an area of approximately 1.5 square miles split between the City of Modesto and Stanislaus County. The neighborhood is a geographic isolate located in the city's southeastern sector. It is bounded on the east by the Modesto Airport, the Tuolumne River forms the southern boundary, and Highway 132, a busy four-lane commercial and industrial corridor, serves as the northern edge of the neighborhood. To the west lies the headquarters of Ernest and Julio Gallo Winery, the second-largest winery in the world. The Airport Neighborhood is small and contained, and this, along with a unique settlement past, contributes to its distinctive identity. Dust Bowl migrants are among the Airport Neighborhood's earliest settlers, and a number of the single-family dwellings date from the 1930s. Today, the area once referred to as "Little Oklahoma" is home to approximately 6,000 residents, with an ethnic-racial composition split evenly between Latino/Hispanics and Whites.

The community is characterized by substandard housing. It is not unusual to have occupied housing with dirt floors, and many households lack basic services. The neighborhood is plagued by a high poverty level, homelessness, and a high crime rate. Seventy percent of the children enrolled at local elementary school are from families receiving temporary assistance for needy families, and 100 percent receive free or reduced lunch. Poverty in the Airport Neighborhood is crushing, with per capita income at \$7,734 compared to \$17,797 for Modesto, and \$22,711 for the state as a whole. The poverty level for seventy-five percent of the district's inhabitants is classified as poor or struggling, which is double the average for the City of Modesto and the State of California.

Judging from newspaper reports, letters to the editor, and discussions with community leaders, the underlying problems that plague the Airport Neighborhood are largely unknown to most area residents. Like Modesto's other areas of deprivation, including the largely Hispanic westside neighborhoods, the Airport Neighborhood is viewed by many as a faceless, crime-ridden island beyond repair.

## **Project Logistics and Course Management**

On the first day of the semester, I presented the idea of a field-based service-learning project to a class of fourteen students, and they seemed to like the idea. I told them about my recent excursions into the Airport Neighborhood and that I thought this would be an ideal place for our project. A concert of disbelief followed, as they replied, "You want us to go where?"

"The Airport Neighborhood," I said. "How many of you have visited?" Silence. To ease their concern, I presented the Airport Neighborhood as a community in need of our support and services, and I emphasized that a good portion of their grade would come from participation in a variety of activities (community meetings, field work, mapping, archival research, landscape analysis, and so on). Some raised concerns about doing research in an unfamiliar place. I assured the students that no one would be forced to carry out field work in a place where they were uncomfortable. I stressed the notion that together we would be embarking on a novel research project, since virtually no one had studied or written about the Airport Neighborhood since the publication of a 1935 dissertation. I followed with a brief overview of the district's social and economic condition, and shared images from my earlier field visits. By the end of class, no one asked to drop the course.

The class met twice a week during the semester, and during the first three weeks of the course, I allocated approximately half the time to project discussion and planning. One of our earliest discussions included a presentation by Service Learning staff. They gave an overview of the current service-learning activities at CSU Stanislaus and information about risk management, and they provided testimonials from other students who had participated in similar projects. The presentation was informative, but more importantly inspirational. Students began to see that their own participation could have an impact outside the confines of the University, and by the end of class they were eager to more clearly define the scope of the project and their individual contributions.

With momentum riding high, we scheduled the first class meeting with our community partner, Airport Neighbors United, Incorporated (ANU). The three-hour visit included introductions and background information about the neighborhood, a guided tour of local parks and commercial and residential areas, and a lunchtime debriefing session. Our goal was to have all participants (students,

faculty, and service-learning staff) meet with community partners to decide how best to connect the needs of the community with course objectives. In other words, how could a group of fledgling urban geographers apply their skills and knowledge to address community problems?

By the end of our meeting, we had generated a list of the most-pressing urban needs and community issues that could serve as a catalyst to student research projects. At the next class meeting, we reviewed the list and the weekend's events, and a lively discussion ensued about what could realistically be accomplished in the remaining ten weeks of the semester.

The project really got off the ground at the first meeting we had with ANU and they shared some of the difficulties people faced every day in their neighborhood. I could feel a spark pass through each one of us as certain topics were spoken of and once I saw the interest in the "younger" student's eyes I knew we could do something for "good" here. It was unanimously decided we would do what geographers do best: research, field work, and MAP! (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay)

The students agreed that the best way to proceed was to break into research teams, with each group taking on a research topic. They would gather resources and conduct research on a particular topic and periodically share the information with the larger group. Four research topics were selected: public transportation, commercial services, social services, and the cultural past and present. The overall goal was to provide visual representation of community assets and accessibility that would tell the untold story of the Airport Neighborhood and aid its endeavors to obtain fair representation in city and county government. Early on, students realized how little information exists about the Airport Neighborhood, thus a secondary goal emerged: to organize all project resources materials (photos, reports, newspaper articles, census and other statistical data) into an Airport Neighborhood archive. Ideally, the resources in the archive would serve as foundational materials for future student projects, as well as provide the community partners with a rich storehouse of easily retrievable information that could support their endeavors. Finally, a "chief cartographer" was selected to create base maps and thematic maps from the information gathered by each student research group.

A multi-method approach including participant observation, interviewing, landscape analysis, mapping, surveys, analysis of census data, and archival research was devised for the overall research project. Each research team discussed its shared plan with the larger group using Blackboard and class presentations to facilitate the exchange of information. They were given feedback by other students and myself and revised their plans before engaging in field work. The Office of Service Learning was also included in these class discussions to assist with logistical matters and to respond to any risk-management issues.

By the fourth week of the semester, the research teams had clearly defined their individual and group tasks, and the project cartographer was busily constructing a base map and poster layout for the final product, an asset map of the Airport Neighborhood. The research teams gave themselves a mandatory deadline of three weeks (before spring break) to gather the information that would ultimately be included in the poster. Class members regularly shared new materials or insights gathered from fieldwork at the beginning of each class. The level of student involvement and engagement noticeably increased during this time, and students who initially lacked initiative caught on that they would be expected to get things done. Frequently students would find they couldn't wait for the next class meeting, so they would show up in my office with the latest research "find." As information began to come in, two students were assigned the task of archiving (both electronic and hardcopy) all materials and posting the electronic versions on the class Blackboard site. During these discussions, they began to explore the themes of social, environmental, and transportation justice; they began to examine resource disparities and suggest ways in which such themes could be illustrated through mapping and cartographic display.

I had a chance to put my GIS skills to use for the improvement of a neighborhood in need. Mapping the needs and assets of Modesto Airport Neighborhood challenged my technical skills, my social ability, and my writing proficiency (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

When the assignment started I didn't like the idea of having to do a group project, but once I saw how much everyone wanted to contribute, I knew this assignment was going to be something special. Everyone collected data, did write-ups, and gave their opinion on the direction of the poster board. It was exciting to see the project come together during the final weeks and to print

out the final poster (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

As the multiple strands of the team research projects began to merge and take the shape of a single project, I challenged the class to present their work at the California Geographical Society (CGS) Conference. While initially viewed as additional work, I pointed out that the work was already completed and that presenting at a statewide conference would offer those who participated valuable professional development opportunities. Furthermore, sharing the results of the project with a wider audience could indirectly advocate for the Airport Neighborhood—and similarly marginalized communities. The guidelines for the CGS conference poster submission were distributed in class. After reading through the criteria, three students volunteered to represent the group project at the conference. A draft abstract was shared and revised and ultimately submitted. Financial support for students to attend the conference came from two internal grants: the Dean's Teaching Initiative and a Service Learning Mini-Grant.

I really felt that for whatever reason, the stigmatization that had affected the Okies in the years past managed to have some sort of trickle-down effect and the people in this community were still fighting an uphill battle. Anything that I could do to help them, including carrying their message to the California Geographical Society's annual conference in Chico was worth doing (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

Public presentation of the Airport Neighborhood project was the next logical step, and one which provided an important capstone experience for students to situate their work among that of their peers in the broader geographic community. In a final, semester-end presentation, the students showcased their work at the ANU community center. The ANU community partners, Habitat for Humanity, local service providers, and a reporter from the local newspaper were invited to learn about the project and offer their feedback and advice on future projects.

After spending nine weeks on this project, students had not only developed the practical skills associated with urban-geographic analysis, but had also witnessed first-hand the connection between theory (geographic and service-learning), method, and practice. Perhaps most importantly from a CSBL standpoint, the asset mapping project demonstrated how geospatial skills and community





engagement through fieldwork can be applied to address community problems and advocate for change.

Mapping the community assets and needs allowed us to get first-hand experience in making proposals, gathering data, field work, research, creating tables and graphs, mapping, communicating and writing. These are all powerful skills and tools that will come in handy again in the future (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

## **Concluding Remarks and Reflection**

Many argue that service-learning is a necessary component of higher education. One often-stated benefit is that students acquire skills and knowledge via service-learning projects that better prepare them for their chosen professions. Moreover, service-learning projects tend to meet the needs of nontraditional students and provide the kind of out-of-class experiences in the community that positively influence student retention (Crump 2002, Dorsey 2001). Beyond these didactic considerations, service-learning projects offer opportunities to engage in participatory fieldwork that promote students' collaborations with one another and with faculty. Human and cultural geography have witnessed a resurgence of this type of pragmatic fieldwork, one that often emphasizes the use of geospatial technology and problem-solving and is informed by concerns for social justice (Graves 2003, Jackiewicz et al. 2005, Ives-Dewey 2008, Skop 2008).

From my viewpoint, this project positively affected my teaching and my students' experience in the classroom and in their communities. Information gained through data gathering, meeting community members, and field research not only supported the creation of a valuable tool for community decision making, it aided my efforts to impress on students the importance of community involvement by talking with and learning from people who have different socioeconomic backgrounds, opinions, and perspectives. Taken together, the tasks and learning activities associated with the CSBL project furnished students with a real local example of how geographic knowledge and techniques can be put to use to revitalize neighborhoods and serve our communities.

Involving students in service activities that build connections with people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds is likely to align with one or more institutional goals at two- and four-year campuses. With the University's desire to continuously be a contributing member of the larger community, creating a way for students to bring spatial technology to neighborhoods is an idea that satisfies many goals. One of the stated goals of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, where Geography resides on my campus, is that students recognize and acknowledge their social responsibility and feel empowered to make lasting contributions in local communities. The Airport Neighborhood Project showed the real value of community-based mapping. It taught participants to see the problems of the community—and their solutions—in new ways. Because data presented in a map format is easier to understand, it is also easier to communicate to others. This is a particularly important point when working with a diverse group of people to identify and achieve shared goals.

I also began to develop a kinship of sorts with the Airport Neighborhood, as their ancestors were not unlike my own, rural farmers from the South/Southwest. Whatever the case, my perspective on this community was that they deserved to have a voice just like anyone else. They deserved to have access to government and governmental services like their fellow citizens (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

For any successful course, planning is important, and that is doubly true for a course with a CSBL component. I began making my initial contacts six weeks prior to the beginning of the semester. Service Learning staff set up initial meetings and often accompanied me on site visits. Their expertise and experience with diverse projects

proved essential to my avoiding many potential pitfalls. I concerned myself with themes and topics to explore with the class and they helped point out logistical issues and coordinated meetings, arranged for transportation, and sent press releases to local media.

While this initial CSBL project was successful, there are many challenges to consider. Several issues emerged during the semester and through post-course student feedback. First, research teams had difficulty scheduling meetings with ANU representatives and with each other. Second, many students had an initial aversion to working in groups. A couple of students opted for tasks that required little or no time in the community (e.g., collecting online sources, organizing the archive) and therefore only indirectly experienced the rewards of CSBL. Ultimately, even the most ardent anti-group-work student came around. In many cases, students mentored one another, turned to one another for help on specific tasks, and looked for ways to highlight particular strengths they could bring to the project. Each student found a particular niche. Some were ardent collectors and organizers; others became fact-checkers and problem-solvers. Near the end of the project, students were establishing their own lists of tasks, timelines, and due dates, and were coming up with solutions when some aspects of the project failed to work out as initially planned. They had to learn to select their best work to tell the story of the Airport Neighborhood. For some, that meant their particular piece had to be edited or greatly modified to create a coherent message for the final project.

I have never worked in a group setting before where everyone took his or her own piece, went and worked on it, brought it back to the whole...and it actually all came together. My previous experiences with groups led me to believe there were always slackers, always folks you had to stand on top of to get the information, but this class was different, and I commend all of my classmates (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

Finally, early on it became clear that I would need to be comfortable with giving up some control as students took on more responsibility and ownership of the project. Often this meant a willingness to be flexible with the course schedule and the due dates to accommodate project demands.

I think you made it clear that the process was organic; that something would grow out of our initial meeting with ANU and

Habitat, and that is exactly what happened. I never felt that you let us run off willy-nilly, but you also let us develop it. I don't think any of us knew what was going to be the final result of this project, but I do believe we have given ANU exactly what they wanted: a tool that they can use to secure grants and have a voice at the local government level (Urban Geography Student CSBL reflective project essay).

In spring 2009, another class of urban geographers expanded the work of the initial CSBL project. The first team continued to work in the Airport Neighborhood. Their efforts focused on residential tree planting and securing space for the renewal of a community garden project. A second research team began a new project in the City of Turlock that included the survey and reuse of upper-storey commercial space in the city's downtown. Both of the projects rely on a mix of methods, blending traditional techniques with geospatial skills, and learning through service to build better communities.

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