Speaking in Poetry: Community Service-Based Business Education¹

Robert H. Hogner

ABSTRACT. This is a story of the development of a community service for business education project in Florida International University's Business Environment Program. The Project, as it is called, had its practical origins in student involvement in community activism-type projects. Its theoretical foundation is found in the concept of increasing community discourse — following Dewey (1954) — as a vehicle for strengthening the business and society bond. Student community service projects are described including the largest group to evolve, a group dedicated to feeding Miami's homeless and taking the name the FIU Foodrunners. The Project is now in its third year with approximately five-hundred students per year working twenty-five hours per semester on community service projects. The community service requirement directly as a result of experiences with the Project has expanded beyond the Business Environment courses to offerings in other departments and is now part of a University-wide recently institutionalized structure designed to stimulate student community service efforts.

Today was our third run, the third Sunday of waking up early. Now that I have been reading Aram and putting the pieces together, I can see how this concept of business and society comes together.²

Introduction

The title of this article is derived, in part, from the experience the author had with one of his undergraduate “Business and Society” students, Richard, a guitar-playing, management information systems major. Richard, working on a community service project, had asked Jerome, a homeless man he fed every Sunday: “How ya’ doing’?” Jerome had answered: “No more tears left to cry”. Richard had approached me in class several days thereafter indicating he was deeply troubled by Jerome’s “poetic” response. He said he had tried to weave the response into a poem, but had failed. I asked him if he wrote poetry and received a response that he did not, but he did write music. I suggested that he try to write music describing the experience, much in the same way he and other students were writing journals. He left and returned the following class period with a musical piece that, from all indications, allowed him to work through for his life the ramifications of a person known to him,³ having “no more tears left to cry”.

Much conversation exists today about conceptualizing the business organization as a “boundaryless” entity.⁴ The community service in management education enterprises underway at Florida International University’s College of Business Administration and elsewhere are, to bring a great number of us up to speed very quickly, truly boundaryless education. They are enterprises of education not training, of experience not fact absorption, of process not object, and of value-recognition not value-neutrality/value-rejection.

Community service in management education offers faculty the opportunity to enrich

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educational experiences in several ways. It brings immediate relevance to classroom learning. It increases the complexity of those who participate in it. It exposes and draws tighter the bonds of community among all those who participate, e.g., students, community group, politicians, those seeking social justice, faculty, even university administrators. Through that process, a result of increased discourse across organizational and social boundaries, it increases the respect “one has for other.” And, it forever lifts the curtain which had previously hid the value-based social context of all human behavior, be this behavior described as educational, political, economic, or otherwise.

Beginnings

The course out of which the Florida International University (FIU) College of Business Administration Community Service Project (hereafter simply Project) grew was, appropriately and perhaps with a bit of destiny attached, labelled Business and Society. FIU is South Florida’s publicly-owned and -operated university. It serves 26,000 students (c. 1994) on two campuses, both located in the Miami metropolitan area. Business and Society is a required course in the undergraduate BBA curriculum and is generally taken in the junior year. Roughly 1200 students enroll each year, with six full-time and two adjunct faculty or Ph.D. students responsible for the area. Faculty are individually responsible for the design of their courses, but a generic model tends to hold: a text (business and society, of course), a casebook, and supplemental readings.

Students are primarily of lower-middle and middle income families, predominantly from first or second generation Caribbean or Latin/South American heritage. Roughly three-quarters of these students are full-time students with full-time (most) and part-time (some) employment in the financial, service and entrepreneurial sectors which dominate South Florida economic activity.

The Project arose out of experiences in Business and Society sections taught by this author. In the Summer of 1990, three community groups with which the author is associated expressed a need for student workers on projects. At the same time, a course design was being developed to allow students to work on group projects associated with matters of immediate public concern about business and society issues. These two ideas came together, with some groups working on such matters as toxic chemical releases in Florida, ozone depleting chemical releases by Florida military contractors, supermarket pricing variations by ethnic neighborhoods, male/female pricing variations by dry cleaners, and so on. Other projects related to public issues of immediate concern to the local community and directly stimulated the development of the Project. Examples of these student group projects were business students collaborating in efforts to bring together a leadership forum for Miami’s Black community and helping a church-based community development organization hold its annual convention with tri-lingual – Spanish, English, and Creole – simultaneous translation.

During Summer 1992, stimulated by extraordinary student and community response to the above projects, the author developed plans to integrate community service as a requirement in the Fall 1992 semester Business and Society class. Three factors influenced this process: (1) the success of loosely assigned group service projects; (2) two papers written by the author, both theoretically related to forming and solidifying the legitimacy of and need for service-based learning in the management education process; and (3) the beginnings of a national dialogue on community service. Delayed by two weeks because of Hurricane Andrew, the author’s Fall 1992 semester Business and Society class (enrollment of approximately 50 students) had a fifteen hours/semester “community service” requirement.

Theoretical context

What struck me about the homeless is that so many were not Black, then it struck me that I had