

TELL ME AND I FORGET.  
TEACH ME AND I MAY REMEMBER.  
INVOLVE ME AND I WILL

# LEARN.

— B E N J A M I N F R A N K L I N

## SERVICE-LEARNING FINDS ITS WAY INTO SCSU CLASSROOMS

*By Lisa Helmin Foss*

Dr. Isolde Mueller's class on German cultural history looks like many courses taught at SCSU. The students, about 20, sit in a circle – textbooks open, eyes focused on their professor, who is writing on the board.

The expectation is that by the end of the semester, the students in Associate Professor Mueller's class will have a better understanding of the history, culture, geography and civilization of German-speaking countries. Based on the exchanges between professor and students, all in German, they are well on their way to achieving their goal.

But a different kind of learning is also taking place ... a kind of learning that goes beyond the traditional classroom to a place that many of Mueller's students say has changed them in a deeply personal way. Her class is one of several on campus that have included something called service-learning in their coursework.

Service-learning is a concept that has been around for many years but has grown as a way to engage students in the learning process.

According to Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher, Office of Service Learning at Indiana University and Purdue University: "Service-learning is a credit bearing, educational experience in which students participate in organized service activity that meets identified community needs ... for deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility."

In other words, it is about turning students into active learners by supporting what they are studying in their courses with volunteer work in their community.



Pictured (l to r): Eveily Freeman, Bob Inskster and Isolde Mueller

Eveily Freeman is the service-learning coordinator for SCSU. She serves as a liaison between faculty who are interested in adding a service-learning component in their courses and the community-based organizations that need the assistance.

According to Freeman, a service-learning project can enrich a student's college experience. "Service-learning increases a student's learning for the people and places around them," Freeman said. "Students learn a lot from engaging with people who are different from what they are."

This is exactly the point of Mueller's class. Her students spend a few hours a week at St. Benedict's Center, a senior community in St. Louis. They use their German language skills by interacting and conversing with residents in advanced stages of dementia. A large number of the elderly, German was commonly spoken in their home. Some of these residents have layered back their English, so they're speaking German again.

Students plan to create a picture dictionary with German and English translations to leave with the St. Benedict's Senior Center staff when the semester ends to help them better communicate with German speaking residents.

Over the years, my students have asked me what they can do with the German they learn in class," Mueller said. When she participated in a reading group on the subject of service-learning, she realized it was a way to expand her students' experiences and look at culture in a whole new way. One of Mueller's goals was to increase the cultural competence of her students.

Working with Alzheimer patients means you really have to step into someone else's world," Mueller explained.

Mueller's students believe their work at St. Benedict's Center is valuable. Said a student named Dan: "It's just something you don't do in any other class. You don't get this out of a book."

"This project gets at something that doesn't happen that often in classes," Mueller said. "There's an emotional part and a behavioral part of learning that is difficult to get at in the classroom. That's what I want to get by having my students involved in service-learning."

Tiffany, another of Mueller's students, agrees: "You get so much more than just coming to class. You go outside, you get resources, you bring them to class, and you talk about them. Everyone has a different point of view, and you learn from each others' experiences."

To date, about 45 faculty are using some type of service-learning component in their classes. Another example is Dr. Robert Inskster and his freshman English class. Inskster teaches the class with a bit of a twist. He asked his students to do 20 hours of community service and then write about the experience.

"I see the course as an invitation to them to think about their lives and their careers and their vocations," Inskster said. "As part of the class, I want them to think about: 'What am I called to be in my adult life?' 'What is my responsibility to myself and my community?' 'What are my ethical responsibilities?'"

For the assignment, students were asked to identify a community service project they were interested in. One student volunteered for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, another used her experience as an AmeriCorps volunteer, still another taught piano to several young students who could not afford lessons. The students were required to write a fairly rich and detailed description of their experience using other resources and literature.

Inskster's favorite story is about one student who, at first, was not all that interested in this "extra" component of the class. On the course evaluation, he even wrote about how he was ready to bail out of the class when he heard about the service-learning component, Inskster recalled.

"He had such a series of epiphanies as he went through his project," he said. "He was a big, macho, muscular guy, and he ended up volunteering to coach a girls' soccer team at North Junior High." The student explained his experience: "I'd yell at them, and they would cry. Then I talked with one of the other coaches and he said, 'Look, these kids aren't going to care a heck of a lot about winning,' so I started trying some stuff. I went out there and just started playing with them and pretty soon they were laughing ..." Inskster said the student has since been hired to coach at another school based on his classroom experience.

While Freeman is quick to explain that service-learning doesn't fit every class or student, "I feel really good about what we've been able to accomplish. It's going amazingly well."