

The College of Wooster

Open Works

All Faculty Articles

All Faculty Scholarship

2006

Mask Making: Incorporating Service Learning in Criminology and Deviance Courses

Anne Nurse

The College of Wooster, anurse@wooster.edu

Matthew Krain

The College of Wooster, mkrain@wooster.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openworks.wooster.edu/facpub>

Recommended Citation

Nurse, Anne and Krain, Matthew, "Mask Making: Incorporating Service Learning in Criminology and Deviance Courses" (2006). *Teaching Sociology*, , 278-285. 10.1177/0092055X0603400306. Retrieved from <https://openworks.wooster.edu/facpub/394>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Faculty Scholarship at Open Works, a service of The College of Wooster Libraries. This article is a(n) Author's Version and was originally published in *Teaching Sociology* (2006), available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0603400306>. For questions about OpenWorks, please contact openworks@wooster.edu.

**MASK MAKING: INCORPORATING SERVICE LEARNING
INTO CRIMINOLOGY AND DEVIANCE COURSES;**

Anne M. Nurse

Matthew Krain

Criminology and deviance classes are often among the most popular in the sociology undergraduate curriculum. These courses provide a unique opportunity for teachers since many students come to class with an intense interest in the subject matter combined with strong opinions about crime, criminals, and deviants. Because these opinions are often based on media reports and stereotypes, criminology and deviance courses provide fertile ground for teaching sociology. At the same time, however, student preconceptions tend to favor individualistic explanations of crime and deviance, making it difficult to teach concepts such as the social construction of deviance. In this article, we propose a unique way to incorporate service learning into criminology and deviance classes to help students overcome this type of resistance to a sociological perspective.

Over the years, a number of sociologists have developed exercises to help students understand the social construction of deviance and social theories of crime. For example, Brezina (2000) suggests an activity in which students analyze their own academic dishonesty as an example of deviant and criminal behavior. Similarly, Reichel (1982) suggests the use of a “criminal activities checklist” in which students check off their own deviant acts. Although potentially effective, exercises of this type may fail to reach some students. So many students cheat (or smoke marijuana, or drive drunk, etc.) that it becomes easy to deny that these are examples of “real deviance.” To overcome this problem, Greenberg (1989) proposes an activity in which students conduct intensive interviews with imprisoned juvenile delinquents. As the students interview the delinquents, they discover they have much in common. Greenberg finds that this exercise forces the students to

consider the role society plays in determining who is labeled criminal or deviant. It also allows them to explore some of the social causes of criminal behavior.

We agree with Greenberg that allowing students to interact with juvenile inmates is a powerful way to help them question their assumptions about crime and deviance. There are, however, at least two potential problems with Greenberg's exercise. First, it does not have clear benefits for the juvenile delinquents. Juvenile prisoners are frequently interviewed by a range of social service professionals and may resent being asked to reveal personal details of their lives to a stranger with nothing tangible to offer them. Second, it is difficult to obtain true consent from a captive population; residents of juvenile prisons may find it difficult to refuse an interview because they fear reprisal from staff. In the pages that follow, we present service learning as an effective and less ethically problematic way to help students understand crime and deviance sociologically.

Service learning is experiential learning designed to provide a needed service to the community while allowing students to move beyond textbook examples and participate in theoretically relevant or illustrative cases, bringing the lessons learned in the classroom to life (Eyler and Giles 1999: 3-5). Unlike voluntarism, service learning requires students to systematically reflect on their experiences and apply course concepts and readings to them. Coursework is informed by student action, and that action is informed by, and occurs within the context of, the academic study of relevant topics. The benefits of service learning as a pedagogical tool have long been recognized by the education community. Beginning with John Dewey (1938), academics in a range of fields have pointed out that the most effective way to teach concepts is through active learning strategies involving real-world application (for an excellent history see Wutzdorff and Giles [1997: 106-9] and Robinson [2000: 605-6]).

OBJECTIVES

In order for it to be a successful pedagogical tool, a service-learning activity must be directly linked to the course and its objectives, and must be carefully interwoven into the learning process set out in the course (Weigert 1998: 5-7; Hepburn, Neimi and Chapman 2000: 617-8). The primary learning objective of the service-learning project described in this paper was to increase student understanding of the social construction of deviance. In order to do this, we tried to create a project that would humanize juvenile delinquents and challenge our students' beliefs that juvenile offenders are "fundamentally different from us." Many students draw from the prevalent societal image of criminals as animalistic and lacking in all compassion (Madriz 1997). This perception makes it difficult for them to think critically about social theories of crime and it prevents them from thinking rationally about justice policy.

Our service-learning project had a *service* objective as well – to provide much-needed community assistance, informed by lessons learned in the classroom. Our project's specific objective was to provide juvenile detainees in our community with positive peer interaction, a creative outlet, a "voice" in how they are perceived, and a chance to break the monotony of everyday life in a juvenile correctional facility.

PLANNING

Before the semester began, we contacted our local juvenile prison facility and expressed an interest in doing a service-learning project. The staff was unfamiliar with service learning and it was necessary to explain how it differed from the more familiar voluntarism model. We then asked the staff if they were interested in creating a service-learning project with us. They were enthusiastic about this possibility and gave us suggestions for projects that would meet their needs. Their facility, like many juvenile prisons, does not have enough funding to provide many activities for the

residents. Because of this, they requested that we come and do an art project. We selected mask making for several reasons. First, it is exciting, dramatic, and unusual. Second, mask making allows for very intense interaction between students and residents. Finally, the symbolism of providing a face for the faceless was attractive to us. At the same time, we believe that many other art projects could be equally effective (for example decorating T-shirts, or making clay-coil cups).

From the first day of our class, we let students know that service learning was a vital part of their coursework. While all students were required to participate, they did have a number of options. We encouraged them to join the group project, but those who felt uncomfortable were given the option of working in another capacity at the prison or organizing a community book drive for the residents. We believe that providing such options is important so that reluctant students are not sent to work with inmates. There is, however, disagreement in the service-learning literature about the wisdom of requiring participation. For a brief review of the debate and how recent findings affect it, see Weigert (1998: 8) and Hepburn, Neimi and Chapman (2000: 621).

The mask-making activity was organized in four two-hour sessions over a period of two weeks, allowing ample time for the masks to set. These eight hours were appropriate for our project and probably reflect the minimum amount of time required for effective learning. We acknowledge findings that suggest sustained service is most beneficial in terms of pedagogical outcomes (Neimi and Junn 1998), but we point to other research indicating that short-term service-learning experiences provide many of the same benefits as longer-term projects (for a review of this literature see McCarthy 1996). With limited time and resources, we selected the more concentrated time period. The service-learning component of the course occurred near the middle of the semester. This enabled us to develop course themes, review relevant literature, and analyze specific examples while still having time for a proper orientation. After the completion of the project, students were given an opportunity to reflect upon their experience.

We required that students keep a journal during the project to further encourage reflection and analysis. In early journal entries students were asked to write about their perceptions of the project and its goals, the nature of service, their preconceptions about prison inmates, and their thoughts on deviance issues as they relate to the incarcerated. Once the project was underway, students were asked to discuss their experiences at the correctional facility and their interactions with the incarcerated youth. They were also asked to begin making more general observations about conditions in the facility and the freedoms allowed or denied the incarcerated. Once our structured visits concluded, we asked students to reflect upon the entire experience and to begin to draw larger generalizations, as well as to examine how their own thinking about correctional facilities, prisoners, and deviance were affected.

SESSION #1: ORIENTATION

At the beginning of our orientation session, we reviewed some of the theoretical issues we had covered to that point in the semester with a focus on the social construction of deviance and social theories of crime. In order to address the concern that the visit to the prison might reinforce negative stereotypes of delinquents, we discussed issues of selective perception and sensitivity to diversity. As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994: 252) point out, however, this step alone does not always adequately address the tendency to accept negative stereotypes. Therefore, we adopted their suggestion to integrate scholarship on race, class, and gender throughout all portions of the course. We also spent significant time during the orientation and in lessons prior to the project explicitly examining the specific groups, institutions, and practices that the students would encounter during their service.

Next, we provided a more practical training session for our students. We discussed the rules of the prison, guidelines for appropriate behavior, and issues of sensitivity and confidentiality. Because the population of the correctional center is drawn from the surrounding community, we

stressed the importance of keeping the identities (or any identifying information) of the residents absolutely confidential. We also talked about our own students' fears and perceptions. As part of this discussion, we talked about liability issues and asked the students to sign a consent form that had been approved by both the detention center and the College. Finally, we had a discussion about how the students should handle residents' questions about their presence at the prison. As a class, we decided that we would not lie, but that we would de-emphasize the criminology content of the course. When asked, students decided to say that it was a service-learning project in a sociology class. If pressed further, they agreed to say that they were working on a unit about the juvenile justice system. It was important to tell the truth, but also to be sensitive to the fact that youth in prison already have daily reminders of their criminal status.

Following this, we taught the students how to make masks. Because neither author was familiar with the process, we invited an artist from the community to help us. Mask making is not difficult, but it is important to do it correctly so that the plaster does not stick to the skin and the masks set properly. The artist used one of our students as a model and taught the class how to create a plaster mask. Our students then selected partners and practiced on one another.

SESSION #2: INITIAL CONTACT AND MASK MAKING

On the second day of the project we traveled to the juvenile detention facility. We had informed the staff of the number of students we were bringing so that we could pair our students one-to-one with the residents. To set the residents at ease about the process, our guest artist demonstrated on one of the college students. In addition, our students brought the masks they had constructed in the previous session as examples of a finished product. We then paired students and residents and had them engage in a series of icebreakers (for example, we had each pair find three things they both liked – a movie, a food, and a sport). After this activity our students made a mask

for their partner. In retrospect, we wish we had allowed more time so that residents could also make masks of the students. We believe this would have diminished any power imbalance that might have existed, and would have allowed residents more of an opportunity to speak. Mask making was the perfect activity for our purposes because it forced the two people to have contact with each other, but required little conversation while the mask was setting. This meant that there was a sense of closeness but it did not force conversation. Nevertheless, we observed that, after a brief period of somewhat tense interaction, much communication – verbal and nonverbal – occurred between students and residents. After completion, the masks were left at the facility to set.

One of our primary concerns coming into this project was the possibility that the residents would participate because they feared staff reprisal, or denial of parole, if they refused. To address this, we made it clear that residents were free to opt out of the project without negative sanctions. Additionally, residents who expressed any discomfort with the application of plaster to their face were provided with the option of using a Styrofoam head. When we presented these options to the residents, however, all chose to participate fully in the project. When we talked to them later, many commented that they had few diversions in their daily lives and the mask making and conversation provided an exciting change from the routine. As the Director of the Center later noted:

Some of these kids don't get visitors. Some parents aren't allowed to visit, some we don't know who they are. Just to have someone listen makes all the difference in the world... We just greatly appreciate this, because there is such a real need (Rutz 2000: B1).

SESSION #3: MASK DECORATION AMIDST CONVERSATIONS

We returned two days later with a variety of art supplies (paints, glue, glitter, magazines, buttons). The college students went immediately and sat with their partners. Both students and residents decorated their masks. This provided a perfect opportunity for conversation about the

masks and other topics as well. Some of the residents asked our students about life at college, and there were discussions about life at the juvenile prison. This day was the most important in fulfilling the purpose of our project, allowing the students and residents to become better acquainted. To further this end, we had each partner help the other write a card explaining the design they chose for their mask. By the end of the session the room was noisy with laughter and conversation. We photographed the masks to enable a public (on-line) exhibit of the artwork, but left the residents' masks at the Center so they could take them home when released. While not all the artwork remains on display, a sample of the masks may be viewed at the following URL: <http://evolutiondesign.com/masks/maskNet.html>. Although we had initially planned to collect the masks and display them in a public exhibit, it soon became obvious to both authors that the residents took such pride in their artwork that to take it away from them would be very upsetting.

SESSION #4: INITIAL IN-CLASS STRUCTURED REFLECTION

The final part of this project was an extended discussion with our students relating their experience to course concepts. When we met, we encouraged each of them to talk about what they learned and draw some generalizations from their experiences. As noted above, service learning has the potential to reinforce negative assumptions if students encounter inmates who exhibit stereotypical behaviors or traits. While this did, in fact, happen in at least one case, our class discussion about each of the students' experiences made clear the complexity and diversity of the juvenile inmate population. Additionally, residents and students talked outside of their pairs on the second day of the project, ensuring that both met more than one student or resident. We also found it useful to point out that some criminals do match stereotypes (and some young offenders might choose to act like "criminals" due to embarrassment or labeling pressures).

STRUCTURED REFLECTION IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE PROJECT

In the weeks following the service-learning project, we assigned students various journal-writing activities designed to help them link their experiences to issues involving the social construction of deviance. These assignments were motivated by research showing that journal keeping, in conjunction with in-class discussions and other means of structured reflection are integral to the pedagogical success of service-learning projects (Cooper 1998; Rice and Pollack 2000). Without reflection, service can lead students to see their activity as an isolated event, rather than an opportunity for systematic observation and analysis (Lipka 1997: 59).

In addition to journal writing, we continued to discuss our service-learning experiences throughout the semester. For example, reference was made to life in correctional facilities in subsequent lessons on a range of issues involving penology, the death penalty, and stigma management. We found that assignments and in-class discussions were significantly enhanced by reflection and analysis of our service-learning experiences. Moreover, reviewing the service-learning project in light of debates on these issues helped students to locate and evaluate their experiences within larger policy and academic contexts. Therefore, during our discussions, we talked about what could be done to improve sentencing and correctional policies within the current political and social environment. We also spent significant time discussing the changes that could not be achieved within the current system, and what changes were needed for improvement to occur.

CHALLENGES

Instructors interested in incorporating this or any other prison-based service-learning project into their class should note that there are a number of potential challenges. First, while the mask-making activity is not expensive, it does require a number of supplies. When we did the project, we

were able to cover the cost with a grant of about one hundred dollars from a service-learning fund on campus. If money is an issue, other art projects can be found that are less expensive (see above).

Working in prison presents a number of security issues. For example, some prisons may not allow scissors or other types of art supplies. Instructors should talk with the institution ahead of time and go over the rules very carefully. If there are rules that will make it difficult to do a project, creative solutions can sometimes be found. For example, our local prison did not allow scissors but we asked permission to bring in one pair with the understanding that only the instructors or prison staff would handle them. Another unexpected issue related to security arose when, after the conclusion of the project, one of our students sent a letter to a resident. The prison contacted us and made it clear that for the protection of both residents and students, this was not allowed. Instructors should be very clear with students that they should not contact residents nor should they give out their own contact information. This is not simply a safety issue – it is also important in order to maintain the confidentiality of both parties. On a related note, because the students and residents were close in age, we had some concerns someone might become romantically interested in their partner. To decrease this possibility, we created same-sex pairs but, regardless of whether this is possible or not, students should be made to understand that any contact with residents after the project could potentially bring all service learning at the facility to a halt.

A final logistical issue that proved problematic for us was the unexpected absence of several students and residents on the second day of the project. This broke the connections that had been formed on the first day and caused disappointment for both students and residents. We were forced to reassign some partners and create one group of three. This problem may be inevitable but instructors should impress upon their students that, by participating in the project, they are making a commitment to attend both days.

CONCLUSIONS

Our experiences suggest that service learning can be a valuable tool in teaching students about the social construction of deviance. In a survey we took immediately following the project, we asked students whether they thought that the service-learning component of the class enhanced their understanding of the course material, including the social construction of deviance. Of the 27 responses, 26 (96 percent) agreed that it did. One year later, we asked students the same question, this time requesting that they use a scale from zero (not effective) to five (highly effective). The average rating was 4.4, with half of the students rating service learning's effectiveness in teaching course concepts as a 5 (n=19).

Student journals suggested that the direct contact and interaction facilitated by the mask-making project served to humanize the prison population, allowing the students to see inmates as people much like themselves. This understanding freed students to see deviance and criminality as socially constructed. In a journal entry, one student commented

I never would have thought that these kids would have as much potential as I saw in that room. I realize that some of them are just tough and immature kids, but some are the products of a society that they did not choose. They were born into harsh lives, and they were doing what they could to get by. I went in expecting a bunch of punks and I came out with a new respect for what they have had to deal with all their lives.

In addition to its positive effects on student learning, both authors noted that the service done by students affected classroom dynamics. While providing students with an enjoyable and entertaining experience was not our primary goal, we found that the enthusiasm generated by the art project spilled over into our classroom discussions and activities. Students felt bonded to each other as a result of their shared experience, and became comfortable sharing their thoughts in class. Moreover, their real-life experiences at a juvenile detention facility made them far more engaged with learning and applying course concepts. We watched as many of the students used their

experiences to reconsider their opinions about prison conditions and sentencing policies. Compared to other classes we have taught, the service-learning class was far more interactive, enthusiastic, and engaged in critical thinking.

Juvenile prisoners are among the most neglected and stigmatized groups in society. By bringing our students into the prison, we provided the residents with a healthy outlet, a larger perspective, and a sense that they had not been forgotten. In addition, the juvenile prisoners, along with the students, learned that they were not significantly different from one another. The bond this understanding created encouraged them to share their separate life experiences. Both groups were enriched as a result.

The mask-making project provided its own unique benefits to the service-learning experience, including the rich symbolism of “giving a face to the faceless,” but it can easily assume other forms and still produce the same positive results. These results arise from the service-learning process itself, a process particularly suited to criminology and deviance classes.

REFERENCES

- Beamer, Glenn. 1998. "Service Learning: What's a Political Scientist Doing in Yonkers?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31: 557-61.
- Brezina, Timothy. 2000. "Are Deviants Different from the Rest of Us? Using Student Accounts of Academic Cheating to Explore a Popular Myth." *Teaching Sociology* 28: 71-8.
- Cooper, David. 1998. Reading, Writing, and Reflection. Pp. 47-56 in *Academic Service-Learning: A Pedagogy of Action and Reflection*, edited by Robert Rhoads and Jeffrey Howard. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, John. 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Eyler, Janet S. and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. *Where's The Learning In Service-Learning?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greenberg, Norman. 1989. "An Experiential Learning Approach to the Teaching of Criminology, Juvenile Delinquency, and Social Deviance." *Teaching Sociology* 17: 330-6.
- Hepburn, Mary A., Richard Neimi and Chris Chapman. "Service Learning in College Political Science: Queries and Commentary." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33: 617-22.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette and Sally Raskoff. 1994. "Community Service-Learning: Promises and Problems." *Teaching Sociology* 22: 248-54.
- Lipka, Richard P. 1997. Research and Evaluation in Service Learning: What Do We Need to Know? Pp. 58-68 in *Service Learning: Ninety-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Part I*, edited by Joan Schine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Madriz, Esther I. 1997. "Images of Criminals and Victims: A Study on Women's Fear and Social Control." *Gender & Society* 11: 342-56.

- McCarthy, Mark D. 1996. One-Time and Short-Term Service-Learning Experiences. Pp. 113-34 in *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, edited by Barbara Jacoby and Associates. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Neimi, Richard G. and Jane Junn. 1998. *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn?* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Reichel, Philip L. 1982. "A Criminal Activities Checklist." *Teaching Sociology* 10: 94 -7.
- Rice, Kathleen and Seth Pollack. 2000. Developing a Critical Pedagogy of Service Learning: Preparing Self-Reflective, Culturally Aware, and Responsive Community Participants. Pp. 115-34 in *Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities*, edited by Carolyn O'Grady. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Robinson, Tony. 2000. "Service Learning as Justice Advocacy: Can Political Scientists Do Politics?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33: 605-12.
- Rutz, Heather. 2000. "Learning As They Give: College Students Mentor, Tutor, Listen at Juvenile Attention Center." *Wooster Daily Record* October 29: B1. This can also be accessed at http://www.the-daily-record.com/past_issues/10_oct/001029dr5.html.
- Weigert, Kathleen M. 1998. Academic Service Learning: Its Meaning and Relevance. Pp. 3-10 in *Academic Service Learning: A Pedagogy of Action and Reflection*, edited by Jeffrey Howard and Robert Rhodes. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Wutzdorff, Allen J. and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. 1997. Service-Learning in Higher Education. Pp. 105-7 in *Service Learning: Ninety-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Part I*, edited by Joan Schine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Author Biographies

Anne M. Nurse is Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at The College of Wooster. Her research focuses on juvenile corrections. Her publications include *Fatherhood Arrested: Parenting from within the Juvenile Justice System* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002). She can be reached at anurse@wooster.edu or by mail at the Department of Sociology, The College of Wooster, Wooster, OH 44691.

Matthew Krain is Assistant Professor of Political Science at The College of Wooster. His research examines human rights violations and other large-scale political violence, and the role of the state in causing or preventing conflict and violence. He is the author of *Repression and Accommodation in Post-Revolutionary States* (St. Martin's Press, 2000) and co-editor of *Globalization and the Challenges of a New Century* (Indiana University Press, 2000). He can be reached at mkrain@wooster.edu or by mail at the Department of Political Science, The College of Wooster, Wooster, OH 44691.

NOTES

i The authors wish to thank Susie Sargent, Neha Sahgal, Amanda Mizeur, Linda Morgan-Clement, Emily Todd, Leon Horton, Pamela Nurse, the Wayne-Holmes Juvenile Attention Center, John Thompson, the Wooster Volunteer Network, and The College of Wooster for their assistance in the development and implementation of this project. We would also like to thank Gary Hesser, the editors of *Teaching Sociology*, and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Readers should note that portions of this article appeared in *Human Rights Quarterly*, 26 (1), 189-207. The article was entitled “Teaching Human Rights through Service Learning.”