



Learn and Serve America CBO Social Media Learning Network - 2008-2009

Lessons Learned

Community-Based Organizations and Web 2.0

Aiming to capitalize on the growth of social media use among young people involved in service, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) made a unique and strategic decision to augment the funding of 10 community-based service-learning grantees, including Northwest Connecticut Health Education Center (AHEC), Search Institute, YMCA of the USA, Heartland Foundation, Camp Fire USA, Michigan Commission, West Virginia Commission, The After School Corporation (TASC), National Network for Youth, and the University of North Carolina Foundation/HMCUC. The funding was to seed innovations in connecting Web 2.0 and networking tools such as blogging, Facebook, or MySpace with service-learning work in order to increase youth engagement, community collaboration, and best practices for high-quality service-learning. In addition, the intent was to see if social media tools could foster promoting this powerful methodology to inspire and educate others. The list of CBO social media grantees and a description of their Web 2.0 projects can be found at the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) website: <http://servicelearning.org>.

In addition to the specific agency work, CNCS provided support for a CBO learning network to facilitate sharing ideas, successes, challenges, and resources among these 10 grantees. Thirty-minute webinars from each CBO grantee—highlighting their accomplishments, challenges, and “what’s next”—are available through NSLC. (CNCS has also provided funding for a [Higher Education Social Media Learning Network](#). Further information can be found on the NSLC website.)

This document synthesizes the lessons learned by the 10 grantees as we introduce social media/Web 2.0 and support its growth and development. It is our hope that our experiences can be helpful to other service-learning practitioners in using this technology to deepen program quality and expand the reach of young people involved in their communities.

Using Social Media with Service-Learning

“Social media can’t be just one person’s job—there needs to be buy-in from all folks across the organization. The more there can be active participation from all departments, the more it will become integral to the way business happens.”

—Amber Jean Hacker, Leadership Development Associate, Interfaith Youth Core, working with Search Institute’s Inspired to Serve project.

As technology continues to develop, people of all ages are increasingly exploring communication and interaction through online social media. We have found that social media can be a successful tool to promote service-learning, deepen quality, and involve more people. To accomplish this, community organizations must understand the challenges and benefits of incorporating social media. Our experiences found the following steps helpful in achieving positive results:

- Focusing on quality and best practice of the service-learning experience
- Expanding reach and creating greater interest and involvement in service-learning
- Building organizational willingness and capacity
- Knowing which social media tool to use for which purpose
- Integrating social media into service-learning program design, implementation, and evaluation
- Creating and sustaining online communities
- Addressing challenges in timely and creative ways

Focusing on quality and best practice of the service-learning experience

When social media is incorporated into service-learning, this process:

- Allows youth voice to be heard—through development of the website, by showcasing work, and by creating resources for themselves and others to use (NN4Y, Heartland Foundation, YMCA of the USA, TASC, Search Institute, Camp Fire)
- Helps young people connect, collaborate, and share information and resources with each other (AHEC, Heartland Foundation, NN4Y, Michigan, Camp Fire, Search Institute, AHEC)
- Engages children in *intentional* reflection through *meaningful* blogging (TASC, Camp Fire, Michigan)
- Offers resources to staff on the best practices in programming (TASC, YUSA)
- Provides low-cost and accessible training through podcasts and video interviews (West Virginia, YMCA of the USA)
- Uses video to document the service-learning standards that can be utilized as a professional development tool that shows what high-quality service-learning looks like (Michigan)
- Uses video for students to demonstrate their mastery of their service-learning objectives (Camp Fire)
- Uses video to support the celebration phase of the service-learning cycle (Search Institute, Camp Fire)
- Uses an interactive web platform to match youth interests to specific community partners (YMCA of the USA)

- Expands online tools to provide public education and broaden the message of community needs and realities (HMCUC)
- Supports measuring outcomes and evaluation requirements (YMCA of the USA)
- Provides a forum to share lessons learned (Heartland Foundation)

Expanding reach and creating greater interest and involvement in service-learning

“The social media focus expanded our marketing efforts beyond our community to more of a state and national presence.”

—Angie Willis, River City Community Development Corporation, subgrant of the University of North Carolina Foundation/HMCUC

From our experience, we can recommend the following actions to expand the reach of service-learning:

- Use Facebook to promote events and service days.
- Use blogs and assign different young people or AmeriCorps members/staff leaders to contribute.
- Feature different sites to share examples and rotate the responsibility for contribute to keep the content changing and “fresh.”
- Use the same content, but post it in more places (Michigan Commission, West Virginia Commission, Heartland Foundation, HMCUC, Search Institute).
- Send youth-generated stories to local broadcast news stations to do more in-depth features on service-learning projects (HMCUC, Search Institute).
- Provide training to other youth development and service-learning organizations.

Many of the grantees found themselves as front-runners in using this technology for youth engagement and programming. They did significant training and sharing what worked as a way to help others interested in utilizing Web 2.0 in their youth development work.

Building organizational willingness and capacity

“When we started, there was zero support for using social media. We have learned so much ... Now it is integrated into our communication strategy and is helping us connect across streams of service.”

— Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission

There are a variety of ways to build staff capacity in order to integrate social media. Several grantees—including West Virginia, Michigan Commission, Heartland Foundation, and Search Institute—used interns and/or young people to get social media efforts started. They are closer in age to the service-learning students, and they can help translate to others in the organization the value and benefits.

Having a social media point person helps to build internal capacity and provides someone to support the local service-learning sites quickly (AHEC, Michigan). The time needed for start-up for some organizations was about two to three months.

Training and support is often needed on at least two fronts: helping professionals involved in programming see what is possible by using Web 2.0 and how these tools can help them with the outcomes they are trying to achieve. The second area is technology support and helping staff increase their comfort and use of social media tools. Technology glitches need to be responded to quickly in order to keep staff and students engaged.

Older folks can be hesitant to get into social media. Many CBO staff like to communicate face to face. It can also be intimidating if one does not know where or how to start. Remember to focus on the benefits (resource sharing, networking, media sharing, storytelling and promotion, inspiring people to action, increasing quality). Several grantees are delighted by older people's increase in comfort with social media, and adults are enjoying the new opportunities it presents. The enthusiasm among adults was an unanticipated—but exciting—area of impact.

Partnering with individuals and departments such as communication and marketing can be very helpful. Several grantees had success in working with the communications staff, and now these tools are the core of the organizations' communication strategies (Michigan, West Virginia, Search Institute, Heartland Foundation, YMCA of the USA).

When integrating social media, it is important to plan extra time for unexpected outcomes. Start-ups often take longer than one might think. Getting individuals up to speed may require a combination of face-to-face time and personal conversations.

An organization should be flexible and responsive, and it should learn from mistakes. In other words, if the approach works, keep doing it! If it doesn't, figure out how to adjust, or drop it altogether (Camp Fire, Heartland Foundation).

Training is required for staff to know what the technology is and how to incorporate it into their work. Then implementation will require ongoing support and encouragement to use that technology. For example, teachers are likely to use Moodle (an open-source online education application), or podcasts on the subject of effective volunteer management (AHEC, Michigan, West Virginia).

Knowing which social media tool to use for which purpose

“You have to be willing to learn as you go. Put something out there and see how it gets used. Be willing to let go if it doesn't seem to be taking off.”

- D.D. Gass, Director of Program Services, Camp Fire USA

Knowing what kinds of social media are available and what fits an organization's needs and budget is important. An extensive [glossary](#) of social media/Web 2.0 tools is found on the NSLC website. Some grantees used “closed” social networks such as Ning to establish a strong sense of

community. Numerous others experimented with blogging as reflection tool and as a way to showcase high-quality examples of service-learning, or they used Facebook to promote events, information, and resources. Youth liked sharing photos and making and sharing videos. The challenge was in getting quality footage, which requires preparation, and teaching young people about sound and light quality as well as interviewing skills. Both time and skills are needed to then edit the video footage.

Erica Ricker from the Heartland Foundation adds the following perspective:

Before ever going on the websites and registering for Twitter or Facebook, etc., it's a good idea to sit down and think about a strategy.

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What is your purpose?
- What is your voice?
- Do you have interesting things to say?
- Do you know how to engage your audience?
- How are you going to measure your success?

After you answer these questions, write up a plan of what you're going to post. Make a list of tweets or a list of ideas for interesting blogs. Find key people in your community to connect with. Find people who support your organization, and try to get them engaged online with you as well. Find those who have been doing it a while, and see what their strategy has been and see if that's something you can tap into.

It's important to remember, however, that this is a new trail being blazed, so no matter how much planning and prep work you do, there will be mistakes, and some things may not work. Learn from mistakes and move on.

Integrating social media into service-learning program design, implementation, and evaluation

“Organizations should plan ahead and think about the timing of when and how the technology is introduced and for what purpose. If they miss the start of the program year, it might always seem like an add-on.”

- Joy Ferguson, The After School Corporation (TASC)

Successful introductions to social media included the following:

- Demonstrations of social media tools at leadership retreats/camps and making sure there is computer access. In these situations, the online tools became the way to keep the community connected. Ning (a closed social media site) became a popular tool for a group cohesion and growth and development based on what the group members wanted (Michigan, Search Institute).

- Connecting technology use to service-learning events (e.g., Day of Service, conferences) to promote sharing, networking, reflection and immediate feedback or questions (HMCUC, Search Institute, West Virginia, Camp Fire)
- Training on how to use a specific tool and its potential benefits: it is about setting the conditions for it to take off versus being prescriptive (AHEC, Search Institute, Michigan Commission)
- Providing resources (flip cams, access to computer labs)
- Creating incentives (T-shirts for bloggers only)
- Using the tools throughout the program cycle to deepen learning, reflection, and community partnerships (TASC, AHEC, YMCA of the USA)

Successful examples of ongoing utilization included these efforts:

- Making time for leaders/staff to foster connections, link with resources, and comment on posts. The energy and momentum will build if it is given time and attention in the start-up phase
- Making time during the programming for students to be online
- Keeping the content fresh by rotating responsibility for postings
- Showcasing individuals and/or specific projects
- Providing tip sheets and tools (often generated by young people themselves)
- Remembering that it's all about relationship building and "being authentic"

Amber Jean Hacker addresses this topic as follows:

Whoever is overseeing the work has to be authentic, allowing his or her personality to come through, and have fun in the process. If management tries to exercise too much control, the account will be less likely to succeed in engaging people. You have to give up some of the control and realize you can't control everything that is posted. That doesn't mean you can't regulate offensive content, but you can have everything get bottlenecked or censored. Use young people to help you get into the social media world, whether it is Twitter, Facebook, or creating your own network site.

Creating and sustaining online communities

"We learned that keeping students motivated and engaged in the process would require more effort than we ever imagined. Much of our time was spent finding ways to keep our students engaged."

- Judith Sabbert, Chief Operating Officer, Heartland Foundation

We learned the following lessons about community:

- It's all about relationships and relationship building.
- Encouraging sharing takes time and persistence.
- Encouraging sharing requires being recognized by others and being asked to share—particularly by someone that person knows.

- People wanted to interact with other people they know. Youth wanted to communicate with others in their program or community.

Addressing challenges in timely and creative ways

Challenge: Kids don't have enough computer access in schools or after-school programs.

Creative solution: Change individual blogging to group blogging, and project the computer image on to the wall. Then a group of students can read and discuss a posted blog as well as write their own.

Challenge: Firewalls in school.

Solutions: Keep the size of the files and visual elements simple. Work with schools to determine what is going to work in their setting. If there is no access schools can write letters to districts asking to include specific sites in approved lists (AHEC).

Frequently Asked Questions of CBO social media grantees

Over the course of the year, we presented at several conferences and were often asked the following questions. In an attempt to provide a range of perspectives based on the different experiences of learning network members, the questions are listed below with various grantees offering their advice and insight.

1. *How long does start-up take?*

“Creating social networking sites from existing sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc., takes about two to three months to get going. There are initial followers and posters, but it takes personal encouragement to get a lot of posts. And it takes a lot of prompting. A new site—such as a private, closed networking site built from scratch—takes at least six months of planning and preparation, and then two to three months to populate” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“It probably took us three months of making the case for social media and for dealing with firewall issues. Once we could make a clear case for why blogs, Facebook, and videos were useful to us, things started to roll” (Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission).

“Start-up (i.e., development and testing of the interactive web site) was a minimum two-year process. This includes all phases of research, development, and test trials” (Gayle Brock, YMCA of the USA).

“AHEC got a basic closed social network up very quickly—it took two to three months. Once the site was open to YHSC members, we continued to upgrade the site with new features—this upgrading is still happening today. With each upgrade comes a host of bugs,

and tweaks that need to be made. The YHSC members were living through this. It might be better to build the entire site, beta test, and then release. However, this did not seem realistic for NWCTAHEC” (Tricia Harrity, Northwestern CT AHEC).

“Usually, within a week you can get up and started on a social media site” (Erica Ricker, Heartland Foundation).

2. *How much staff and ongoing investment is required?*

“If we could afford it, we would have a staff person spend 20 hours a week on our social networking sites. The more time spent, the more interest. However, we currently have someone who spends 5-10 hours per week” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“It requires only the right team willing to fight for approvals. The social media efforts originated with program staff and VISTAs. The communication team soon adopted the practices and built them into their daily work plan. Currently, three cross-departmental team members (of 20) take the lead in this area” (Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission).

“At least one staff leader with IT support is required to monitor the site and respond to inquiries and facilitate staff communication” (Gayle Brock, YMCA of the USA).

“I have one full-time staff person who is responsible for the social network. He spends approximately .5 FTE on social networking tasks. He focuses on training and support of users as well as monitoring bugs in the system. He spends time distinguishing between operator error and system bugs. He trains AHEC staff, who in turn are responsible for training YHSC members. This system breaks down when the AHEC staff person is not confident in their social networking skills. We have created training tools for AHEC staff to use with YHSC members to orient them to the social networking features of our website, but still, if the AHEC staff does not have strong motivation to use the social networking features, this trickles down to the students” (Tricia Harrity, Northwestern CT AHEC).

“There only needs to be one person doing regular posting, but it’s beneficial to have occasional staff participation. This could mean a short blog about something they were involved with at the organization, or a personal story, pictures they took at an event, and so on. It’s good to give the organization a face and show the customer not only the work you’re doing, but *who* is doing the work. It helps connect.” (Erica Ricker, Heartland).

“It’s also important that staff supports the main social media person: keeping them aware of the goings-on, providing them feedback, commenting on blogs, Facebook, retweeting (basically getting a conversation started in hopes that others will join in), and just generally providing them the information that needs to get broadcasted” (Erica Ricker, Heartland).

3. ***How do we get students to respond? How do we get students motivated to use a site or specific tools?***

“We can't assume that if you create an online community youth will be repeatedly drawn to it. The online community cannot replace the face-to-face community. Students need to be connected first before they are introduced to an online community. After that, they need to be pulled together regularly to maintain their connections” (Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission).

“The tool must be attractive, fun and developed by teens for teens” (Gayle Brock, YMCA of the USA).

“YHSC has a ‘Gear Store’ that motivates students to use the social networking features. Students accumulate “gear points” for social networking activity. They can use the gear points to purchase YHSC gear, including T-shirts, drawstring bags, and hoodies. YHSC also integrates social networking activities into the service projects. We invite students to complete their reflections on their blog page. Students are required to make friends with other YHSC members. Student use polls to gather information. Students can celebrate success by posting pictures and videos about their service” (Tricia Harrity, Northwestern CT AHEC).

“Engaging students in creating meaningful blogs is best done by asking essential questions (see *Understanding by Design* by Wiggins and McTighe). This really engages them in reflecting about what is important in the learning activity or service experience” (Joy Ferguson, TASC).

4. ***How do we monitor inappropriate photos and language? Who monitors online postings and how often?***

“This has been a huge concern of our supervisors. We do have staff that monitor all of our social networking sites each day, including weekends. But, it's not 24/7. We have not had to delete very many posts. But some. Our closed social networking site for younger youth—the moderator has to approve all posts. This is a safeguard, but sure inhibits spontaneous conversations” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“This hasn't been an issue yet. I hope that by clarifying the intent of the blog or video, students will want to present themselves well. They also know that teachers and other adults share their space. That seems to keep them in line. If not, we do have editorial control over most of these mediums. We would hate to have to use them” (Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission).

“Regional AHEC coordinators monitor their students' social networking activity. We have not had any problems with this to date. We train students at the beginning of the program on how to appropriately use social networking tools” (Tricia Harrity, Northwestern CT AHEC).

“We had a monitor check every evening to review for inappropriate comments. There were just a few that were better not published” (Joy Ferguson, TASC).

“We check Facebook, Twitter, and Launch Pad daily. It only takes a second to see who’s left a comment or who has responded to something. If something is inappropriate, it’s best to act quickly instead of waiting and doing it once a week. Usually you can adjust account settings to send an e-mail out when a new comment is received” (Erica Ricker, Heartland Foundation).

5. Which social media tools do I select or start with when there seem to be so many options?

“For adults and teens, we’ve had the best success with Facebook” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“We use Ning for lots of groups. Facebook, Blogspot, and Twitter are other tools that are easy for our folks to use” (Angelia Salas, Michigan Commission).

“It depends on what your goals are and who you’re trying to reach. Facebook is a broad tool. Pictures, blogs, and short announcements can be posted, as well as allow your customers to directly communicate with your organization. There aren’t a lot of elementary-aged students on Facebook, so if you’re trying to reach an older group, then it might be a good tool to use. (Younger students are just starting to use Facebook more, so maybe in the next few months it might be a more useful tool to reach them.)

“Based on my experience, Twitter seems like a good tool to use to communicate with other organizations and adults. Twitter isn’t something that a lot of younger students have started utilizing, but it has been gaining popularity with high school students. The most common age group for Twitter users is women in their mid-thirties.” (Erica Ricker, Heartland Foundation).

6. What were one or two of the unanticipated impacts?

“Our intention was to engage youth; the unanticipated impact was how excited adults were to share past Camp Fire experiences. And how proud alumni adults were to see stories of current youth programs.

“While some youth engaged in sharing stories and photos, they primarily wanted to share YouTube videos.

“Also, it has been *very* beneficial to have this agency sharing time! While we have learned from our council staff, and other agencies, we have learned a lot through listening to the processes others in the Web 2.0 grant have gone through to set up their programs. It has been very educational! It has helped us to better understand the barriers other organizations—and especially schools—face in using Web 2.0!” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“That the tool would be so well received that staff leaders would incorporate it into orientation trainings” (Gayle Brock, YMCA of the USA).

“Programs are now doing their own blogs. Staff are so much less intimidated by the safety issues of children on the web, which has opened the doors of social media as an arena for learning” (Joy Ferguson, TASC).

7. *What were one or two things you would never to again?*

“Youth want to share with other youth. So, the social networking sites where adults are primarily present were not as much interest to them. Sites specific to their programs were better populated” (DD Gass, Camp Fire).

“My biggest mistake in developing a social networking site had to do with me constantly building cumbersome safeguards against problems that never materialized. These cumbersome safeguards seemed prudent in the development stage. Web 2.0 is the Wild West of our society, and I wanted to make sure my network was something that was safe for students and acceptable to school systems and parents. However, these safeguards ended up serving as unnecessary barriers to student engagement. For example, I put in place two approval steps for students to log their volunteer hours on the website. I thought this made sense to protect against students logging on and ramping up their volunteer hours. What the approvals ended up doing is turning the students off from logging legitimate hours as well as getting active socially with other YHSC students” (Tricia Harrity, Northwestern CT AHEC).

“Omit incorporating a more comprehensive post-launch usage evaluation measure” (Gayle Brock, YMCA of the USA).

“Our web host changed just after our site was up, and this caused technical complications that were minor, but didn’t help us with our ‘best foot forward.’ I would have delayed the start by one month, had I known.

“Our lead support people were so concerned with access (by far our biggest challenge) that quality became second tier. We should have scheduled another training halfway through to make sure that the key ingredient to engaging children in blogging was there: the essential questions (how, why, what will help, etc.)” (Joy Ferguson, TASC).

Conclusion

“Just don’t jump on a social media site because it looks cool. Really think about your goals, your purpose, and your audience, and if that site will do for you what you want.”

- Erica Ricker, Heartland Foundation

Social media presents many exciting opportunities for community organizations to communicate and advance service-learning, even with the challenges inherent in getting started and being champions for new ways of doing business. We deeply appreciated the opportunity to be on the leading edge of this experiment, and as members of the CBO Social Media Learning Network, we positively support using this innovative technology to facilitate greater youth engagement and build a quality service-learning experience. We look forward to continue to learn from others who join this wave of innovators.