

## Service-Learning and the Use of a Mock Organization for an Undergraduate Macro Practice Social Work Course

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Macro-level practice curriculum at the BSW level prepares students for practicum in social service organizations; it is an integration of micro and mezzo level practice skills, applied to macro-level practice and prior to field-learning. One can assume that in classroom instruction, a student will learn at least as much about the helping process from the content of the lectures and readings as the practical experiences reinforced through the theoretical concepts. Inherent in social work instruction is the use of service-learning to develop theoretical and practical experiences for macro-level practice. Service learning is a beneficial instruction module that combines macro-practice instruction goals and community service to enhance both student growth and real community action goals (Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2016). However, there may be a disconnect between what students learn in practice courses (micro, mezzo, and macro) and what students are doing in the field. Moreover, research has found that service-learning is not always implemented correctly and can be confused with volunteerism (Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Preble 2014; Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe, & Song, 2016). To differentiate service-learning from volunteerism, scholars and practitioners in the area agree that there are three necessary conditions for service activities to be considered service-learning: reflection on academic performance grounded in curricular learning objectives, civic engagement, and reciprocal relationships and personal growth.

Students need an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge and case examples to macro-level practice activities. The use of a multi-system training module (i.e., service-learning) allows students to acquire experience in the development and implementation of a mock organization, and all the ups and downs that come along with this, all while benefiting an established social service organization that provides needed services to vulnerable and oppressed populations. Service-learning is a multi-system training module with an emphasis on student learning that entails civic engagement, structured reflection on the service activity (and how it relates to the theoretical course content), and reciprocal relationships between all

## Abstract

This article describes the use of service-learning -with a focus on civic engagement, academic performance, and personal growth- using a mock organization. This format of service -learning is utilized in an undergraduate macro-level practice social work course. This article describes the application of the mock organization and provides insight into several CSWE competencies that are taught throughout the semester. Additionally, this article describes the benefits and challenges to the use of a mock organization and the applicability of classroom concepts to “real-life” situations. This article also offers research, teaching, and practice implications.

participants in the experience, the student, community agency, and faculty (Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Phillips, 2011; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014). In service-learning, theory and practice include the development of the goals and objectives, a plan for the service-learning activities, and an explanation of the responsibilities and expectations of the student, faculty, agency, and department of social work.

Service-learning agencies expose students to experiences in interpersonal relationships, communication styles, organizational structures, conflict and problem-solving issues, and power/leadership hierarchy (official and unofficial). Furthermore, service-learning can be indirect or direct: indirect service-learning projects attempt to influence the institutional or community environments in which service recipients are situated, whereas direct service-learning projects have face-to-face contact with the clients or service recipients of an agency or program (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Moreover, service-learning paradigms develop along a continuum from charity to social justice (Morton, 1995, as cited in Nandan & Scott, 2011). Although indirect service-learning is thought to be passive service and an exercise in patronization, it provides experiences that students can use when working at non-profits that depend on in-kind donations and fundraising.

The purpose of this article is to describe a service-learning project that utilized a mock organization to explain and provide applicable experiences of macro social work practice in an undergraduate course. This macro-level practice course has been taught by the author for three school years, every semester. This article will delve into the process under which the mock organization is developed and maintained, the process of choosing the service-learning agency, the course requirements, challenges in the implementation of the project, as well as some insight on practice, research, and service in the use of this service-learning project and implementation of a mock organization.

## **Characteristics of the Course**

### *Concepts of Course*

This macro practice course is taught last in a three-semester sequence: Practice I (micro), Practice II (mezzo), and Practice III (macro). This course covered four Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) competencies: engage diversity and difference in practice; engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; and intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Students must not only demonstrate knowledge about the competencies, but also be given the opportunity to demonstrate the ability to perform the skills and behaviors described in these competencies (Phillips, 2011). The service-learning project, coupled with the development of a mock organization, provides this opportunity to incorporate classroom concepts with practical application.

In addition to CSWE competencies, Boyer's Model of Scholarship was applied to the development, integration, and evaluation of the course. Boyer's Model of Scholarship has four areas of scholarship: discovery, teaching, application, and integration (Boyer, 1990 as cited in Tobin, Bordonaro, & Schmidt, 2010). This course uses this model and applies it to the service-learning project through the utilization of a mock organization. Tobin and colleagues (2010) define the scholarship of discovery as

the acquisition of new forms of information through research studies. The scholarship of teaching uses this mock organization to educate future social workers through teaching and the learning process; students acquire knowledge through strategies and interventions implemented via the service-learning process and the use of parliamentary procedures to conduct the business of the mock organization. Scholarship of application seeks to address how the classroom knowledge can be applied beyond academia and integrates knowledge from the social work field to the community; this allows the students and the professor to learn from the experiences of the service-learning project and the mock organization.

### *Course Assignments and Structure*

The assignments and structure of this macro practice course can be explained through three interlocking steps (Harder and colleagues, 2007). The first step is preparation through readings and didactic teaching; the second step involves the application of the readings and teaching (e.g. the mock organization provides the students the chance to serve in leadership positions and practice the use of parliamentary procedures when conducting organizational meetings) and the third step is reflection through critical thinking and problem solving, writing papers, and group presentations on the service-learning project (Harder and colleagues, 2007).

There are essential curricular components for a macro practice course which include knowledge (general and/or specific), skills, and values. Establishing a mock organization to benefit a local social service organization can better prepare students for curricular components, field practicum, and ultimately the profession. Reflection papers (20% of grade) are used to engage students in introspection about social, cultural, and economic issues. The community meeting assignment (5% of grade) in which students attend a community meeting and write a reflection paper that compares and contrasts their mock organization with the community organization meeting they attended. Students are also required to write a theoretical paper (20% of grade) that explains their experiences with service-learning, the mock organization, and their interactions within the classroom and in the community. Near the end of the semester, students have group presentations (20% of grade) that address the goals, objectives, and how they were accomplished for all committees and the executive board. In the papers and group presentations, students discuss their “glows and grows” about the service-learning project, applicable theoretical concepts presented in the course, and how they relate to CSWE competencies and their experiences. Throughout the semester, students also have three quizzes (30% of grade), as well as a policy advocacy project in which they contact a local, state, or governmental official and advocate for a policy on behalf of a vulnerable and/or oppressed group.

### **Development of Mock Organization**

A mock organization is developed to conduct the business of the service-learning project for the macro practice course. The mock organization members are comprised of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO-professor of record), an executive board consisting of a president, vice-president, secretary, and financial secretary, and committee chairs for fundraising, collections and distribution, social media and advertising, and activities. Students in non-leadership positions volunteer for membership on the four committees

(although some may need to be assigned due to the need to keep the committees' membership numbers somewhat equal in size). This mock organization is an advocacy group that conducts indirect and direct service-learning activities at a local social service agency. However, during the pandemic, students only conducted indirect service-learning activities.

This mock organization developed a plan for division of labor in which they chose leadership and role responsibilities and assigned duties accordingly (while the professor provides teachable moments and connects the theoretical concepts to the practical application). These learning experiences address administrative and staff behaviors in social service agencies that reflect, explicitly or implicitly, theory about what their organization is and how it should be run. The professor and agency representative identify the important concepts, goals, and objectives of this service-learning project (i.e., current needs, activities needed to achieve these needs, and responsibilities of all involved); the agency representative may have their own philosophies and methods out of experience and necessity. The content and teaching should vary based on the goals and objectives set by the mock organization and be flexible for the best use of knowledge, skills, and experiences. This experience provides an opportunity to offer students a blending of classroom theory and practice.

The development of the mock organization also entailed students nominating their fellow classmates for leadership roles (after which, that student may accept or respectfully decline); also, a student may self-nominate. Students that do not serve in leadership positions serve on one of the four committees based on their interests (however, some base their choice on established relationships with their fellow cohorts). There is a division of responsibility explained at the time of voting, as well as through course concepts. Committees for the mock organization are set by the professor and each committee has two co-chairs; these committees cover fundraising, collections and distribution of solicited goods for the service-learning agency, advertising for the committee's activities, and an activities committee which handles the direct service-learning project with the participants in the social service agency. However, during the pandemic, and the need/requirement for indirect service-learning, students in the collection and distribution committee voted to rebrand this committee (Distribution and Outreach) and developed new goals and objectives based on the university COVID-19 restrictions imposed for all classes and/or student organizations.

The Fundraising committee coordinates fundraising activities based on the monetary goal set during initial voting processes. Throughout the many semesters of teaching this course, this committee has held fundraising events at local eateries to raise monetary funds for the social service agency chosen. The Collections and Distributions committee organize solicitation of needed goods the service-learning organization requests, as well as delivery of the goods to the agency. This committee often holds solicitation events at local grocery stores, or stores that sell the items needed by the service-learning agency and ask patrons to purchase items to benefit the service-learning agency (this provides students the opportunity to practice their "elevator speech"). The Advertising committee establishes a presence on and off campus, and online via social media. The Activities committee is responsible for the direct service-learning project at the end of the year as the mock organization celebrates the collaboration with the service-learning agency.

Students vote on the service-learning agency for the semester-long project. The CEO, president, vice-president and/or secretary meet with the agency representative to develop goals and objectives for the semester-long service-learning project. Throughout the semesters teaching this course, cohorts have chosen service-learning agencies such as child and adolescent group home facilities (some with religious affiliations and some without), teenage pregnancy and parenting program within a local school district, and an organization that educates the public on sexual abuse and sexual trafficking. During the pandemic, students worked with an agency that provides women who are incarcerated family connectedness with their children through literacy.

The course is structured as a weekly two-hour and fifty-minute meeting which includes lecture and conducting organizational and committee meetings for the mock organization. These weekly meetings are led by the president (as the CEO supervises) and business is conducted using parliamentary procedures. The meeting follows an agenda, developed by the president, and provides minutes from the previous meeting, taken by the secretary. An agenda may include the following: the entire class convenes as an organization to address old and new business and vote accordingly, then a break for committee meetings; afterwards, the entire organization reconvenes, and committee chairs update the entire organization on their tasks and presents motions for votes. During the committee meetings, the president and vice-president meet with all committee chairs to discuss progress and/or setbacks. Also, during these committee meetings and outside of class time, the students plan events to raise funds, collect donations, and raise awareness for the service-learning organization. Throughout the semester, each committee is required to hold events that will benefit the service-learning organization. Students are required to attend at least two events throughout the semester, one of these must be sponsored by their committee.

The expectation is that every social work student should gain some understanding and application of administrative processes and ethical practice, and this will vary in relation to their work responsibilities within the mock organization as well as their interactions with the service-learning agency. The activities in this course, theoretical and practical, provide insight into the structure of social service organizations and how this structure influences the service delivery, while attempting to keep the client and agency goals as a priority and identifying the theoretical concepts inherent in the practical experience. This experience is essential to the development of leaders in social service organizations as it moves from knowing to understanding classroom knowledge through practical experiences.

### **Insights into the Use of a Mock Organization**

There are essential aspects of service-learning projects that have become evident while teaching macro-practice social work. Previous research found that academic performance, civic engagement, and personal growth were integral themes when researching service-learning in social work (Phillips, 2011; Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2016). Also, the structured reflections used in this course are valuable as it promotes personal understanding through intentional thinking and self-analysis about one's *academic performance* in the service-learning experience (Sanders et al., 2016).

*Academic Performance* was categorized as the theoretical concepts and the application of these concepts, explained through lecture and course assignments that contributed to learning macro practice skills. One assignment that students found beneficial was reflection papers. This assignment asked students to reflect on the mock organizations' weekly meetings, the progress of their committee, and provide insight into how the lecture was connecting to their assigned tasks in the mock organization. One student stated that "...they allow for introspection and retrospection on the service-learning project". Furthermore, Sanders and colleagues (2016) found that students that wrote reflection papers significantly increased their personal growth. Some of the issues often addressed in the reflection papers were leadership and stepping outside of ones' comfort-zone.

*Civic Engagement* is another essential part of service-learning, and necessary for understanding the processes of macro practice social work, including an understanding of the administrative and practice behaviors (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Civic engagement is characterized as service experience designed to address real community problems and develop skills that promote the quality of life in a community and work to make a difference in the community through different social justice activities (Phillips, 2011). Civic engagement in the mock organization entailed organizing, attending activist meetings, volunteering, tabling and signing a petition, voting, and overall activities that help others thrive in their community (Richard-Schuster, Espita, & Rodems, 2019).

Students participated in several civic engagement activities while functioning as a mock organization. The different service-learning agencies that this course collaborated with were affiliated with the Department of Social Work; some social work majors are placed in these organizations for their field practicum. One student reported the structure of the mock organization provided a framework for students to understand how real organizations work. "The [mock] organization...helped me become passionate about a subject and guided me to help make a change within our community...working in committees and an organization to benefit vulnerable and oppressed populations". This work occurred through fundraising skills and community awareness activities, i.e., profit sharing with local businesses, monetary donations collected, physical donations collected for the service-learning agency, and advocacy and information-sharing for community members about the service-learning agency. During the pandemic, students' civic engagement activities were limited to online fundraising and awareness, which provided insight into tele-health and how to conduct meetings online while maintaining the professional standards that social work requires. These types of activities address real community problems, develop skills and awareness of the business aspect of social service agencies, and leads to personal growth.

*Personal Growth* can be described as experiences that contribute to the students theoretical and practical learning processes throughout the semester; personal growth can be measured through achievement in academic performance and civic engagement. Joon Lee, Wilder, and Yu (2018) found that the service-learning project helped students learn the course material, feel more connected to the surrounding community, and improve their communication and problem-solving skills for their future careers. Students stated that this service-learning project helped them "think outside the box" and provided them with a "hands on experience". Some of the phrases used by students to describe personal growth were the use of patience, active listening, conflict

resolution, communication skills, reciprocal relationships, and interpersonal leadership skills. One student stated that this experience "...helped me become more passionate about a subject and guided me to help make a change within our community". Other students stated that "I got a lot of experience and understanding on what it is like to be part of an organization that is working to serve, and all the good and bad things that come along with it"; and "...there were many 'a-ha' moments about the semester and information started to click". This service-learning project provided the opportunity for the application of many theoretical concepts presented across the social work curriculum (i.e. policy, human behavior, practice, ethics, etcetera).

### **Challenges to Goal Attainment**

There were challenges to goal attainment throughout the semesters this course was taught utilizing the mock organization. Joon Lee and colleagues (2018) found that time and logistical issues often hindered goal attainment. Schelbe, Petracchi, and Weaver (2014) found that arranging and coordinating service-learning activities was a challenge, as well as transportation to these activities. A suggestion was to develop more indirect service-learning activities, so students had more opportunities to participate. Additionally, time was also found to be a challenge for faculty as well. The amount of work required to organize service-learning activities is an enormous demand yet goes unrecognized by administration and may be counterproductive to being retained and promoted (Schelbe et al., 2014; Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Preble, 2014).

Each of the cohorts faced unique learning experiences and challenges based on the service-learning agency they chose that semester. One student stated in their teaching evaluations, "The class encountered real barriers to their actions despite all that they wanted to help with". Students expressed shock/disbelief that although they wanted to help, at times unofficial and/or official policies made goal attainment difficult. For example, in one of the cohorts, students coordinated a profit-share with a local eatery and advertised the upcoming event on social media as a *Dia de los Muertos* event. A complaint about cultural appropriation was made against our mock organization via our Facebook page. The students discussed the issue, and some were shocked as approximately 30% of the class identified as LatinX, and approximately 50% of clients from the service-learning agency identified as LatinX. The students ultimately decided to change the name of the event to the Harvest Festival and change the advertising materials to reflect the feedback received. This was appreciated by the complainant, and they later shared the event on their social media page (political advocacy for Latinas in the area). This experience provided students the opportunity to understand cultural appropriation, as well as which battles should be fought and when to compromise.

Another realization was students being ever-cognizant of their conduct and how they represented themselves and the cohort, the social work department, as well as the service-learning agency. Student participants also mentioned the challenge of ethical boundaries when working with religious-based organizations. Some profit-sharing events were held at local businesses that sold alcohol. The students realized that they had to communicate all their intentions when representing the service-learning organization and/or using their name for advocacy and fundraising as it may be contrary to their mission and belief statement.

An additional challenge to achieving the goal of the mock organizations throughout the semesters was the complaint that some students did not do their fair share of the work. Students often explained their lack of participation was a result of time and logistical challenges. For example, some stated that the committee voted to conduct an activity on a day that they did not vote on and they were not available; they have a “life outside of class” and cannot devote a lot of time outside of class to the service-learning project. Moreover, it was found that students, especially those with full-time jobs and families, found it difficult to balance their service-learning activities with other courses and requirements, and found the required hours for service-learning overwhelming. The connection between course requirements and service-learning activities, and how they relate to students’ future roles in the social work field is expressed, explaining the importance of a healthy work-life balance.

Leadership issues were another challenge within the mock organization and sometimes stemmed from having to supervise one’s friend/cohort. One student stated in their teaching evaluation that “Keeping track of my tasks and everyone else’s in my committee was [a] realization that it is more than a title.” It is interesting to see who is voted into leadership positions amongst their peers; popularity amongst cohorts may play a role in leadership choices, regardless of competency. In one cohort, a student had to be removed from their leadership position due to complaints of a lack of work from their co-chair and committee members. As in many organizations, one may experience conflict with a colleague, and students will experience conflict with their fellow cohorts. Students were encouraged to address the issues they had with their fellow cohorts or their committee chairs and use the professor as a mediator, but as a last resort. Students ultimately made the connection to real-life experiences of those that work in social service organizations (i.e., some people do more work than others, especially in groups).

Another challenge to implementing this service-learning activity revealed in the data was banking. Although collection of physical donations for the service-learning organization could be achieved without the use of a bank account, and profit-sharing events produced checks written directly to the service-learning organization; however, collection of monetary donations presented unique challenges. Some of the cohorts used an online donation application each semester (GoFundMe or Venmo) to achieve the goal of the mock organization; yet, this app had to be connected to a bank account. The use of an individual’s personal bank account was not feasible, yet the professor of record was the faculty advisor of the social work student association (SWSA), so their bank account was used for online donations. The final challenge with a service-learning project like this was the pandemic, and the restrictions placed upon direct service-learning (i.e., social distancing and the need to keep students safe). These restrictions limited the types of fundraising and solicitation events for physical donations that could be conducted, which ultimately affected the amount of monetary and physical donations collected for the service-learning agency. During one of the semesters with pandemic restrictions, students solicited physical donations through Amazon Wishlist, which shipped all donations to the service-learning agency directly.

## Implications

Macro practice coursework should be a culmination of all social work courses (i.e., human behavior, policy, ethics, diversity, and micro and mezzo practice). The knowledge provided in these courses is ultimately applied in the macro practice course. Students should begin to have make the connection between theoretical concepts and practice experiences with the use of a service-learning project that incorporates the use of a mock organization. These connections manifest as academic performance, civic engagement, and personal growth.

### *Teaching and Practice Implications*

Teaching and learning are major implications for the use of a mock organization in a macro practice social work course. Boyer's model of scholarship of teaching and learning describes four components: discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Kern, Mettetal, Dixson, & Morgan, 2015). This model suggests that teaching, service, and research are intertwined; teaching can inform research and/or service and vice-versa. However, as previously mentioned, the amount of work required to organize service-learning activities like this one is an enormous demand for faculty teaching this course, and this work may go unrecognized by administration and may be counterproductive to being retained and promoted (Schelbe et al., 2014; Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Preble, 2014).

Practice implications mainly stem from suggestions to improve the course, and by this means serves the community more effectively and efficiently. Some students believed that it might be beneficial for the mock organization to meet with the participants of the service-learning organization at the beginning of the semester; all the cohorts conducted their direct service-learning activity at the end of the semester (with the exception of the cohorts that were affected by the pandemic and university regulations/restrictions). Meeting earlier in the semester will allow students to meet or form a relationship with their service-learning agency. Other suggestions entail student accountability and evaluation; some students will always do more work than others in group situations. Also, some students chose a committee based on friendships versus where they could contribute most. To alleviate these problems, students suggested assigning individuals to committees, and utilizing peer evaluations.

### *Program Evaluation Implications*

Service-learning for macro practice social work is an approach in need of continued evaluation research to inform teaching, research, and practice. The use of a mock organization to conduct the business of the service-learning project is an innovative idea. The evaluation study design for this type of project should include certain variables such as demographics (and student and professor characteristics), and the amount of individual time spent on academic activities (including lecture) vs time spent on planning and implementing service-learning activities through the mock organization. Additional variables should entail data about the course format and how the mock organization will be developed, criteria for selecting the service-learning agency, methods to supervise students, assignments used for reflection, how service-learning is integrated into the course objectives (CSWE competencies), information about the service-learning activities, and direct vs. indirect interaction with clients.

Evaluation research must also consider if data collection should happen at two separate time points within the same semester (repeated measures) or at one point in time in the semester. Repeated measures can demonstrate student growth, whereas one data collection over similar cohorts provides more participants and data to analyze. Future research would benefit from a more rigorous evaluation strategy, such as a mixed-methods design including thematic analysis and repeated measures analysis of variance, coupled with a focus group for students as well as service-learning organization staff.

### *Conclusion*

Service-learning projects, coupled with the development of mock organizations, were valuable for students' attainment of academic and practical knowledge. Traditional service learning provides a continuum for learning: learning to serve and serving to learn (McKay & Johnson, 2010). However, traditional service-learning may lead to students placing themselves in positions of doing charity work, which may reinforce the savior mentality (Andrews & Leonard, 2018). Critical service-learning is social change that redistributes power and engages the community to help themselves, whereas traditional service-learning does not. Andrews and Leonard (2018) focused on bridging the gap between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning with an explicit focus on justice and equity, situating scholars' work with the community rather than for it. Involving the service-learning agencies' clients provide a better opportunity for participation in social change and the development of authentic relationships between the clients and the university.

The implementation of a mock organization provides opportunities for learning about the business aspect of social service organizations while conducting a service-learning project, and students make connections between their community experiences and the course content (Phillips, 2011; Cronley et al., 2014; Joon Lee et al., 2018). However, with gains there may be risks. There is a risk of losing the focus of service-learning (civic engagement) and focusing on learning competency-based practice behaviors instead of focusing on practice behaviors and community engagement. This risk could be addressed by using critical service-learning versus traditional service-learning. Overall, a service-learning project should address the most important current social problems that go beyond training for competency-based practice but prepare students for the development of their communities through empowerment and the development of authentic relationships.

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