

“Learning by Doing” in a Graduate Course in Human Development and Family Studies: Service Learning Utilizing an Evaluation Project

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The purpose of this paper is to share our experiences involving a creative approach to service learning that was implemented in a Human Development and Family Studies graduate course. In our departmental pursuit of evolving scholarship and promoting scholarly teaching and learning (Kopera-Frye, Hilton, & Cavote, 2003), this course represents an example of how one can promote higher-level learning among our future professionals. This service learning approach utilized in this particular course focuses on needs assessment and program evaluation, a direction not usually found in typical service learning projects that involve a social volunteerism approach. By discussing the theoretical basis for the project, course format, and providing some qualitative/evaluative data, we will contribute to the knowledge base on innovative ways to promote scholarly learning. Challenges and issues that need to be anticipated before designing this type of service learning experience will be highlighted.

What is Service Learning?

History of Service Learning

As early as 1902, John Dewey spoke to the National Council of Education and proposed that educational institutions broaden their roles to include community-building, an approach termed “education in the community” (Dewey, 1902). In his speech entitled, “The school as a social cen-

ter,” he suggests that the resources of the school be paired with the place of community as a source of citizenship education and community growth. Dewey’s approach called for teaching students to be democratic, participatory, and interactive, forming the foundation for approaches such as service learning. This idea of learning beyond the walls of the classroom received further attention during the

1960s as various governmental, educational, and agency sponsored activities were developed for students, including service learning (e.g., internships with Congress, or agencies). In the mid-1980s and 1990s, national groups such as the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) and Campus Compact launched service learning initiatives (e.g., AAHE's Service Learning Project) in institutions of higher education, thus promoting service learning across many institutions (AAHE, 2000; Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999; Kellogg Commission, 1999). Between 1985 and 2004, Campus Compact, a leading training organization for service learning in the U.S., served 960 public and private two- and four-year colleges and universities and currently has 30 state-based campus offices. Evidence that service learning is an invaluable, growth-promoting experience for students has clearly emerged from the movement to support it as a powerful pedagogical tool. Service learning has been defined as a "structured learning experience that combines community service with preparation and reflection" (Connors, & Seifer, 1997, p. 9). Further, Zlotkowski (2001), who has written extensively on the service learning approach, adds that the linkage of student learning with off-campus experiences naturally draws upon socially complex learning environments. The most direct benefit of this approach is that service learning allows the students to apply classroom information, concepts and content to "real world" situations, provides a reflective opportunity for the students, demonstrates caring for others and a strong sense of community, and identifies and meets community needs (Callister & Hobbins-Garbett, 2000; Connors & Seifer, 1997; Solomon Cohen & Milone-Nuzzo, 2001; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001).

A further element of the service learning experience is that a structured assignment requires students to reflect (e.g., in a journal) or produce a product involving their experiences (e.g., a presentation or needs assessment). This contextual-based learning requires the student to reflect, and learn about, the larger political, economic, social, and cultural forces that shape the activities or services provided by the community agencies in addition

to examining the human interactions within these contexts. With this approach, the faculty member becomes more of a facilitator than an informant (Connors & Seifer, 1997). As a facilitator, the instructor can aid the student in creating a useful experience, thinking creatively about how to serve the agency, while learning/exploring an area that the student wants to learn more about; all requiring the instructor to be flexible and adaptable to new pedagogical techniques. Service learning projects can involve a variety of community sites (e.g., courts, religious organizations, county programs) and may include activities such as volunteerism, internships, and field experiences. However, these projects are distinguished from volunteerism in that the experience is connected to classroom learning and course requirements, and it is distinguished from field placements and internships in that it involves students in social problems and addressing unmet community needs (Connors & Seifer, 1997; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 1999).

Effects of Service Learning

In a report documenting the effects of service learning on college students and faculty from 1993 to 2000, researchers (Eyler et al., 2001) found the following benefits for students: a) personal outcomes for students – enhanced personal identity and growth, learned leadership, and communication skills; b) social outcomes – positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating racial and cultural understanding, increased sense of social responsibility, and commitment to service; c) learning outcomes – academic learning, application of classroom information to the "real world," and critical thinking and problem solving increased; and d) career development – the sites often employed students post-graduation. The report also details the benefits to faculty (e.g., increased satisfaction with student learning), costs (e.g., no faculty rewards to do service learning), and impacts, both positive (e.g., positive effects on student retention) and negative (e.g., lack of faculty rewards), on the institution and community agency (e.g., useful service provided to agencies).

Our Human Development and Family Studies Department and Course

The University of Nevada-Reno (UNR) is a land-grant institution with a Fall 2005 graduate and undergraduate student enrolment of 16,336. Based on the Fall 06-Spring 07 academic year data, the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) department has seven teaching faculty, approximately 19 graduate majors, 155 undergraduate majors, and 64 minors. Students may choose from three areas of concentration: child and adolescent development, family studies, and adult development and aging. The mission of the HDFS Masters program is to produce graduates who have appropriate information and skills for understanding and working with diverse individuals and families and a background in theory and research methodologies essential for pursuit of further graduate education. Courses, practicum, and internship experiences provide students with knowledge and skills to: 1) work in positions that improve the lives of individuals, families, and their communities; 2) critically evaluate and contribute to the improvement of theory, research, and practice in the field; 3) utilize an accurate understanding of the interaction of the bio-psycho-social elements of human development, with in-depth expertise in at least one developmental stage; and 4) integrate information on the processes of diverse family systems with current issues and conditions affecting families.

Three of our teaching faculty also belong to a PhD Interdisciplinary Social Psychology program, with one faculty member serving as the director. The Interdisciplinary Social Psychology program currently has 34 PhD candidates, and many of these students take our HDFS graduate level courses; the course, which is the focus of this paper, was comprised mostly of doctoral students enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Social Psychology program.

The service learning course

The course, entitled "Program Development and Evaluation," meets for one 15-week semester. Top-

ics covered in this course via lectures and readings include: program design, needs assessment, types of program evaluation, goal attainment scaling, client satisfaction, qualitative and quantitative methodology, data collection and sampling, multi-method approaches, selecting data collection tools, making sense of evaluation data, dealing with politics and ethics, cost-benefit analysis, and writing effective reports. The instructor provides a foundation for designing a needs assessment and evaluation during the first three weeks of the semester. Concurrently, the students are told to partner with a site in the community, determine how they can provide a service to this site in the form of a needs assessment and multi-year evaluation plan targeting one of the sites' programs, journal and log their reflections/observations at the site (average time spent at each site is 5 hours per week), attend class weekly, and then prepare a written proposal for the needs assessment and evaluation of a program by the sixth week of instruction. This proposal is a collaborative arrangement between the student and the community site, and has to be a realistic assessment as well as provide a plan which will be implemented in the site's program. Part I of the evaluation plan is a complete description of the site, program, and stakeholders, etc. Included in this initial part of the plan are the following: relevant literature pertaining to the assessment and plan, conceptual framework guiding the program, overview of the program's purposes, characteristics of the program's participants, complete description of each session or program activity. Part II of the evaluation plan contains the following elements: an abstract, program definition/description, identification of the targeted subcomponent of the program, stakeholders, an ecomap of the program that describes relationships utilizing systems theory, activities, evaluation questions, evaluation design, sample description, methodology for evaluation, instrumentation, data analysis, cost-benefit analysis, management plan, and timeline for the evaluation. This portion of the plan is due by week 12 of the course and a formal presentation is made to the class so that they can critique each others' plans. Feedback is given to each student and then the student modifies the plan and presents it to the community site by the end of the semester. The

needs assessment and evaluation project is one-third of the course grade, with essay exams, article summaries and critiques, and participation comprising the remaining two-thirds of their grade.

Evaluation of the project

From the instructor's point of view, the service learning project proved to be an extremely valuable pedagogical tool. Students indicated via self-learning reflection rating sheets that they wanted to further pursue the notion of becoming consultants in program design and evaluation as a career upon graduation. They prepared extraordinarily creative, yet realistic evaluation plans that were "doable" within the community agencies. Several students indicated that they were in charge of actually implementing the plan at the site and would be conducting the evaluation long after the class had ended.

It was refreshing to see the students "feel and do" program evaluation as opposed to just reading about it without having the opportunity to apply their knowledge. While most service learning projects typically involve providing some social *activity* to the site participants (e.g., assisting with a senior hot lunch program and relating their observations to course readings), this particular service learning project was far more intense and required much stronger application of knowledge (e.g., designing an actual program evaluation for the agency that could be implemented to improve the program). Students were able to deliver a *product* based on active observation. The project also nicely aligns with the HDFS Department's mission and program assessment learning outcomes.

An evaluation form was given when they turned in their final products which queried how valuable, worthwhile, and pleasant this SL project was in addition to an open space where they could write-in any other comments. On their evaluation sheets, all agreed that it was only when mapping their evaluation and starting the implementation, that they understood the various nuances, mechanisms, and politics of doing program evaluation. Students said that they now clearly understood the contextual and social problems (e.g., soft funding and unpredictable monies for program continuation) facing commu-

nity agencies. The knowledge learned in class came "alive" in the community, as one student described it. This knowledge could not be taught to them in any deep, meaningful way in a classroom lecture. All students were very excited about the work they were doing and their evaluations of the course were overwhelmingly positive. Although it is conceivable that some students might not be comfortable with being so intensely involved in community programming, this was not the case with any of the graduate students in this particular course. From the service recipient standpoint (i.e., community site), all agencies agreed that they would want to work with students when this course was offered again. Site personnel reported that some of the evaluation plans created by students were better than they had seen offered by independent consultants. Furthermore, they reported that they had learned more about the how and why of conducting an evaluation from mentoring the students. The fact that the agencies invited the students (in all cases) to continue to work with them after the class had ended is indicative of their enthusiasm for the service learning experience.

Challenges to utilizing service learning

The service learning approach can be a positive experience for faculty, students, and community partners alike. However, implementing this approach is not without its concomitant challenges, including: 1) the time needed to monitor service learning versus the standard lecture; 2) the typical lack of reward given to faculty for undertaking intensive teaching experiences; 3) fitting the experience into a single semester, if that is the constraint imposed on the course; 4) limited institutional support for faculty who want to do something innovative instead of traditional (e.g., standard lectures); and 5) negotiation of the politics between the institution and the community sites. Student challenges, which have been identified in the literature (Eyler et al., 2001), include: 1) being insufficiently prepared with information in the classroom to support the field project; 2) feeling uncomfortable in some community settings; 3) limited timing for the project to be completed by students (one semester versus multiple semesters); 4) intra-group conflict between students, which is typical in some

service learning projects; and 5) feeling powerless in negotiating the politics of the community agency.

Issues for the community service recipients that have been identified in the literature include: 1) the timeline of student experience is not compatible with organizational goals and tasks; 2) discomfort in reporting problems with students to the instructors; 3) providing valuable experiences for students is difficult when a community site is unprepared; and 4) little control of how the service learning experience is carried out, because the instructor and the institution are perceived as being in charge. The point in acknowledging the challenges is that an instructor needs to think about these issues and develop strategies to solve them before the experience is designed. For an excellent review of the issues involved in service learning, see Eyler et al. (2001). These researchers provide a comprehensive report summarizing national data on the effects of service learning across projects that were conducted between 1993 and 2000.

We have provided a model of service learning that departs from typical service learning activities by including a much more intense, real-world evaluation project, with a product-focus, as part of a graduate course in HDFS. While the literature documents the benefits of any type of service learning experience, this course offers product-based strategies that could be adapted for use with many other courses. The full power of the “learning by doing” method resulting in scholarly learning was realized when the graduate students were held accountable for producing a realistic evaluation plan that could be implemented as part of a targeted program within a community agency. We believe that pedagogical techniques, such as the product-based service learning project that we have described, are essential in the training of future professionals. This is the ultimate goal of many programs and institutions – producing competent, well-rounded, professionals who have a sense of commitment to society.

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