

Service Learning Develops Teaching Dispositions

Nancy B. Ruppert

Abstract

This study was performed to determine if a first-year experience course with a service-learning component could help students achieve teaching dispositions and make freshmen more satisfied with their college experience. "Teaching dispositions" are the set of desirable habits and ways of thinking and acting necessary for successful teachers. Students participated in a first year experience course titled "What Is Teaching?" In the service-learning component of this one-semester course, students tutored ESL (English as a Second Language) children once a week at a nearby elementary school. Each week the freshmen handed in a short report about their experiences in and reaction to the course. This article provides an overview of the project; describes the views of the first-year experience students over time that relate to teaching dispositions; and outlines what students believe they learned by participating. This project supports research and outcomes related to teaching dispositions and the impact of service-learning on those dispositions.

Background on First-Year Experience Course and Teaching Dispositions

Freshmen at University of North Carolina–Asheville (UNCA) participated in a first-year experience course in fall 2003. The course—"What Is Teaching?"—was designed to include service-learning, with two primary goals: to enhance students' understanding of teaching dispositions, and to connect students with one another and the community. The course was designed by the university professor in collaboration with the ESL teacher and the media coordinator at the elementary school. Each week, the students and the leaders of the project met to discuss the ESL children, the project, and how the freshman participants were adjusting to their first year of college. The results of this study suggest that using a service-learning experience that takes place over time in a first-year experience course could help future teachers achieve teaching dispositions and might make it easier for freshmen to adjust to college life.

Colleges and universities throughout the United States have offered first-year experience courses for more than twenty years (Frankle and Ajanaku 2002). According to The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, more than 740 colleges and universities offered freshmen some type of seminar or course that focused on helping students make the transition to college (Cox 2003). At UNCA, "the First-Year Experience program [was] specifically designed for first-year students and supported the university mission of providing the best possible opportunity to acquire the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to pursue educational and professional goals" (UNCA catalogue 2003–2004). In this study, freshmen had the option of participating in the first-year experience course.

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Research suggests that compared with students who did not take first-year courses, those who did participate in them were more likely to stay in school, had higher grade point averages, were more likely to finish their degree at the institution where they took the course, and were more satisfied with the college experience (Koch 2001; Cox 2003; Starke, Harth, and Siriann 2001). Research also suggests that because students communicate with professors during first-year experience courses, which involves feelings of being included and accepted, such courses may have an effect on how well students

adjust to college life (Barefoot 2000; Crawford and Thomas-Maddox 2000; Goodell and Agelidis 2000). In addition, when a service project was a component of a first-year experience course, students who participated in the course indicated increased satisfaction with college (Howell et al. 2002; Zlotkowski 2002). Of the 740 colleges that had first-year experience courses in the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition study, only 24.7 percent of the schools offered service-learning as a component of the first-year experience course (Cox 2003).

Service-learning was not required for the first-year experience courses at UNCA, but it was encouraged. The UNCA Key Center for Service-Learning supports faculty members in designing and

maintaining service-learning projects. The focus of the center is to help "UNCA students and professors find meaningful projects ranging from a few hours in length, to short-term projects lasting a few days or weeks, to long-term internships with local service organizations and schools" (Key Center). The center's Web site further notes that nationally and locally, service-learning is becoming a way to help students "reflect on what they learn through service, and to draw connections between what they learn in the community and what they learn in the classroom." This project used service-learning as a major component of the class and addressed dispositions as defined by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), (NCATE 2004).

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education gave specifications for institutions to address dispositions (2004). Teaching dispositions as described by NCATE (2004) are "The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice" (NCATE Glossary). In view of this description, the project was designed to provide evidence that dispositions could be addressed, identified, and developed using a service-learning experience.

Dispositions have been characterized in research as affecting student learning, as useful in developing learning communities in the classroom, and as a powerful tool for managing and working with children (Collinson, Killeavy, and Stephenson 1999; Ruppert 2003; Taylor and Wasicsko 2000). A comparative study of exemplary teachers suggests that the dispositions of getting to know students, showing respect for them, and caring about them contribute to their learning (Collinson, Killeavy, and Stephenson 1999). Administrators also reveal that dispositions are as important as knowledge and skills in being a successful teacher (Ruppert 2003). Each of these studies suggests that dispositions could be identified and described by observing prospective teachers in action.

Because of NCATE, evaluating students' dispositions was a focus for colleges and universities (NCATE 2004). At UNCA, the education faculty developed a "dispositions checklist" that includes twelve standards to ascertain students' knowledge, professionalism, and inquiry. The dispositions were developed using the NCATE definition and by examining the approaches that other colleges

and universities take to identify them. This study attempts to make a connection between student learning and the development of teaching dispositions by using a service-learning component.

What Is Teaching?: A First-Year Experience Course

The first-year experience course "What Is Teaching?" was offered to nineteen freshmen in the fall of 2003 at UNC-Asheville. One goal of the first-year experience was to introduce freshmen to teaching dispositions by having them work with ESL children. A second goal was to help the freshmen adjust to college life. The course met two days a week.

Students worked with third, fourth, or fifth grade ESL students at a local elementary school every Tuesday as a service-learning experience throughout the semester. Each student chose a forty-five minutes time block during the children's regularly scheduled ESL class time. Lessons were designed by the ESL teacher, and she and the college professor worked alongside the students and the children every week. After each class, the UNCA students (called Bulldog Buddies) reflected on what they had done and what they had learned in order to document the experience.

The Bulldog Buddies helped the children create banners for the media center. The ESL teacher and media specialist had completed eight banners, reflecting eight of the seventeen different countries represented at the elementary school in 2000. Each banner displayed four to six symbols that represented different aspects of the country as well as the name of the country. In addition, the national flag of the country hung next to each banner. When the faculty member from UNCA approached the ESL teacher to participate in the service-learning experience, the ESL teacher asked if the UNCA students could work with the media specialist and her students as Bulldog Buddies to complete the collection of banners. The project chosen was to create the additional nine banners so that all seventeen countries represented at the elementary school would be on display in the media center.

Every Tuesday, the ESL teacher created lesson plans for the students, and the faculty member and the media specialist participated in each of the three grade-level groups throughout the day. The goals of the banner project were to help children understand and experience other cultures, to help children improve their language arts skills by integrating social studies and technology skills, to encourage children to use the media center books and the Internet, and to teach the children to use Kidspiration visual

learning software and PowerPoint. The project involved helping the children use resources in the media center to research the different countries. Children drew pictures of symbols that they selected to represent the different countries. They wrote sentences to describe the significance of the symbols on the banners in the library and described the symbols they drew for the new banners they were creating. They decorated the banners with felt representations of their symbols, and they created PowerPoint presentations on all the different nationalities. Over the course of the semester, the children, with the help of their Bulldog Buddies, the two teachers, and the media specialist, created the nine country banners along with PowerPoint displays of the symbols the children chose and drew. The media specialist used the Student treasures program to create a book of the country banners.

Two events marked the completion of the project. The Bulldog Buddies hosted a luncheon at the university to celebrate the end of the semester. At the celebration, each child was given a copy of the book he or she had helped create and an inflatable globe. In the spring, the banners were displayed in the media center and the PowerPoint slides were available for viewing at an evening program. On the night of that celebration, the children presented a skit to the parents, teachers,

and Bulldog Buddies, which told the story of how the banners came about. The children showed their PowerPoint presentations to the school community, and parents brought foods from their region to share. Both events honored the work of the children.

Each Thursday during the semester, the freshmen participants met at the university and began by responding to questions about how well they were doing in college. Students rated their week on a scale of one to five. A rating of one (1) indicated that they were ready to pack their bags and go home, and a five (5) indicated that they could "write the book" on being a happy freshman at UNCA. This opening activity allowed the university professor to gauge her topics of discussion about the needs of the group (health issues, roommate problems, study skills, wellness). In addition to the opening activity, students participated in discussions about

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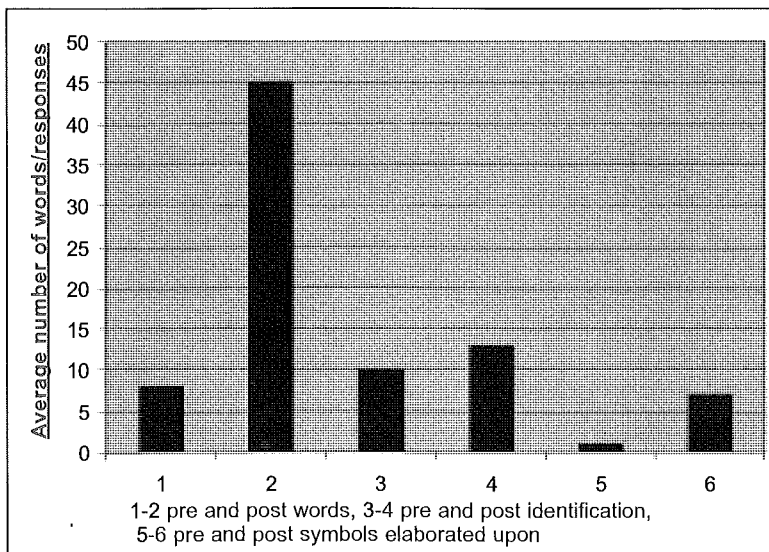
books on teaching that they had been asked to read. They also studied various topics associated with teaching and participated in classroom discussions with the instructor and with one another to explore topics such as what motivates children, constructivism, at-risk children, and multiculturalism.

The university classroom experiences focused on research, speaking, and writing. The service-learning project focused on helping the ESL children develop their literacy skills, while the freshmen participants learned about the meaning and importance of teaching dispositions. Data were collected throughout the experience to illustrate the impact of the project.

Data from the Experience

Three forms of data were collected during the semester. At the beginning and end of the project, the ESL children were given a test made up of eighteen symbols (pictures) from the eight banners that hung in the media center. Symbols included pictures of animals, land features, and other images that represented the different countries. The UNCA buddies recorded the children's responses. From the responses, the researcher and the ESL teacher determined the number of symbols identified, the number of words used to identify each of the symbols, and the number of symbols that the children elaborated on (i.e., for which they used

Graph 1: Average differences in pre and post tests



more than one word). The pre- and post-project tests not only revealed that the children increased their abilities to recognize the different symbols, but also showed that the number of words they used to describe the symbols increased (Graph 1).

When asked to identify and describe what they knew about the eighteen symbols, the children gave an average of eight words in the pre-test and an average of forty-five words in the posttest. On average, the children were able to identify ten of the symbols on the pretest and thirteen symbols on the post-test. On average, children were able to elaborate on one of the symbols on the pretest and at least seven of the symbols on the posttest. These data suggest that children increased their vocabulary fivefold over the course of the semester.

Two other forms of data were collected from the UNCA freshmen participating in the course. The second set of data revealed the dispositions expressed in the students' reflections and the most profound learning that they experienced. Each week, university students wrote down their reflections on the service-learning experience. At the end of the course, they were asked to review their comments and choose one that identified what was most compelling. Most of their thoughts focused on the pride of watching the children develop skills and what they perceived as characteristics of good teachers, as these representative comments show: "I think she had it in her all along. She just needed to be pushed a little so that she would do her work. . . . She's doing great at sounding out words and writing in complete sentences." "We spent a lot of time talking. Her English is getting really good. I really enjoy working with her and everything she does makes me so proud." "I am really glad that I have had this experience. I love the children! It was great to see the children and videotape them today. I was so proud of each of their responses. I am so surprised at all they have learned from doing this project." The above comments focus on how the freshmen perceived working with the children. Freshmen also identified their views of working as a teacher: "A good teacher does not let little things upset her. (or if they do, she doesn't let on to her students!) A good teacher is flexible and has back-up plans in case there is an unavoidable problem. Lastly, and probably most important, a good teacher is positive about difficulties," and "As a teacher I have learned that you have to have a back-up plan for every lesson in case something goes amuck." The responses of the freshmen suggest that they were able to recognize teaching dispositions.

From the observations and journal entries of the freshmen, the following dispositions (from the UNCA dispositions checklist) played a role in their experience: manages time (students signed in and out and the researcher was there every day), exhibits professionalism in school settings (students dressed appropriately and acted appropriately in the school setting), demonstrates flexibility (when the computers did not work, the students commented in their journals about the importance of having backup plans), interacts appropriately with children (each week students commented about how important this experience was in helping the children, and they also revealed that they were learning a lot), and reflects on teaching and learning (students shared their ideas on what it meant to be a good teacher and how they hoped to be as organized as the ESL teacher). These dispositions appeared to develop over the entire semester, suggesting that a service experience that spans a semester can influence dispositions.

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At the end of the semester, freshmen were asked to think about all of the things they had learned and identify the most profound learning that they experienced. Eight of the eighteen (44%) students identified the growth of the children as the most meaningful thing they had observed. Six (33%) said that their own professional growth had been the most meaningful result of the course. Three (17%) identified specific aspects of the project, and one other student (6%) identified the collaboration between students and teachers as the most profound. The UNCA teaching dispositions of caring about children, growing professionally, creating meaningful experiences, and working together were identified in the data. It appears that the service-learning experience of working with ESL children over the course of the semester gave this group of freshmen insight into what it means to be a teacher.

The third set of data collected were weekly satisfaction ratings describing how the freshmen felt about college. Though one of the

goals of the course was to identify teaching dispositions, another was to help freshmen adjust to college life. And while there did not appear to be a link between how the students were adjusting to college and the service-learning experience, the first-year experience course provided each participant with the opportunity to both reflect on his or her experiences and find friends among a group of peers. The course also gave the professor the opportunity to monitor and respond to the needs of the participants. Each week, the freshmen were asked to rate their week on a scale of one to five: One (1) meant they were ready to pack their bags and move home, and five (5) meant that they were finding the adjustment perfectly easy. In between were two (2), meaning they were not doing well, three (3) meaning they were doing okay, and four (4) meaning that college life was good. Comments were then coded using the students' explanation for rating the week as they did: "My week is a 5 because my grandparents are taking me to the ballet this weekend"—coded as resulting from "family" influences. "My week is a 2. I think I bombed my humanities exam"—coded as resulting from "academics." Comments such as "4 we had a blast this weekend and there is another concert in town that we are going to" or "2 my roommate is driving me crazy" were coded as attributed to "friends." The data indicates that satisfaction in college was related to many different aspects of living in a community. The responses suggested that academics, friends, and family influenced freshmen satisfaction most.

Data were collected for eleven of the fifteen weeks. Data were not collected the week of fall break, the week of Thanksgiving, or the last two weeks of the semester. Table 1 shows average weekly class responses.

Table 1: The average weekly rating of freshmen at UNCA in the course "What Is Teaching"

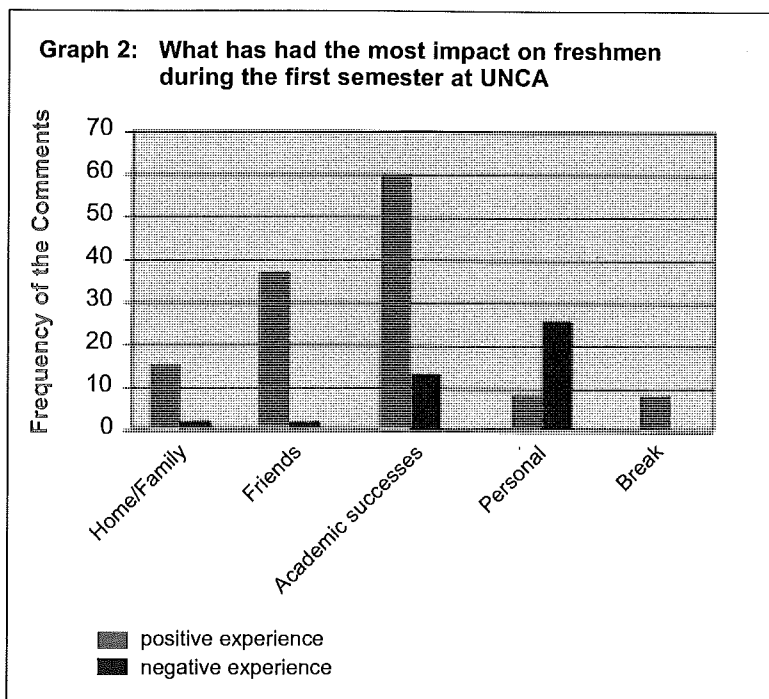
Weeks:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	10	12	13
	3.81	3.47	3.62	3.67	3.06	3.81	3.66	3.51	3.66	3.53	3.66

Other than a dip in week five, it appears that the freshmen thought college life was okay. One student dropped out after the fifth week. Reflections from other students indicate that week five was a busy one, with many exams and papers due.

The weekly responses were then analyzed by looking for patterns and coding similar responses. Their comments on what made them feel successful included academic success: "I made a good grade" or "I'm feeling good about my paper." Friends also appeared to influence satisfaction with college—"I made some new friends this week"—as did family: "My mom came to see me" or "My little sister came and spent the night with us." In describing college life, reflections ranged from "I have mono and can't run" to "Break was great." Table 2 reveals the number of comments made for each of the categories identified. Graph 2 also illustrates the positive and negative comments that were tallied.

Table 2

	Home/ Family	Friends	Academic Successes	Personal	Break
Indicates a positive impact	14	36	60	8	8
Indicates a negative impact	1	1	13	24	0



Based on the responses connected with the weekly ratings, it appeared that academic success, friends, and family had the greatest positive impact; personal issues and lack of academic success resulted in negative experiences.

The three data sets collected provided insight into the impact of the first-year experience class on the participants. This project gave a group of freshmen (1) the opportunity to experience what it is like to be a teacher in a hands-on, productive way, (2) insight into teaching dispositions, and (3) a framework for thinking about their reaction to college life.

Conclusions

Data from this semester indicate that service-learning is a viable component of a first-year experience course. The students who participated helped children develop their literacy skills, and the students themselves appear to have acquired five dispositions that support good teaching. The course also revealed that there could be a link between taking a first-year experience course and being satisfied with college. Though such a connection might not exist, the data suggest that academic success, friends, and family support had the greatest impact on the satisfaction of these college freshmen.

Where We Go from Here

The first-year experience course was also offered during fall 2004. The ESL teacher and the university professor chose a different project, but the format of the experience was the same. A comparison of both groups should be made. In addition, those students who participated in the course should be monitored and compared with students who did not participate in the course to determine if the teaching dispositions they acquired persist over time.

While teaching dispositions were the focus of this study, field experiences and diversity are two issues that are also addressed in the NCATE standards and could be analyzed as part of this project. Collaboration between university- and school-based teachers and the use of technology are other valuable components of this project. Perhaps this approach to introducing students to teaching could be refined as a model for developing a dynamic experience for first-year students—one that sets a solid foundation for future teachers.

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About the Author

Dr. Nancy Ruppert is an assistant professor at UNC-Asheville, where she is the middle grades education licensure coordinator. As an educator she is a proponent of field experiences and believes that coteaching is one of the most powerful tools for preparing future teachers. By connecting freshmen with a service project that relates to their interests in teaching, she believes that the first-year experience provides young people with a vision and purpose for pursuing their career.