

Becoming Culturally Responsive Teachers Through Service-Learning:



A CASE STUDY OF FIVE NOVICE CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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In the effort to augment teacher candidate education beyond text-based direct instruction, universities and teacher preparation programs are incorporating more field-based interactions through which

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teacher candidates can master skills and reinforce pedagogy through experience. The term “service-learning” was first used by the Southern Regional Education Board in 1969 to describe “the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999).

Congress defined the term formally in 1990 as experiences that promote learning through participation in activities that address community needs. In 1993 Con-

gress expanded the definition to include activities that provide opportunities for reflection and compassion building. The overarching goal of service-learning should be to enhance the text-based and direct instruction knowledge with authentic practices in real life environments (Astin, 1996; Brown, 2004; Checkoway, 1996; Danahue, Bowyer, Rosenberg, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Stanton, 1990).

Service-learning activities can afford both the recipient community (social, class-

room, school, and personal) and student providers a firmer understanding of the social implications of equity in all aspects of education and mutual support for social justice. The student learns and reinforces the social context of education through participation in service-learning activities that strengthen student-centered classroom instruction, culturally responsive management skills, and peer and community cross-cultural interactions (Astin, 2000; Barber & Battistoni, 1993; Kendall, 1990; Morton & Saltmarsh, 1997; O'Grady, 2000; Stanton, 1990).

The term service-learning does not simply imply that one provides a service for a particular target group; the service participants must also strive to learn how to augment and reform their own knowledge base. Brown (2005) has redefined service-learning for teacher candidates and asserts that service-learning must include a five-point outcome criterion for it to truly be effective for both the recipient and provider (see Figure 1). For a full description and review of the model see the article "Service-Learning in One-Year Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification: A Powerful Multicultural Teaching Tool" in *Equity and Excellence in Education*, Volume 38, Number 1.

This case study examines the influence of the above model on the teaching philosophies of five novice secondary teachers who matriculated through a one-year, alternative program for secondary certification and who are currently in their first to fourth year in the classroom. This study ad-

ressed: (1) can service-learning activities based on the Brown model raise social justice awareness and commitment and (2) do novice teachers carry forward service-learning experiences to augment their instruction, management and assessment strategies?

Context

The five study participants were enrolled in a site-based one-year master's for initial secondary certification program (MIC) at a southeastern university. Each participant was assigned to the same urban secondary school between 1999 and 2003. The high school (HS) served a middle-class urban neighborhood with a significant bussed in population. The HS student population of approximately 1,800 was economically and ethnically diverse with 34 % on free or reduced lunch, 37 % students of color (Latino/a and African-American) and a significant population of first generation immigrants and refugees.

Participants

In cohorts of 16-20, the graduate students spent the first ten weeks of their program observing, tutoring, and mentoring students and assisting teachers. During this period each student was required to develop and implement a service-learning project using the Brown model. The students could choose to develop projects individually or in groups of

2 to 4. The five study participants selected for this study implemented unique service-learning projects during the site-based component of their MIC program (see Figure 2).

Study participants designed and implemented these service-learning activities over a ten-week period. Prior to and during the activities, the cohort leader (investigator) conducted guided discussions and debriefings on the projects. The participants were provided with an assessment rubric to help focus their decisions for choosing, constructing and completing each project (see Appendix I).

The following study participant reflections center on how the above service-learning activities increased their social justice sensitivity and augmented their commitment to becoming culturally responsive classroom teachers. Each section provides a synopsis of the service-learning experiences of one teacher candidate during the development and implementation of a project, their reflection on the value of site-based service-learning as a novice classroom teacher, and their perception of the direct and indirect applicability of such activities—following the five-point criteria model—in enhancing future educational instruction for those involved in service-learning. These student narratives are not quoted verbatim but are summaries of student reflective journals, final reports and in-class discussions. Although each study participant addresses all five service-learning criteria in their journals, reports, and during discussions, only one of the five from each was summarized for this article.

Purposeful (Bill)

The main objective of my group project was to add an inviting element to the high school to which we were assigned. As we observed and interacted with students, we found that most English as a second language (ESL) students felt isolated and many of their parents never visited the school. After several discussions we decided to develop a project that would address the physical surroundings and social atmosphere for both the ESL students and their families. We interviewed and observed both students and administrators to gather home language data on the student population. We found that though many languages and language dialects were spoken at home, most students could understand English, Spanish, French, Chinese Mandarin or Russian. My group decided to focus on making the school more welcoming by designing and installing multilingual welcome and goodbye signs at the front entrance

Figure 1. The Brown Model

CRITERIA	RATIONALE	REFERENCES
PURPOSEFUL	Activities should raise the self-esteem and academic skills of student providers as they perform needed services	Speck, 2001; O'Grady, 2000; Waterman, 1997
REFLECTIVE	Student providers examine the current future impact of their service-learning activities and outcomes on themselves and the recipients through debriefing, analysis, journaling and discussions	Brown, 2004; Pang, 2001; Rosenberger, 2000
EXPERIENTIAL	Activities that assist student providers in giving meaning and relevance to and making connections between academic theory, school political agendas, classroom practices, and student needs	Dewey, 1951; Eskow, 1980; Kolb, 1984
RECIPROCAL	Each activity provides tangible benefits for both the provider and the recipient	Kendall, 1990; Sigmon, 1996; Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999
TRANSFORMATIVE	Effective school-based experiences raise cross-cultural cognizance and assist future teachers in overcoming their biases, revising their perceptions, and solidifying their commitment to social justice	Boyle-Baise (1998), Morton, 1995; Pang, 2001; Sleeter, 2000

Figure 2. Study Participant Demographics and Projects

Program Year	Pseudo Name	Race Ethnicity	Gender	Subject	Projects Area
2000	Rasheeda	African-American	F	English	Web-based interactive college financial aid and information worksheets
2001	Carman	Mexican-American	F	Foreign Language	Translated school forms into three languages
2002	Helen	European-American	F	Science	Website of home countries of immigrant and refugee students
2003	John	Iranian-American	M	Social Studies	Flags of 40 countries representing the diversity of school's student body
2003	Bill	Appalachian-American	M	English	Welcome signs in 4 languages

where visitors and students would see them as they entered the building.

Our goal was threefold: (1) change the perception of the school to a welcoming, warm and inclusive community of diverse individuals, (2) encourage students to dialogue across linguistic boundaries and outside of their comfort zones and (3) reduce the perceived and actual isolation experienced by most ESL students. This project's connections to the purposeful component of the service-learning criteria and my classroom teaching are explained below:

The week following the installation of the signs, we observed student interactions as they entered the building and changed classes and interviewed a cross-section of students and teachers. We found that the multilingual welcoming signs acknowledge the diversity of the student population, welcome and invite the entire school community into the building, encourage cross-cultural dialogue among students, and reduce feelings of isolation experienced by second language learners. The experience was purposeful for me as a teacher in training because it allowed me to acknowledge the entire student population. I became aware of the diversity of the school as I researched student demographics to determine the four main languages spoken at the school. In essence, I became involved with the whole student population and found how we can connect the entire school community, even with a simple gesture such as the welcome signs. In addition, it was rewarding to watch the students discuss the meanings and pronunciations of the phrases with each other. As an English educator, I am reminded that communication is one of the key aspects of human understanding, and I will continue to use cross-cultural communication to involve all of my students in the learning process.

Reflective (Carman)

Before, during and after the service-learning experience, we participated in guided class discussions and debriefings covering the benefits and limitations of our projects, wrote individual reflections about our progress, and submitted a final report including a letter from the school sponsor. As I began to observe teachers and attend school meetings and an open house, I found

that very few Latino parents attended these functions. When discussing this concern with classroom teachers and administrators, they expressed disappointment and frustration about the limited parental response to letters, announcements and invitations sent home with students whose home language was not English.

In reflecting on my own home environment, I recognized that many Spanish speaking parents may not have the English language competency and confidence to communicate in writing. Therefore, the original objective of my project was to encourage Latino parents to become involved in the school community and respond to written communication. To accomplish this, I decided to translate into Spanish, the significant school forms sent to all parents at the beginning of the academic year. However, I soon found that if I collaborated with the language department on the university's campus, I could acquire assistance in translating the forms into several of the most common languages spoken by the HS students at home.

With the assistance of several university faculty, I translated four forms (home language, truancy, welcome, computer usage) into Spanish, French, and Russian. The response to the project was incredible. Several other schools in the district now use our translated forms and have asked that we translate more. More parents whose first language



The Welcome Project

First view of flags in school atrium

is not English are completing the forms and returning them to the school and a few have attended several school functions.

Over the three years that I have been in the classroom, I have reflected on this project from several vantage points: the importance of being a socially conscious professional educator; providing a welcoming environment for all parents and developing culturally responsive instruction for all students. I am careful to include students with limited English speaking competency in class discussions, model the importance of respecting and sharing the cultural capital each individual brings to the learning environment, and often share this commitment both in my professional and social environments. I now recognize that students want to feel included in the academic and social environment of the school and parents need to be welcomed as partners in the learning process. I strive to create this environment in my classroom and work diligently with peers to demonstrate this throughout the school campus. Finally, I vary my instructional strategies to meet the needs of all of my students.

Experiential (John)

Our group project was implemented to showcase the school's multiethnic composition, to open a dialogue, and to develop friendships between the new immigrant students and their American peers. As we surveyed the school and observed students and teachers, we found that no one knew how many nationalities were represented by students who were first generation immigrants or refugees. Additionally, our observations found that because of the language barrier and cultural traditions, most of these students were an "invisible minority" who rarely spoke or were spoken to by their American peers, seldom called on by teachers and often encapsulated in ESL classes. We decided to conduct a survey to ascertain how many nationalities were represented, hang flags in the school's atrium representing each nation and work with a cross section of HS students from several ethnic groups to develop a grid identifying each flag.

Though all five group members were future social studies teachers, we knew little about many of the forty (40) nations represented in the school. Furthermore, we learned important lessons about internal politics of a school and the value of collaboration and support from teachers and administrators. This project made several connections to both our subject area and our foundations courses. Below are my reflections on the experiential component of our project and the influence of the project on my current classroom strategies.

The required research, collaboration



There is more to making signs than meets the eye



Don't worry, I'm on it

and hands-on experience of this project allowed me to apply my content and foundational knowledge in a real life setting. Lectures, discussions and readings built the theoretical foundation. However, application in the school environment brought relevance and meaning for me. I have learned two crucial points that I will carry into my teaching career: no matter how commendable a project, without collaboration and support from others it is probably doomed to failure and I must be aware of the politics, political agendas and hierarchy of the schools where I will teach. As a teacher I will continually strive to: (1) provide my students with a sense of belonging, (2) develop mechanisms that foster cross-cultural student/student interaction and (3) strive to include all students in the learning process.

Reciprocal (Rasheeda)

As I listened to my peers discuss the types of projects they envisioned, I was drawn back to my time as a high school student. I reflected on being a student of color from a working class family and how it seemed that I and my siblings would not have an opportunity to go to college. I thought about my determination to succeed and the financial obstacles that loomed before me. Based on my personal struggles, I decided to provide students with a tool that I didn't have a self-guided web-based financial aid and college preparation resource.

My project goal was to provide students with a website where they could: (1) research the many aspects of financial aid (e.g., scholarships, loans, gifts), (2) work on financial what-if's with their parents, and (3) collect information to prepare themselves throughout their high school careers. Though English is my subject area and this project falls under business, I had a passion to provide this knowledge to the many students who I knew would need it. As I began researching both in the library and on the web, collecting the data needed became a larger project than I had anticipated. I also found that my writing and grammar skills were crucial when putting the information in a form understandable to secondary students.

When the project was complete, I stored the information on a CD to be used in the family life center for juniors and seniors and gave several power-point presentations in business classes. I was asked to share the CD with the 11th and 12th grade counselors, who indicated the information could be used in the counseling office to assist all students with college applications.

Cohort discussions, reflective journaling and dialogue with students and administrators helped me to reflect on my own past experiences as a high school and college student and to review and revise my project to fit the needs and maturity level of secondary students. As I evaluated the effect and outcome of the project on the school community, I also realized my siblings and my home

community were enriched by the project. Having been a teacher for four years now, I find that this project has enabled me, as an African-American from a working class family, to connect with students across all socio-economic classes, to better understand my responsibility to create an inclusive classroom environment for all students, to continuously strive to sustain equity, social justice and culturally responsive teacher / student connections and to help students reach for success in my English classroom. As I discussed these projects with peers, I realized I created a project that my siblings, my community, my school and - if updated - my own children could benefit from and that I as an educator had garnered significant computer and research skills. Reciprocity at work!!!!!!

Transformative (Helen)

One requirement in our secondary teacher education program was to design and implement a service-learning project for the school community. For the first week in this field-based placement, I pondered what I would contribute to the science department. As I discussed various ideas with other subject area peers and observed in the classrooms and halls, I was struck by the thought that neither I nor my peers (even those in social

studies) knew much about the heritage of many of the refugee students. We began to discuss how important it is for teachers to know their students' home traditions and began to reflect on how we could incorporate this knowledge into the learning experiences of their American peers. Four of us whose subject areas were social studies, science, and English began to survey teachers about the countries their students came from and conduct informal interviews with refugee students about their cultural heritage. We found many of the students eager to share their pre-American experiences and talk about their lives before they came to America and how and why they had to flee their homelands. Most indicated that they missed home and planned to return some day. When we talked to their American peers, we found that they were unaware and often unsympathetic to the plight of these students. As a group, we decided to inform students and teachers about the heritage of these students who came from around the world (e.g., Bosnia, Congo, Liberia, Pakistan, and countries that no longer exist). We designed a web-site to display a picture of every refugee student who participated, their national flag, the location of their country, several facts about the students and their countries and a web link to more information. Most refugee students

were delighted and eager to share their stories. However, for some the wounds of war and refugee camps were too deep and still to fresh in their minds to share with others.

This project transformed our group in many ways. We recognized that we were charged with preparing our students for the global community and that we could not expect our students to validate cultures of which they were unaware. Personally, I began to consider teaching science from a global perspective. I often plan lessons requiring my students to research and synthesize information on the impact of decisions made by Americans (e.g., deforesting, gas consumption, the production / use of various chemicals, air / water pollution) on the global population. I have been a classroom teacher for two years and find that I continue to strive to become a transformation agent in my personal and professional life and work diligently to provide my students with the knowledge and motivation to also become transformation agents among their peers, in their communities and in our global environment.

Conclusion

As these five novice teachers' experiences suggest, service-learning activities that follow Brown's five criteria model reach effectively beyond the context of a site-based, field placement. Using this service-learning format can expand pedagogy acquired in the classroom into applicable experiences that connect theory and practice to increase cross-cultural cognizance, instill the commitment to create equitable and inclusive classroom environments, and promote social justice and life long learning in a student-centered culturally relevant and supportive environment. Although each service-learning experience was unique on the surface, basic principles were common to all:

- ◆ Learning requires supportive and open communication,
- ◆ In-depth knowledge of an educational environment is only available to those who function within it,
- ◆ Productive change can only occur with the inclusion of all players (administrators, parents, staff, students, teachers) in the design, implementation and evaluation process,
- ◆ Students want and need to feel a sense of belonging,
- ◆ Teachers must learn to be cultural mediators and culturally responsive to the needs of all students,



Identifying each flag by country



Rehanging the flag project

Appendix I
EDC 777-004, Fall 2004
Service-Learning Project Rubric

Project Sponsor _____

Group Member _____

Project Title _____

Title	Possible Points	Your Points
Purpose of Project		
(a) Goal and objectives	3	
(b) Why is it needed	3	
(c) Who benefits	2	
(d) Who will use	<u>2</u>	
	10	
Description of Project		
(a) Describe the scope and sequence of the project	3	
(b) Provide specific examples of how it will be used	3	
(c) Integration of foundations and content knowledge	<u>4</u>	
	10	
Project Reflection		
(a) Learned about planning/organizing projects for schools	2	
(b) Learned about collaboration/cooperation within a school	2	
(c) Learned about working with peers in your cohort	2	
(d) Learned about your content area/educational foundations	3	
(e) Project influence on your cross-cultural perceptions	3	
(f) Project influence on communication style	3	
(g) Learned about politics and power in schools	<u>3</u>	
	18	
Mechanics of Presentation		
(a) Organization/grammar/spelling	2	
(b) Clarity/creativity	2	
(c) Appearance	<u>2</u>	
	6	
Project Recipient Feedback		
(written statement)	6	
Total Points	50	

Your project report should be 12-15 pages and include the recipient letter as an appendix.
 Reports with a grade below 40 must be revised and resubmitted.
 Include before and after pictures where appropriate.

◆ Teachers must challenge their students to develop a global socially conscious perspective.

In summary, service-learning using the Brown model allows future teachers to make the connections between theory and practice, raises their level of multicultural consciousness, provides them with insight into the hierarchy and political agendas

driving educational policy, increases their ability to negotiate and form partnerships with culturally diverse groups in the school environment and encourages the practice of educational equity.

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All forty flags on display