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Reflections on the Impact of Service-Learning/ Experiential Education for the Field of Human Services

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Reflection on the Impact of Service-Learning/Experiential Education for the Field of Human Services

Teresa Brooks-Taylor and Jamie Kridler

Abstract

The article addresses the importance of a holistic approach to human services by exploring the concept of community through utilizing service-learning/experiential education in human service courses. ACCESS (Achievement, Collaboration, Community, Education, Standards, and Services) illustrates that service-learning/experiential education can offer a viable pedagogy for collaborative partnerships between the university, community, students, and faculty. The article reviews important elements of service-learning/experiential education to provide a thorough understanding of the concepts, including reflection on the service experience from students, community agencies, and faculty. Survey results demonstrate ways in which service-learning/experiential education aids students in achieving skills and in acquiring a deeper understanding of course concepts while meeting needed services in the community.

Human Services is a broad based discipline in both foundation and practice; thus, teaching human services requires a holistic approach, which allows students to envision a clear concept of community through which they can comprehend and assist with social problems. In practice, they will also need to network for effective service delivery. Students should understand that society is a web comprised of various directly and indirectly connected interactions. In addition, they need to comprehend the symbiotic relationship between the environment and individuals. Utilizing service-learning/experiential education in human services can illustrate this point.

Experiential education is a pedagogical method through which educators purposely engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values (<http://www.aee.org/about/whatIsEE>). Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (<http://www.servicelearning.org/what-service-learning>).

Both methods rest on the principles established by John Dewey. “For Dewey, community was a core concept of his social philosophy. It was the communal association that gave rise to the moral, intellectual, and emotional aspects of life as well as the foundation of democracy” (Eyler & Giles, 1994, p.81). Experiential education/service-learning offers “multiple outcomes for the public good” (Hatcher, 1997, p.27), linking personal and interpersonal development to academic and cognitive growth. Further, experiential education/service-learning allows students to learn about social problems, address them through community action, and engage problem-solving and critical thinking.

Learning improves the quality of service today and more importantly helps sustain it throughout a citizen's life by developing attitudes toward community and a commitment to making a difference. Service transforms learning, changing inert knowledge to knowledge and skills that students can use in their communities. (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997, p.5)

Students in the field of human services need to develop skills and knowledge that center on the concept of community. Their selected profession focuses on helping and the importance of networking to provide needed services for their clients. Human services skills encompass important elements found in experiential education/service-learning: reciprocity, reflection/evaluation, development, and diversity.

A variety of benefits and positive outcomes from experiential education/service-learning exist for all those involved—the community, the students, and the university. “Universities have valuable resources that become accessible to the community when partnerships address community needs” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p.221). Varied researchers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000) posited that students in service-learning had more positive evaluations of service and community and higher academic achievement than did their peers who were not involved in service. Those students were also more likely to pursue a career in service fields and had a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness (Astin et al., 2000).

Surveys conducted in human services courses (Introduction to Service-Learning, Introduction to Human Services, and Child, Family, Community Relations) at East Tennessee State University supported previous findings regarding the impact of experiential education/service-learning. Many students indicated that their service experience aided their career decisions and sharpened their skills. In addition, they noted the ability to apply course concepts, as well as their service knowledge, to other courses. Please refer to the data below for specific percentages.

Impact of Service-Learning on Skill Development and Self-Reflection

Career.

As a result of the service-learning experience:

- 31% helped confirm career choices
- 20% considered different career and 4% changed career
- 29% had somewhat stronger confidence in their major; 31% were much stronger
- 30% had somewhat stronger confidence in career choice; 31% were much stronger
- 49% had somewhat stronger preparation for their career; 24% had much stronger preparation for their career

Skills.

Most felt the experience improved their skills in:

- Writing 55% somewhat stronger; 9% much stronger
- Analytical 58% somewhat stronger; 14% much stronger

- Interpersonal 55% somewhat stronger; 36% much stronger
- Project completion 46% agree; 25% strongly agree
- Apply course concepts 40% often; 54% sometimes
- Apply service to the course 46% often; 47% sometimes
- Apply service to other courses 34% often; 48% sometimes

Other important outcomes illustrated the impact of experiential education/service-learning. Most students indicated they did not volunteer prior to taking a course with service-learning but they planned to continue to serve in the future. Attitudes about service-learning improved with an increase in their wanting to participate. Service-learning also made students more aware of community needs, interests, and abilities. They became more involved in social problems and anticipated continued involvement.

Overall, experiential education/service-learning empowered students to contribute and to consider their individual biases and prejudices. The service-learning experience creates cultural awareness because the service hours expose students to individuals from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, and different socioeconomic conditions. Please refer to specific data listed below.

Volunteering and Culturally Aware Data

Volunteering.

- Most students (64%) indicated they were not volunteering prior to taking a course with a service-learning component; however, after taking the course, most indicated they would continue volunteering with 50% somewhat stronger and 40% much stronger
- Prior to the course, 63% wanted to participate in service; 14% were neutral; and 25% did not think they would have time
- After taking a service-learning course, 71% wanted to participate in service; 10% were neutral; and 20% were surprised they had time to schedule service
- Most indicated the experience affected their interest and involvement in social problems with 69% somewhat stronger and 14% much stronger
- Most indicated they expected involvement in addressing social problems due to the course experience with 62% somewhat stronger and 20% much stronger

Responsive citizenship.

- Empathy: The experience made the students more aware of community needs, interests, and abilities with 29% agree and 58% strongly agree
- Power to contribute: The students discovered ways to become more involved with 38% agree and 55% strongly agree
- Cultural identity: Most indicated the experience made them more aware of their own biases and prejudices with 36% agree and 13% strongly agree. Most indicated the experience helped their understanding of different background than their own with 45% somewhat stronger and 34% much stronger. Most (82%) indicated they served people of

a different culture, race or SES background and most (70%) indicated they worked with people of a different culture

Service-learning is especially relevant because it creates a balance between the service and the learning. It goes beyond volunteering wherein the primary focus is on community needs and differs from an internship that focuses on meeting the learning objectives of a class (Furco, 1996). Service-learning assists students in the process of connecting the environment and the individual and in examining the way in which each impacts the other. The keys are in the reciprocity and reflection pieces of the pedagogy. Reciprocity indicates meeting community needs, whereas reflection encourages students to apply their community experiences to their coursework and their course concepts to their service. While serving and participating in class, students reflect on their experiences for a better understanding of the community and their course material. Student, faculty, and community reflections illustrate the power of experiential education/service-learning.

Student, Faculty and Community Reflections

Community.

- These students are wonderful asset to our program. The children they are helping get someone a little more cool to relate to, we get invaluable tutors, the students get to make a difference and I think they enjoy it more than the children.
- The Service-Learning program has provided positive role models for individuals with disabilities.
- The student consistently demonstrates the ability to interact in a positive, professional, and caring manner toward the children for whom she is an advocate. She is a valuable addition and asset to our program and I look forward to continuing to work with her.

Faculty.

- I have learned the extreme value of experience in the aspect of learning. Service-Learning enhances the overall learning in the course. Students frequently report life-altering experiences through their reflective logs.
- I could have never described or taught the experiences, feelings, and features/benefits of these two community nutritional programs in the way the students learned while in service-learning.
- The service-learning component greatly enhances what the students have to bring to the literature.
- Service-learning expands students' knowledge base. I can tell them what the profession is like, but service-learning shows them. Service-learning extends the classroom and gives students real world skills. Service-learning helps develop ideas about potential careers, hands-on work place experience, application of classroom learning/training, personal growth; learning to work with others from diverse backgrounds.
- Enriches curriculum and assignment possibilities.
- It is real-life learning, which makes a life-long impact. That the students will moan, groan, and complain but in the end they learned so much!

- Service-Learning is an excellent opportunity for my students to observe how skills are being practiced or not practiced. Research supports what service-learning is doing as we know students learn best in the environment. I value and depend greatly on service-learning as I think this experience is as important as the classroom experience.

Student.

- I have definitely has a quality learning experience. Every day, I walk out of class having been enlightened. I took this class out of curiosity. It has nothing to do with my major but everything to do with the rest of my life. I have started to do a lot of community service work. I jump at every opportunity I get to do it.
- This class has made me much more aware of the world. Unlike other classes that I've had in school, this has been a forum for learning what other people think and feel. It has taught me a lot more about other's values and opinions. It has taught me to respect others because each person comes from a past that I can't understand from just looking at them. It has also taught me to examine myself and see what I really believe in.
- This class had made me much more aware of how I can participate in society. It is not as hard as it may seem. If everyone would just take a small step as we have in this class, it would create a huge impact on our society as a whole.
- I was able to use my unique talents and abilities to give back to the community.
- I was surprised at how much I learned about my community.
- How much my communication skills grew
- I learned a lot through working in the community and I think community work should play a larger role at ETSU.
- My service experience impacted me in a much more powerful way than I expected. I'm very happy I was able to take this course.
- I feel that if every student took this class, it could make a big impact on the community.
- Helping the community has made me a better and happier person.
- Service learning is learning with my hands and heart.
- I think it is important to have experience in community service to see what it is like outside our personal bubbles and have knowledge in what reality can be
- Sometimes people need help getting started on how to start volunteering in the community.
- I believe this course should be mandatory for Social Work students.
- Service is life-altering; you will earn respect for others who are less fortunate than you.
- The service experience made me grateful for the life I have and aware that not everyone has the same opportunities.
- The relationships you build with the agency are amazing!
- You may not be able to have a huge impact on the world, but you can have a huge impact on someone's life by helping them.
- I enjoyed getting to make relationships with my students
- Everyone should have to volunteer at some point; it makes you appreciate other people more.
- Really, this class should be a requirement for freshman year to help establish a baseline for Human Services.

- I think that service-learning is very beneficial for students and those being helped in the community.

For students, experiential education/service-learning brings the concept of community to life. It illustrates the importance of networks, life-long learning, and active citizens. Students have a better understanding of the complex web of relationships through participation in experiential education/service-learning. Civic engagement is necessary to grow and sustain our world. The field of human services especially needs students to be well equipped in this area so they may be successful in their careers to meet the needs of their clients.

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