Service-learning has a long history as a teaching and learning strategy in higher education, but has experienced explosive growth since the 1990’s (Astin, 1999). According to Poulsen et al. (2000), few identified strategies have helped to fuel the expansion of service learning. First, service itself is not enough to ensure learning; critical reflection is required. Second, service-learning must be aligned with the educational mission of universities in order to be effective and accepted. Those ideas are now institutionalized within the general education curriculum, which involves (1) a service experience based in the community and 2) student learning driven by a) application of disciplinary content to the community setting and b) reflection on the service experience (Kuh, 2008).

It is this reflection that is the focus here. Tyler and Gingles (1999, p. 171) define reflection as “being able to step back and be thoughtful about experience - to monitor one’s own reactions and thinking processes.” Research concludes that reflection is key to a high-quality service-learning experience (Actin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Mabry, 1998). Reflection can occur in a variety of ways. Through written work or class discussion, individually or in groups, among peers or with a faculty member (or both). To illustrate this, we report on the action in a service-learning project for Human Services majors in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Purdue University.

The Service-Learning Project

The service-learning project takes place in an upper division course entitled “Skills for Helping Professionals in Individual, Family, and Group Settings.” In the course, students develop basic helping skills (e.g., active listening, asking questions, communicating empathy, etc.) needed by human services practitioners. The course requires students to complete a collaborative, semester-long service learning project. Students working in partnership with a human services provider who provides services to groups. The project was designed specifically for student teams to plan and lead one session of that group.

Though reflection may occur throughout the project, it is most significantly highlighted in two assignments. In a group presentation assignment, each group makes a presentation to the whole class in which they report on the project they completed, including reflecting on the experience. This assignment brings reflection into the classroom and allows for students to share their findings in the project with the class. During this assignment, a written reflection requires each student to write an essay reflecting on his/her experience in the service-learning project. Students reflect about lessons learned, connections to course material and future work, and the experience of working collaboratively with fellow students and a professional from the community.

Student teams select their professional partner themselves. As a result, students have worked with a variety of agencies serving a wide range of groups. Many students have interests in working with children. Partnering agencies that serve children have included schools, childcare programs, afterschool programs, the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, and the YWCA. Other students have interests in particular presenting problems. Partnering agencies with specific focuses have included a grief support program, a domestic violence shelter, an adult education agency, and a crisis pregnancy center.

During this group there was another person who wanted to be a group leader ... and it's easy to judge people over email or through class ... but when you get to know

I drew in some of the interpersonal conversation skills learned in class when

I believe that not meeting when all four of us could be present really caused our

Building Reflection Skills Through a Service Learning Project in Human Services

Jennifer Dobbs-Oates, Ph.D.
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Introduction

Student Reflections

Student reflections clustered around some common themes. Teamwork was the most among the frequent topics reflected upon. Some teams worked together very effectively, while others struggled. The students who struggled identified a lack of effective communication, coordinating schedules, and negotiating leadership roles. Through reflection, students connected those teamwork difficulties to their consequences, including low quality work, poor grades, and conflict among teammates. This allowed students to identify things they would have done differently, knowing what they know now, to achieve better outcomes.

Students who reported that their teams worked together effectively often noted that this was different from what they had experienced in the past. A common refrain was that the student had done all or most of the work in previous group assignments, but in this group s/he was able to trust her teammates to complete their responsibilities as well. Other students reported effective teamwork if they were surprised by the way students so seemingly different from one another could work together very effectively, while others struggled. The students who

I wish I could go back in time and turn people differently from the way I treated them. I never physically abused anybody, but I did make people feel bad when they made mistakes.

Questions? Contact Dr. Jennifer Dobbs-Oates at jendobbs@purdue.edu

References


Mabry, J.B. (1998). Pedagogical variations in service learning: How service-learning experience, student reflections and demonstration, and the learning that took place. Students reflecting on effective teamwork often noted that this team


Poulsen, who each taught previous versions of this course.

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Mabry, J.B., & Yee, J.A. (2000). Helping skills developed in class as they worked with their teammates. Students reflecting on effective teamwork often noted that this team

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Service-learning research and best practices attest to the essential nature of reflection for effective service-learning experiences (Astin et al., 2000; Mabry, 2008). In this service-learning experience, student reflections demonstrate, and help generate, the learning that took place. Students reflecting on ineffective teamwork took note of what went wrong and identified actions they could have taken to improve the situation. Importantly, student reflections focused on their contributions to the team’s problems, rather than place the blame exclusively on others. Students reflecting on effective teamwork often noted that this team functioned better than they had been a part of in previous courses. Students also commonly noted that they found themselves using the helping skills developed in class as they worked with their teammates. Although students did not make the connection between these two points, it seems that reflection provided students with the effective teamwork that pleasantly surprised so many students.

Students reflecting also focused on the challenges of working with a helping professional and a client group, the way course material was used in their work with this group of students, and how they were affected by completing the project. What is perhaps most striking about these reflections is that they show how students can be changed by participating in a service-learning assignment. Students reported increased awareness of the problems and needs of others, increased confidence in their own skills, and even a desire to work with children with special needs. Without taking the time to reflect on their experiences, students would be unlikely to have used these changes in themselves, and faculty certainly would have no opportunity to document such important impacts from service-learning.

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References


