Building Reflection Skills Through a Service-Learning Project in Human Services

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Introduction

Service-learning has a long history as a teaching and learning strategy in higher education, but has experienced explosive growth since the 1990's (Liu, 1996). Around that time, two key ideas gained prominence and 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 generally accepted definition of service learning, 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. Eyler and Giles (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 (Astin, 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 community partner. This poster describes the use of reflection 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. Student teams work in partnership with a human services professional who provides services to groups. The primary objective of the project is for the student team 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 student team 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 reactions to the project with their classmates. Second, a written assignment 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.

Figure: Word cloud built from student reflections.

Student Reflections

Student reflections clustered around some common themes. Teamwork was among the most frequent topics reflected upon. Some teams worked together very effectively, while others struggled. The students who struggled commonly described difficulty with 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 reporting effective teamwork reflected that they were surprised by the way students so seemingly different from one another could work together so effectively. The close teamwork required by this project seemed to break down the preconceptions students may have held about one another.

- "During this group there was another person who wanted to be a group leader ... and at first I resisted it a bit. If I could do things differently, I would allow her to lead sooner, because maybe then our group would have run more smoothly earlier."
- "I believe that not meeting when all four of us could be present really caused our communication lines to break down. This is leading to distrust between members. I have been disappointed with the way our group worked, but I am as much to blame as anyone."
- "Now that the project is complete, I have learned that it is OK for me to release some of the responsibility, trusting that my team members will take the project just as seriously as I would."
- "I thought by default I would have more in common with [Mary] and have an easier time working with her, but the opposite was true. [Mary] was a good team partner, but I had a blast with [Justin]. Working with him taught me a lot, mainly not to judge someone before you get to know them."
- "It's easy to judge people over email or through class … but when you get to know them and work with them and actually speak to them, you learn a lot about them and who they truly are…. Now if only I could open up to my other groups as much as I did this one."

Student Reflections on Teamwork

- "I used reflective skills to briefly go over what I was grasping from their responses to make sure that I was fully understanding what they said and what they meant by their statements. "
- "I found that when we worked with the kids, closed-ended questions were conversation killers, so asking more open-ended questions definitely helped them to open up when we talked to them."
- "I drew in some of the interpersonal conversation skills learned in class when communicating with my group members. I specifically remember using reflection to clear up misunderstanding about an idea with a group member, as well as goal setting. Brainstorming was very important to our group in the early stages, and from that list, we chose our goal for the project. "
- "Surprisingly, some of the course material we learned about in labs was very helpful in learning how to communicate with my group members. I know that I tend to rehearse in my head what I am going to say next instead of fully listening to what is being said to me. Learning to sit back and relax and listen to what is being said has helped me communicate with my group members."

Student Reflections on Applying Course Material

Students also reflected on the challenges of working with a professional helper and a group of clients. Many students expressed anxiety about their ability to work with their target population. Often, this came from unfamiliarity with age groups, cultural backgrounds, or life problems of the clients. This anxiety motivated the students to learn what was needed in order to serve the client group effectively. Students also discovered that their professional partner had responsibilities of her own and wasn't always available when they wanted to reach her. This helped the students see their project not just through their own eyes, but also in terms of how it fit into the partner agency.

Student reflections highlighted the ways students used course material in the project. Some students focused on how they used knowledge and skills from the course when leading the activity with the client group. A variety of helping skills were mentioned, including reflection skills, open-ended questions, and effective non-verbal communication. Other students noted (sometimes with surprise) that they used skills learned in the course to work with their teammates. Students noted that they listened more actively, used reflection to confirm understanding, and used brainstorming and goal setting to define the scope of their project.

When reflecting on what they learned from this project, students identified content knowledge related to their helping group (e.g., knowledge of addictions or child development) and skills, particularly teamwork. Students also reflected upon the ways that this project developed their confidence. One student even remarked that working on an anti-bullying project made her wish she could change some of the things she did as a child to exclude other children.

Acknowledgements

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Contact

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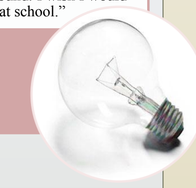
- "I learned that working collaboratively in a professional setting can be hard work. I also learned that it can be very rewarding, as multiple ideas from multiple minds can be brought together in ways that a single individual would likely never imagine."
- "I was very proud myself for not only completing the assignment to the best of my abilities, but because I finished the assignment with the confidence of knowing that I have the ability to apply skills that I learn in class to other settings."
- "This class has really brought out my inner self. I am much more confident in everything I do and know that I am in the right place as far as a major."
- "I wish I could go back in time and treat people differently from the way I treated them. I never physically abused anybody, but I did make people feel bad when they wanted to sit with us at lunch or hang out with us on the playground. I wish I would have let people in and made them feel more comfortable while at school."

Student Reflections on Lessons Learned



Conclusions

Service-learning research and best practices attest to the essential nature of reflection for effective service-learning experiences (Astin et al., 2000; Kuh, 2008; Mabry, 1998). 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, students tended to take responsibility for their contribution 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 teams 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 likely that the use of these skills contributed to the effective teamwork that pleasantly surprised so many students.

Student reflections also focused on the challenges of working with a helping professional and a client group, the way course material was used in the project, and what students learned, 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 act with more kindness. Without taking the time to reflect upon their experiences, students would be unlikely to have noticed these changes in themselves, and faculty certainly would have no opportunity to document such important impacts from service-learning.

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