Building Reflection Skills Through a Service 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 exponential growth since the 1990s (Liu, 1996). Around that time, there was a growing recognition that working with community partners could help 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. 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 (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, or among peers or with a faculty member of the project director. This project reflects on the 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 up an in-course project 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. This project was developed as a student-faculty team consisting of a commercial agency and a university. 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.”

Though reflection may occur throughout the project, it is most significantly highlighted in two assignments. In a group presentation assignment, each student 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 student reflection on the project with their teammates. 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 partners themselves. As a result, students have worked with a variety of agencies serving a wide range of individuals. Many students have interests in working with children. Partnering agencies that serve children have included schools, childcare programs, after-school programs, the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, and the YWCA. Other students have interests in particular preventing programs. Partnering agencies have specific focused include a high school support program, a domestic violence shelter, an elderly adult agency, and a crisis pregnancy center.

Project context 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 with teamwork commented on communication, coordinating schedules, and negotiating leadership roles. Through reflection, students connected these 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 team 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 reflecting that they were supported by the way students so differently from one another who could work together as a team. The primary difficulty for this group 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 surprisingly some of the course material we learned about in labs was very helpful. It’s easy to judge people over email or through class activity, but when you get to know these people face-to-face it’s just not the same. [Mary] was a good team partner, but at first I resisted it a bit. If I could do things differently, I would allow her to lead because she was 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 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 discussed 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 helpful skills were cited, including helping skills, open-ended questioning, and goal setting to define the scope of their project. Some students focused on how they used knowledge and skills, open-ended questioning, 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 related knowledge to their helping group (e.g., knowledge of addictions or child development) and skills, particularly communication skills. Students described how they developed their confidence. One student even remarked that working on an in-class project with her mentor helped her to be more comfortable with her skills.

Lessons Learned

“Using reflective skills to briefly go over what I was experiencing from my group members helped us to stay focused on the client.”

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“I was able to use reflective skills in class when communicating with my group members. I specifically remember using reflection to clear up misunderstandings about our group with a group member, as well as group graphs. Brainstorming was very important to our group in the early stages, and from that, we chose our goal for the project.

“Surprisingly, some of the course material we learned about in labs was very helpful in class. For example, when working with a group, we thought about how to effectively release the same idea in my head that I was going to say next instead of fully listening to what is being said. I stay tuned to my own response in what is being said and helped me communicate with my group members.”

Conclusions

Service-learning research and best practices attest to the essential nature of reflection for effective service-learning experiences (Eyler 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 their experiences showcased how important it is to be brought together in ways that a single individual would likely never imagine.

This class has really brought out my inner self. I am much more confident in communicating with my group members. “I would use reflective skills to briefly go over what I was experiencing from my group members.”

References


At the end of the course, students reflected on what they had learned and how it had affected their lives. Some students commented on how the project had helped them to break down the preconceptions students may have held about one another. 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.”

Student Reflections on Teamwork

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References


