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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). At Purdue, the human services undergraduate program has 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 Giles (1999, p. 171) define reflection as “being able to step back and be thoughtful about – 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. Throughout written work or class discussion, individually or in groups, among peers or with a faculty member and through the service-learning project. Students from a collaborative, semester-long service-learning project in a Human Services class at Purdue University. 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. The project involves students in partnership with a human services professional who provides services to groups and a project that provides practice in the helping process for the student team to plan and lead one session of that project.

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 student sharing of the experiences they have had in the project with the class. 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 team selects 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.

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. The project involves students in partnership with a human services professional who provides services to groups and a project that provides practice in the helping process for the student team to plan and lead one session of that project.

Student Reflections
Student reflections clustered around some common themes. Teamwork was one of the most frequent topics reflected upon. Some teams worked together very effectively, while others struggled. The students who struggled or communicated poorly with the community worked on building schedules, and negotiating leadership roles. Through reflection, students connected these teamwork experiences 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 now know, 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 noted effective teamwork reflective that they were surprised by the way students so different from one another could work together so effectively. The primary reason the project seemed to break down the preconceptions students may have had about one another

During this group there was another person who wanted to be a group leader … and I feel I was a little bit intimidated at first. If I did I could do things differently. I would allow her to lead more because each one of our group would have more equally chances.

I believe that not meeting when all four of us could be present could really impact our communication here to help all the other members. I have been disappointed with the way our group worked, but I am much too much as an actor.

Now that the project is complete, I have learned that it is OK for me to release some of my concerns and my feelings about the project as seriously as I was.

I think that I would have less in common with [Mary] and have a closer time working with her, but the opposite was true. [Mary] was a good team partner, but I had a lot of work [with]. Working with him taught me a lot, mainly not to judge him.

It is easy to judge people overly or through classes but when you get to know them better you start actually work in them, you have to give them there and they truly are… Now if you can open up to my other group members as much as I did this one.

Student Reflections on Teamwork

“Used reflective skills to briefly go over what I was grasping from their responses to I drew in some of the interpersonal communication skills learned in class when other students have interested in particular presenting problems. Partnering a service-learning project with the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, and the YWCA. 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 partners 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. Students focused on how they used knowledge and skills from the course when leading the activity with the client group. A variety of students noted that they used their 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 led more actively, used reflective communication to understand, 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 related to their helping group (e.g., knowledge of addictions or child development) and skills, particularly team-building skills. Students noted that they developed their confidence. One student even remarked that working on an end-of-project reflection project that could change some of the things she did as a child to exclude other children.

Acknowledgements

The service-learning component of this course has been developed over a number of years. Appreciation and acknowledgement is offered to Dr. Walter Thomas and Dr. Shruti Poulsen, who each taught previous versions of this course.

References


Conclusions
Service-learning research and best practices attest to the essential nature of reflection for effective service-learning experiences (Astin et al., 2000; Kuh, 2008b; Mabry, 1998). In this service-learning experience, student reflections demonstrate, and help generate, the learning that took place. Students reflecting on their experiences took stock of what went wrong and identified actions they could have taken to improve the situation. Importantly, students tended to emphasize their contribution 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 helpful 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. Students focused on how they used knowledge and skills from the course when leading the activity with the client group. A variety of students noted that they used their 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 led more actively, used reflective communication to understand, and used brainstorming and goal setting to define the scope of their project.

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