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SERVICE–LEARNING IN UNDERGRADUATE NURSING EDUCATION: WHERE IS THE REFLECTION?

JANET M. BROWN, PhD* AND NOLA A. SCHMIDT, PhD

Service–Learning is recognized as a valuable pedagogy that involves experiential learning, reflection, and reciprocal learning. Reflection is a critical component because it assists students to develop critical thinking and social awareness as they reflect upon their experiential learning with community partners. Although there is a proliferation of literature about service–learning, upon closer examination, it is apparent that some authors do not place emphasis on reflection when reporting on service–learning projects. This begs the question, “Where is the reflection?” The purpose of this article is to provide an overview and describe misrepresentations and exemplars of service–learning. After providing an overview of service–learning, examples of how service–learning is misrepresented in the literature are discussed. Exemplars of service–learning are also cited. Calling attention to how service–learning is reported in the literature will increase awareness about the need to critically evaluate articles for evidence of reflection. (Index words: Service–Learning; Reflection; Undergraduate; Nursing education) *J Prof Nurs* 32:48–53, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE PUBLIC DEMAND for college graduates who are critical thinkers and good citizens of the world creates a mandate for nurse educators to implement learning opportunities that foster these attributes. Service–Learning, recognized as both pedagogy and philosophy, is a well-established educational strategy known for challenging students to critically think about the world and how their service can achieve community goals. Service–Learning is defined as “a structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection” (Seifer, 1998, p. 274).

In service–learning, reflection is used for “the development or refinement of critical thinking skills such as being able to identify issues, being receptive to new or different ideas, and foreseeing the consequences of one’s actions” (Rama & Battistoni, 2001). Using reflection sets service–learning apart from other types of service. Without reflection, learning experiences are not authentic service–

learning, rather they are examples of volunteering or community-based learning. Although having nursing students serve meals to individuals who are homeless constitutes service in a community, it is not authentic service–learning unless there is a reflective requirement for this experience.

The literature is replete with examples of service–learning in undergraduate nursing education; however, there is inconsistency as to how reflection is addressed by authors. Some authors fail to mention reflection in their definitions of service–learning and descriptions of student experiences (Alexander, Canclini, & Krasner, 2014; Balakas & Sparks, 2010). Others refer to reflection in their definitions of service–learning but make no further mention of activities related to reflection (Weingarten, 2009). There are even cases when authors label their projects as service–learning without providing a definition or referring to reflection (Janke, Pesut, & Erbacher, 2012). Given the key role that reflection plays in service–learning, surprisingly few authors provide the warranted amount of detail about how reflection was accomplished. When published papers about service–learning do not include information about reflection, it calls into question whether the experiences being described are authentic service–learning. The purpose of this article is to provide

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an overview and describe misrepresentations and exemplars of service-learning. Calling attention to how service-learning is reported in the literature will increase awareness about the need to critically evaluate articles for evidence of reflection.

Overview of Service-Learning

Service-Learning is considered to be a pedagogy and philosophy designed to engage students with communities in ways that enhance their academic experiences and simultaneously serve the needs of communities (Champagne, 2006; The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership, 2006). Service-Learning is a teaching method that links educational objectives with service designed to meet community needs. Originating in the early 1900s, John Dewey proposed three essential elements that distinguish service-learning from other learning experiences: (a) experiential learning, (b) reflection, and (c) reciprocal learning. According to Dewey (1938), it is critical that educational strategies include experiential learning that connects students to the realities of society. Rather than using traditional teaching strategies that may tend to promote passivity on the part of students, service-learning involves active engagement to address social concerns while fostering learning. Students come to understand phenomena, rather than simply know them, by reflecting about social justice and one's responsibility to others. Reciprocal learning involves collaborative partnerships among universities and communities. To achieve long-term success, particularly in health-related venues, individual and community empowerment is critical (Champagne, 2006; The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership).

Service-Learning benefits students and faculty and academic institutions, community organizations, and community members (Seifer, 1998). Students demonstrate enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2005; Simoni & McKinney, 1998). Through reflection, they also can achieve a heightened sense of civic responsibility (Casey & Murphy, 2008; Groh, Stallwood, & Daniels, 2011; Hunt, 2007; Simoni & McKinney, 1998), sensitivity to cultural diversity (Casey & Murphy, 2008; Jarosinski & Heinrich, 2010), and a willingness to volunteer in the future (Astin et al., 2000; Champagne, 2006). Service-Learning has been shown to positively affect the interpersonal, spiritual, and moral development of students (Hester, Daniels, & Adonis, 2005). Reflection through the use of journaling has been shown to empower students and promote self-direction (Harris, 2005). Faculty report increased satisfaction with the quality of student learning and stronger relationships among students and faculty, when service-learning strategies are used (Champagne, 2006). When students are involved in service-learning, the visibility and reputation of academic institutions are enhanced, and opportunities for collaborations on research and social policies can ensue (Champagne, 2006; Seifer, 1998). Community organizations benefit by reaching more people and increas-

ing the variety and quality of services provided (Champagne, 2006). Evidence shows that changes in health behaviors result in improved health outcomes through service-learning projects (Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006a).

In the United States, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of service-learning as an educational strategy in higher education. For example, under the auspices of Pew, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health was initiated in 1997 for the purpose of fostering partnerships between universities and communities to improve health (Champagne, 2006). In addition, an accreditation criterion of engagement and service has been established by The Higher Learning Commission (2003). To address this criterion, educational institutions must identify their stakeholders and create service-oriented programming.

Service-Learning is a popular teaching strategy in nursing education. Service-Learning, with its emphasis on reflection, provides opportunities for students to develop the core values of professional nursing identified by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN): altruism, autonomy, human dignity, integrity, and social justice (AACN, 1998). This methodology is especially compatible with recent efforts to infuse nursing curricula with community-based experiences. The shift from traditional education models to community-based curricula has been endorsed by the AACN (1999). Community-based nursing education involves emphasis on the integration of clinical experiences in the community. Within the past 15 years experiential learning has expanded from hospital-based settings to a variety of community settings where health care can be provided.

At first glance, it appears that the nursing literature is infused with examples of service-learning; however, a more critical appraisal reveals that many of these examples give insufficient detail about the reflective component of service-learning. At times, reflection is completely absent and at other times, reflection is included but to a very minor degree. This is concerning because service-learning is being potentially misrepresented. To implement best practices, detailed and clear descriptions about reflection in service-learning are needed for replication. It is recommended that authors explicate service-learning pedagogy, acknowledge reflection in their definitions of service-learning, and provide details about the student reflection activities.

Misrepresentations of Service-Learning

The literature cited in this article is not meant to represent a systematic review. Rather, over the course of time, the authors collected articles as they explored the literature for ideas to implement in nursing curricula and prepared manuscripts. All articles were associated with the search term *service learning* in databases. Through critical reading, the authors found articles that contained comprehensive descriptions about service-learning while others were vague or lacking in detail. Patterns emerged about the type of information that was included or

omitted, and categories were created. What follows are the categories that emerged and examples of articles that fit those categories.

Reflection not Apparent

In the literature, some authors claim that student experiences are service-learning when they have made no mention of reflection. Some authors do not include the critical component of reflection when defining service-learning. When defining service-learning, several authors mention the balance of learning and service in the experience and the reciprocal nature of the partnerships while neglecting to include the component of reflection (Abell, Main, & Jones, 2007; Alexander et al., 2014; Balakas & Sparks, 2010; Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008; Jordan, Van Zandt, & Wright, 2008; Schoener & Hopkins, 2004; Winship, 2009). Lemon (2001), Neill, Hayward, and Peterson (2007), and Sensenig (2007) mention service-learning in the abstracts, but never refer to it in the body of articles. In these cases, not only is reflection omitted, but service-learning as a pedagogy is not discussed.

By definition, the service in service-learning is voluntary, which means that service is unremunerated. Consequently, when a description includes mention of nursing students receiving a stipend at an hourly rate (Jordan et al., 2008), then most likely it is inappropriate to label the experience as service-learning. Under these circumstances, any reflection would not be in the spirit of civic duty.

Reflection Limited to Definition of Service-Learning

Frequently, authors will include detailed discussions about the philosophy or pedagogy of service-learning in the introduction where they acknowledge the importance of reflection. Despite this acknowledgement, it is not unusual to find that authors neglect to describe how reflection was incorporated into the service-learning project. One possible explanation or pattern for this omission is when authors are focused on providing a description of the service-learning project. For example, Weingarten (2009) described a 15 year partnership with an elementary school, where students provided health education to grade school children, but they did not describe how the students used reflection in their experiences. Similarly, Kushto-Reese, Maguire, Silbert-Flagg, Immelt, and Shaefer (2007) did not provide information about reflection, although they provided an excellent description of student experiences involving screenings at Head Start programs and a faith-based elementary school. Four community experiences were described by Miller and Swanson (2002), yet there was no information about how students reflected. While the level of details provided about how the partnerships were formed, the needs of the communities, costs involved, and outcomes achieved was helpful, readers were provided sufficient information to replicate the project. Yet, there is no mention of any activities involving student reflection. This omission could be because the

authors assumed that the use of reflection was implied because they had discussed service-learning pedagogy. In addition, manuscript page limitations may have prevented robust descriptions of strategies used for reflection. As a result of the insufficient detail about reflection, these learning opportunities should be described as being community based. There are many innovative and exciting community-based projects described in the nursing literature; however, without the inclusion of reflective activities by students, community-based projects may not meet all service-learning criteria.

Reflection Limited to Student Activities

Another way service-learning is misrepresented occurs when authors do not include reflection in their definitions of service-learning but make mention of students using reflection. Bell and Buelow (2014) provide an excellent description about the use of reflection when teaching students to work with vulnerable populations; however, they provide no definition of service-learning. Laughlin, Pothoff, Schwartz, Synowiecki, and Yager (2010) describe a service-learning project implemented by nursing students who provided health teaching for grade school students. Although they fail to mention reflection in their description of service-learning, the authors do describe how a requirement of the clinical experience involved a reflective journal exercise to foster "introspection by students, encouraging them to evaluate a clinical experience relative to their personal growth" (Laughlin et al., 2010, p. 190). They provide student quotes showing how the students recognized their contributions to society. Schneiderman, Askew, and Reed (2002) also mention service-learning in the abstract and provide ample detail about student reflection. However, no definition or description of pedagogy is offered about service-learning. Lack of explicit information can lead to confusion about whether student activities are indeed grounded in the pedagogy of service-learning. In another example, reflective journals were used in an interprofessional education course involving a service-learning project to prevent or slow the development of cardiovascular disease in older adults (Dacey, Murphy, Anderson, & McCloskey, 2010). Although the authors provided excellent descriptions for the pedagogy of interprofessional education, they did not provide any definition for service-learning. In these instances, authors may be assuming that readers are familiar with the concept of service-learning and, therefore, purposefully chose not to include definitions. There are a variety of definitions for service and service-learning; therefore, definitions are needed so that readers can critically evaluate examples provided.

In some articles it can be ambiguous as to whether the student quotations are indeed reflection. For example, Bentley and Ellison (2007) provide a rich student quote that implies that reflection was part of the process. Yet, in their article, there is no indication in the definition or description of student activities that reflection was included.

Questionable Student Reflection Activities

One of the driving forces behind the initiation of service-learning was the need to increase student engagement in social issues (Dewey, 1938). Thus, when student reflection is limited to evaluating personal learning and performance and does not encompass reflection about social justice, the philosophical underpinnings of service-learning are not embraced.

Gillis and Mac Lellan (2010) identified two types of reflection: traditional and critical. They suggest that traditional service-learning involves reflection “where the focus is the provision of service without specific attention to the sources of injustice” (p. 2). This type of reflection does not encourage students to critically think about their roles in the world. Critical reflection encompasses how social injustices toward vulnerable populations can be addressed, which should be the specific focus of reflection (Gillis & Mac Lellan). However, if the fundamental premises of service-learning are embraced, the distinction between traditional and critical service-learning is debatable.

Learning opportunities that involve reflection limited to student evaluation of personal learning should not be identified as service-learning and are better designated as community based. For instance, Foli, Braswell, Kirkpatrick, and Lim (2014) reported that students reflected about one leadership skill they acquired during the experience. Wu, Wozny, and Raymond (2013) indicated that “synthesis for the student nurses unfolds through examination of the practical experience supported by concepts learned in their lecture/theory course work” (p. 178). It is unclear if those concepts included service-learning-related concepts such as justice and equity. Likewise, Ross (2012) provided a thorough description of reflection questions such as the types of activities provided by the community agency, the roles of staff members, the actions of students, and their observations about older adults. Without prompts for reflection about social justice, student learning experiences may not encourage the kind of reflection demanded for service-learning.

Confusion also occurs when reflection is focused on evaluation of the project. For example, Richards, Novak, and Davis (2009) and Richards and Novak (2010) described service-learning projects in Mississippi and South Africa. The authors provided quotations from students who completed an anonymous survey “as a component of the project evaluation” (Richards & Novak, 2010, p. 48; Richards et al., 2009, p. 118). On the one hand, giving a survey at the end of a project causes students to reflect. On the other hand, such an exercise does not necessarily promote the type of reflection associated with the theoretical foundation of service-learning. Hoebeke, McCullough, Cagle, and St. Clair (2009) and Kulewicz (2001) reported that students identified several lessons learned from the experience, making it questionable as to whether student reflection about social justice occurred. Authors must provide

sufficient detail so that readers can distinguish between feedback and student quotations that are evaluative and those that are reflective.

Published articles describing service-learning projects make important contributions to the dissemination of innovative ideas. Thus, it is important that sufficient detail be provided so that replication can occur. Amerson (2010), Anderson and Miller (2007), Bassi, Cray, and Caldrello (2008) and Nokes et al. (2005) indicated that students performed reflection using journals or small group discussion. While these authors described methods of reflection, what students reflected about was not discussed, making it difficult to determine if authentic reflection occurred. Although this criticism may seem insignificant, nurse educators often struggle with engaging students in productive reflection (Harrison & Fopma-Loy, 2010; Wellard & Bethune, 1996). Information about both “the what” and “the how” used to stimulate reflection is critical for determining best practices in service-learning.

Exemplars of Service-Learning

The nursing literature includes articles that are exemplars of service-learning. These articles are distinguished from others because descriptions about the pedagogy of service-learning, a definition of service-learning that includes reflection, and a focus on the what and the how of student reflection activities are included. Authors describe the what by indicating questions or topics they used to stimulate student reflection (Callister & Hobbins-Garbett, 2000; Hunt & Swiggum, 2007; Kendle & Zoeller, 2007; O'Brien-Larivée, 2011; Olsan et al., 2003; Redman & Clark, 2002; Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006b; Souers, 2009; Wittmann-Price, Anselmi, & Espinal, 2010). An illustration of this is the question, “Do minorities (ethnic, racial, language, religious, or other) experience a lesser quality, availability, accessibility, or acceptability of health care services?” which was posed to raise awareness about disparities in health care (Redman & Clark, p. 447). Kendle and Zoeller (2007) also provided a list of questions to stimulate reflection through the use of a respite journal and a journey paper. Other authors describe the how by stating who fostered the reflection, how the reflection was implemented, and when and where reflection occurred (Bentley & Ellison, 2005; Bittle, Duggleby, & Ellison, 2002; Downes, Murray, & Brownsberger, 2007; Jarrell et al., 2014; Johanson, 2009; Lashley, 2007; Ward et al., 2007). For example, Souers used strategies such as providing students with guidelines for journaling and deadlines for submission. Bittle et al. combined weekly written anonymous assignments, a debriefing session after the project, and a student luncheon presentation. Another positive feature noted is that student reflection activities were linked to course objectives (Bentley & Ellison, 2005; Callister & Hobbins-Garret, 2000; Olsan et al., 2003; Redman & Clark, 2002). Student discussions were led by instructors who facilitated reflection following class (Bentley & Ellison, 2005) to meet a course objective about

demonstrating awareness regarding the impact of nursing care on diverse populations.

Conclusion

In summary, there is a proliferation of articles about service-learning in the nursing literature. Yet, it cannot be assumed that because an author claims to have used service-learning that this pedagogy was actually used. A more critical examination shows that not all authors are accurately portraying service-learning. Some authors fail to include a definition of service-learning, or if a definition is included, it often lacks any reference to reflection. Other authors sometimes omit descriptions of the reflection activities. This calls into question whether service-learning was authentic. To have confidence in terms used in the nursing literature, it is important that authors include all three essential elements of service-learning. Reflection needs to be an important, visible component and more than simply evaluative in nature. Students need opportunities to reflect upon how issues regarding social justice were addressed during the service-learning experience. Without this level of reflection, the spirit of service-learning has not been truly embraced.

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