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Promising Practices in Service-Learning with Grant Writing in Rural Communities

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Abstract. This paper describes the teaching practices in a community practice course that was designed for using a grant writing project with a service-learning component in a rural community. The course and assignments are outlined. Four critical success factors are: commitment to a service-learning pedagogy, flexibility regarding course objectives, engaged students, and committed agencies. Strategic partnerships and successful grant applications are the best evidence that enhanced the experience for the students and agencies.

Keywords: rural social work, service-learning, teaching grant writing

Social work practice in rural and non-metropolitan areas continues to be in an early stage of development in terms of what is known about engaging in effective practice. Authors such as King (2003), Martinez-Brawley (1990), Riebschleger (2007), and others have suggested that rural social workers employ community-based principles and values within a generalist practice framework. Davenport and Davenport (1998) describe a framework for rural practice by conceptualizing the local social services network from a person-environment perspective and practice collaboration. Educational approaches and practice frameworks are necessary for social work competency. For developing social work practitioners this involves the integration of knowledge and skills along with an in-depth understanding about "what it means to perform" (Larrison & Korr, 2013, p. 195). Service then becomes an essential pedagogy toward the development and application of practical knowledge and skills for action and the central form of learning. Service-learning is both pedagogy and a philosophy with the central belief that for meaningful learning to take place it must occur in a curriculum-based, community-based activity (Mennen, 2006). Thus, service-learning is one educational practice that goes beyond the classroom teaching and learning and it is not to be equated with community service. In the case of rural social work practice, integrating service and academic study draws from the wisdom of other social workers practicing with rural people, using the strengths perspective, and blending systems for development of community assets (Riebschleger, 2007). All of these frameworks are beneficial as tools in teaching and learning in social work programs in rural communities because of the unique emphasis on both student learning and performance in community service.

The current article describes community linked teaching and service strategies in a rural community to promote learning in human services. Students were involved in a service-learning assignment in an MSW course where grant writing was used as the primary vehicle for learning. The approach taken and some of the specific findings from the course are described here. This effort should be regarded as a pilot project with acknowledged limitations. The aim is

to highlight perspectives that lead to an understanding of how greater levels of educator, student, and community-based service user involvement in a social work course might be achieved, with particular emphasis on the context of social work education, community asset building, and agency collaborative partnerships (Proctor, 2007). This exemplar concludes by providing education outcomes along with the practical evidence of the efficacy of service-learning in a rural community-based agency and university.

Relevance of the Service-Learning Experience for Rural Communities

Service-learning may be one of the more significant approaches to having a positive impact on students' learning in rural communities. First, service-learning assignments place the service user at the core of service involvement and development. Historically, one of the key tenets of social work education is community engagement and advocacy. As far back as Jane Addams, social workers transformed neighborhoods by providing community-based service and education (Addams, 1910) and this approach was the foundation in the development of experiential learning by John Dewey (Itin, 1997). Addams (1910) used the approach of learning-by-doing in training community workers, and encouraging the development of student knowledge and skills through meaningful service provision. Student participation in practical experiences has been the foundation of learning to think and perform like a social worker since the turn of the 20th century (King, 2003). Service-learning is not passive or didactic and is distinguished in its reciprocal and balanced emphasis on both student learning and community service supported through class lectures and discussion, assigned readings, independent research, and reflection activities to advance the community service opportunities (Cook, 2008). Academic content applies to the real-world situations and social issues the student is experiencing.

The goal of all teaching is for students to finish the course with having a significant learning experience. Service-learning benefits to students are reported to be numerous. In terms of engagement and advocacy, benefits included were (a) improved grades, (b) increased civic engagement, and (c) enhanced job skills (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Students in service learning courses are looked to by faculty as sources of unique expertise who have a greater understanding of diversity and the needs of their clients (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Furthermore, service participation encouraged increased commitment to the community after the course ended (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Forte, 1997). Thus, service-learning has "positive effects on students' commitment to future community involvement, efficacy, and empowerment" (Knapp, Fisher, & Levesque-Bristol, 2010, p. 233).

Second, teaching practice skills in traditional social work education presents both practical and methodological challenges to students, instructors, and community-based practitioners. Here, experience is the source of learning and service-learning in contrast to well-established courses breaks with traditional teaching philosophies and encourages novel ways of approaching teaching and learning. Service-learning is thought to represent great potential for both development and enhancement of student experience into knowledge through practical meaningful community-based experiential learning when it is carefully implemented. As a form of experiential learning, service-learning is an educational approach designed to promote academic and professional development through community service (King, 2003).

Third, service-learning provides a wide range of services and benefits to citizens and agencies, and gives students the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills from the classroom to real-life community activities. While enhancing classroom learning, students assist with local service strategies to build community assets through investing in resources coordinated in collaboration with the university and community (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993). Although service-learning can have its problems, these often occur if the community-university relationship is not well executed and supervised, and if student expectations are not clearly explicated (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Blouin and Perry (2009) demonstrated that overall service-learning is beneficial for community organizations and these experiences can have significant and far-reaching effects in education, criminal justice, social, and health service systems which have all incorporated service-learning into their curriculum (King, 2003). To serve the needs of the community, students are contributing a valuable resource, often doing the work of paid staff. This is particularly important in working with rural, small non-profit agencies that have small budgets or unsteady funding streams.

The primary benefit for social work programs using service-learning is the exposure for students to essential community service context for advancing knowledge and credibility for "real-world" professional practice. It uses the classroom instructor's expertise to guide the student in the application of knowledge and skills not generally available in the internship. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* and the Council on Social Work Education accreditation standards emphasize the importance of understanding the person-in-situation practice framework, which refers to the impact of environmental influences on human behavior. This notion recognizes the interrelationships between people and their social environments, and provides the basis for the service-learning environment. Integrating service-learning into the curriculum gives instructors the ability to expand upon the traditional internship and provide students with additional opportunities to address the challenges faced by agencies and communities (Scott, 2008). Service-learning pedagogy is a natural fit for educators in rural settings.

Finally, an essential feature of service-learning is the feedback element wherein activities are circular and nonlinear in nature, giving instructors the opportunity to evaluate their own teaching by observing student application of knowledge gained through the course. When students undertake service-learning, they are encouraged to engage in a real-world setting while also bringing about change in their local community. Research suggests service-learning results in a number of positive reciprocal outcomes for university students and the community including, "improved learning, a better understanding of citizenship, increased social capital, and the promise of a lifelong involvement with their communities" (Forbes, Wasburn, Crispo, & Vandeveer, 2008, p. 29). These outcomes are achieved by improving the classroom experience through student action, reflection, and application of knowledge (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). In addition to increasing students' awareness of their community and its needs, service-learning may increase understanding of social and cultural diversity, and incorporate community-linked social justice, or institutional change opportunities (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007).

Course Description and Service-Learning Assignment

In preparation for engaging in a grant writing project, content knowledge acquisition must be considered. Foundations of Community Practice (CP), is a core requirement of the first year curriculum in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at this small metropolitan university: While located in the state capital, it is a rural southern state with a high rate of poverty, ethnic populations, and underserved populations. All the human service agencies have a great need to attract federal, state, foundation, and other dollars to meet the needs of the population. In the CP course, students are exposed to background reading in community practice as necessary to understand the broader context in which the agency operates, and they must be able to assess and competently apply the community practice theoretical frameworks within the various social systems in the community. Content related to assessment, intervention and critical thinking for practice within communities, and understanding social work values and ethics occurs. Knowledge exposure in this course addresses community engagement, community development, and social policy decision-making at macro, mezzo, and micro levels. Additionally, students come to understand funding mechanisms for various types of human service agencies and organizations.

Proficiency in grant writing is desirable for every social work practitioner, yet most often these skills are acquired through hypothetical assignments in the classroom. Grant writing skills are needed in real-world social service agencies, organizations, and communities. Up until the past three years, the assignment in the CP course was hypothetical or traditional classroom based with no opportunity for direct and active involvement in the learning process and in community work—students wrote a hypothetical grant. The use of experiential learning methods through the service-learning grant writing assignment was developed to help students connect macro theories to real-world settings with the intent of better preparing them for professional practice. By integrating grant writing into the service-learning assignment of the social work curriculum, students began to acquire expertise in this area, while simultaneously providing service to a community agency that did not have the staff or time to carry out these tasks. It allowed students to fully engage in the community and help meet the needs of the population they will be working with for future practice.

Overview of the Assignment

The instructor adopted the definition of rural social work practice suggested by Daley and Avant (2004) to the community development course which takes an inclusive approach to social work in rural communities and to also include the concept that rural social work is not just work carried out in rural areas, but wherever rural people are found. This "perspective leads social workers to focus on aspects of resource development, building on community strengths or assets, and community building" (Daley, 2010, p. 3).

Students are required to be directly involved and responsible for developing a tangible grant proposal for a social service agency or community organization which is to be sent to a funding source. Students collaborate with the agency where they carry out their field practicum, but the grant proposal assignment is not a part of the internship requirement—it is distinctly separate. Students may identify a need in which funding is desirable, but if the agency has

already established a need, the student must complete the project based on the agency's preference. As part of this assignment, students must sign a formal working agreement with the agency specifying their respective responsibilities to complete the grant proposal, complete a client profile, and research and identify three funding sources. Agencies agree to provide students with the information necessary to complete the work but the agency submits the final proposal. If the student is not currently enrolled in a field practicum or the agency does not want to collaborate on the assignment, then another service organization is located (an organization in need of a grant writer is not difficult to locate).

The grant writing component of the CP class has been in place for the past 15 years; however, it has only been in the past three years that students have been required to complete a valid grant proposal as a service-learning project. During the initial part of the semester, students are introduced to the fundamentals of grant writing, community practice methods, and administration, and they carry out the assignment during the last eight weeks of the semester. Upon completion, students are required to make a formal presentation of the final grant proposal to the class and agency for which they have completed the grant. Students receive a great deal of oversight from the instructor in the development of the grant proposal. While they only have eight weeks, the assignment is completed in stages. They receive prompt feedback on each part of the grant that is submitted to the instructor.

Student Reflective Assignments

It is important to understand how students engage in and experience service-learning activities in conjunction with grant writing. There are several ways in which these students are providing feedback to the teaching and educational design of the community practice course. The first has to do with monitoring for student and community agency satisfaction with the grant for quality assurance from beginning to end. This occurs through reflective assignments during the service-learning experience and at the end of the course. Continuous reflection not only builds critical thinking skills, it allows the student to integrate their experience into the repertoire of their newfound professional abilities and competencies. There are a wide range of reflective activities that are integrated into the service-learning experience such as journals (e.g., personal, dialogue, key phrase, etc.), reflective essays, directed writings, experiential research papers, service-learning contracts and logs, case studies, structured class discussions, student portfolios, class presentations, and E-mail discussion groups along with many others. These activities require students to continually think about their experience, connect the experience back to the course objectives, challenge themselves to move away from superficial thinking, and finally to contextualize the course content in a meaningful way (Connors & Seifer, 2005). Feedback is open throughout the service-learning period, allowing the instructor to provide instant feedback to the student and the agency.

In addition, prior to beginning their assignment, students in the CP class are asked to reflect on any concerns they have going into the service-learning experience. Over the past three years, approximately half of the students reported no concerns while a third reported feeling anxious or unsure they have the skills to write a grant, while others indicated not wanting to let the agency down if the grant was not funded.

The third important subjective experience concerns the ways in which student expectations are being met through the course and service-learning. The stress of time constraints to complete the grant along with other competing demands on their time is often cited in student reflective papers. In their reflections, during the time of writing the grant, students report surprise on how time consuming it is to actually research and write a grant. Others expressed a desire to know more about the process involved in writing a grant prior to enrolling in the class. The most common theme centers on the agency, and the importance of having an understanding and open line of communication and feedback with students so that some adjustment over the time is understood for the student to work effectively in the service environment.

In their final reflective assignment, students are overwhelmingly positive with the vast majority stating that writing a grant for a real organization is a good assignment with learning enhanced through this real-world experience. A deeper understanding of grant writing as a process is appreciated as is learning to work with the network of relevant stakeholders.

Students indicated that grant-writing skills will be helpful in future employment. When asked to reflect on the question: "Do you think you learned or gained more from your service-learning experience than you would have gotten if the time spent on the grant writing was spent in the classroom or done as an academic exercise?" students are overwhelmingly positive in their comments. As one student stated:

> *YES! I enjoyed dealing with a real agency, real problems, real people with real time constraints, and other bumps in the road. It wasn't as smooth and easy as I thought it was going to be. A very good learning opportunity! Glad I didn't just do it in the classroom or make it up.*

Practical Promising Practices

Several factors contributed to the successful implementation and effectiveness of this service-learning course. Six critical factors are summarized below.

1. Service-Learning Pedagogy
The instructor has extensive teaching experience and shares a strong passion for service-learning as an educational frame of reference for student academic learning. Service-learning through the community practice course is designed to be engaging, motivating, and to invite innovative learning while addressing diverse community service organizations through grant writing to develop community assets. As with most courses, it is essential that the instructor thoroughly orient students to the concept of service-learning at the beginning of the course. This is done by reinforcing the outcome of the course—the grant and drawing connections between community practice course content and the needs of the agency in the grant. Students need a realistic picture for the amount of work the service-learning assignment will place on their time, (such as approximately the hours over the course of the project) emphasizing time-consuming research and legwork. This must include an understanding that students may have little control over problems or situations that can challenge them in the course of carrying out the development of the grant.

2. Service-Learning is Not Volunteer Work
One of the key concepts related to service-learning is that it has to be a reciprocal relationship between student learning and agency needs. Service-learning allows students to practice in a safe environment what they will be doing in real practice. Students appreciate this. It is stated over and over again. Comments from reflective papers indicate the following:

> *I'm glad I did this assignment, it was really hard . . .*
> *I feel like I can do this again for real!*

Students are providing a service to the agency (the grant), and are learning how to write a grant, and in return should expect that the agency will share information they need to complete the writing of the grant. Agencies must be prepared to share program and budget information.

3. Be Flexible Regarding Course Objectives
Course objectives are important; however, remember the grant writing assignment is tied to the objectives of the class, and of course to student learning. Do not worry if course content drifts toward the real-world setting, as this reflects the experience of day-to-day professional practice. Consider that the necessary skills and resources will unfold. Things don't always go as planned, but that's OK too because that is what happens in real-life . . . you know the lemons into lemonade thing! Have a "Plan B." For instance, one student worked very hard but half way through the grant the agency reversed course and wouldn't cooperate. She was required to write the grant as a simulation. It was still a learning experience, and she carried out all her responsibilities, and produced a beautiful product that she could feel proud of.

4. Skill Development
Instructors must engage in activities with students to stimulate their learning and develop their skills. This requires students and instructors to interact with the agency and peers for a significant level of support and encouragement during the writing of the grant. While this may be time-consuming, students rely on the guidance and support of the instructor as they negotiate the various challenges they may encounter. Elements of successful grant writing were presented in class lectures and discussion, and examples completed by prior students are provided. Motivate students by reminding them they already have many of the skills they need to carry out the development of the grant. The grant proposal essentially puts into practice knowledge gained in the classroom and applying this to real-world service problems or populations. This may include interpersonal communication skills, and politically navigating an organization or community. Students gained experience in writing a grant proposal in collaboration with the agency.

5. Strategic Partnerships are Expected and Essential
Build on existing partnerships in the community. In rural areas it makes sense to proceed where existing partnerships are well developed. Of course, sometimes the agency doesn't cooperate or students don't do their part either. Students need to treat this

as a professional responsibility and be held to that standard. Be ready for the unpredictable, but understand the importance of community relationships and connections, and nurture those relationships (MacTavish et al., 2006). This is very important as the instructor for the grant writing project must find organizations that are willing to partner and trust inexperienced students with the writing of the grant. If the agency experiences a problem, the instructor is in contact immediately with them.

6. Reflection and Revision
It appears from the reflective elements of student feedback assignments that service-learning highlights learning as very positive, and the course content as much more interesting and relevant to real-world issues and challenges. Although some student comments acknowledge that the assignment can be difficult, it is useful to consider how this may be improved perhaps through a higher level of engagement with the service organization to enhance student learning. The process of reflection and revision invokes ascertaining what needs to be changed from the previous year to the next so that the course can be improved. Draw on the results of evaluation to determine what worked well and what is in need of change. Finally, use former students who were successful to come and talk about their grant to the class and what factors they think made a difference, some of the problems they encountered, and what they did to overcome those problems. Another activity used is to have students read and evaluate real grants that have and have not been funded. Students work in groups at least three or four times and discuss the pros and cons of the grants. Role-play a grant review board to simulate sitting on the board of a foundation or agency making the decision.

Grant Contributions to the Community

Over the past three years, students have completed an array of grants that have been successfully funded and benefitted the community in multiple ways. Each year close to 80 grants are written by students and the result of awards and grants include:

- One $500 grant to a neighborhood association to start a web based newsletter.
- One $500 grant to a women's shelter to start a preschool reading program.
- One $1,000 grant to develop a vegetable garden at a local school in an impoverished neighborhood.
- One $2,000 grant for symphony members to visit elementary public school children over one year to expose the children to classical music and instruments.
- One $5,000 grant to set up a playground for children at a women's shelter.
- One $6,000 grant to create community gardens in low income neighborhoods around one city.
- A hospital received a $500 grant for a translator phone to allow hospital staff (i.e., doctors, nurses, etc.) the opportunity to work with Hispanic (primarily) patients on the site. There are few qualified linguists in this rural area and they are expensive to use. The telephone service will allow them to more competently assist their patients.

- One $20,000 grant to develop the infrastructure of a new agency for youth aging out of foster care.
- A foster care shelter for teenage girls received $2,500 for a bathroom renovation and a washer and dryer.

Service-learning increases students' awareness of their community and its needs. Successes may occur after leaving the course. For example, two students who graduated from the service-learning grant writing course two years ago just received nearly one million dollars for an agency they created. This faculty member was asked to serve as the consultant in the development of the grant. Grant successes may also be unknown by the faculty member because students graduate and follow-up is not available.

When grants are unsuccessful, the agency or organization has the foundation for future grant proposals and applications. As a bonus, students have been able to utilize their grants as part of their employment portfolio. While this service-learning component has only been in place for three years, the effect of grant writing is potentially a long term, collaborative partnership between the service users and the university toward asset building. In a recent interview, two alumni discussed the impact of grant writing on the development of their own agency and its continued viability. Many others spoke of their job responsibilities wherein grant writing was an essential component. Going forward, alumni will be surveyed to assess their use of these skills for long-term community engagement.

Despite the focus of the grant, Howard (2001) suggests that it is important to emphasize the difference between service-learning and the addition of a community service option or requirement for a course. "Rather than serving as a parallel or sidebar activity, the students' community service experiences in academic service-learning function as a critical learning complement to the academic goals of the course" (Howard, 2001, p. 57). This interpretation of service-learning is congruent with Honnet and Poulsen's (1989) principles of good practice for combining service and learning which recognize that service and learning are reciprocally related, "the service experiences inform and transform the academic learning and the academic learning informs and transforms the service experience" (Howard, 2001, p. 57).

Recommendations for Teaching Service-Learning

Preparing social workers to address dynamic policy changes, fluctuating resources, and changing service demands with shifting populations provides a challenge to educators. So often instructors use hypothetical assignments to achieve course objectives and build professional competency when other methodologies may be available for enhancing learning and engaging students in a meaningful way. Research as well as the authors' experiences suggests service-learning provides students with the opportunity to practice their growing professional skills while making a contribution to the community. Service-learning and grant writing closes the gap between static teaching assignments and the fluid demands for social work service. Despite the fact that these assignments are often more difficult and time consuming, students not only prefer to carry out this type of exercise, but are more engaged when they do so, thereby increasing their ability to learn. Service users applaud the collaborative partnership with the

university as far more relevant to the preparation of professionals. One of the most compelling arguments for integrating service-learning into courses comes from Saulnier (2004) who states:

> Despite the fact that research has shown that we remember only 10% of what we hear, 15% of what we see, and a mere 20% of what we see and hear, these remain the basic sense modalities stimulated in most education experiences. Service-learning strategies recognize that we retain 50% of what we do, 80% of what we do with active guided reflection, and 90% of what we teach or give to others. (p. 7)

A growing body of research suggests the integration of service-learning is a valuable approach and improves academic achievement across a wide range of disciplines and for social work education as well (Biskin, Barcroft, Livingston, & Snape, 2013; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Saulnier, 2004). Community engagement through service-learning is a dynamic, collaborative process whereby faculty, students, and the community can partner to link learning with service to the community. Most important, for social work students who plan to practice in rural communities where they often practice in isolation, generalist skills are extremely valuable, grant writing is an essential development tool, and service-learning gives these burgeoning social work practitioners the opportunity to practice these newly formed skills in a supported environment.

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