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The Community Assessment:Students Discovering Strengths and Needs in Small Towns and Rural Areas

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Students Discovering Strengths and Needs in Small Towns and Rural Areas

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Abstract. This article highlights an evolving assignment given in BSW and MSW Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) courses. The community assessment assignment provides students with the opportunity to become immersed in small towns and rural areas and discover strengths and needs through observation, analysis of census data, interviews with key informants, and giving back. Components of the assignment are discussed as well as keys to success for facilitating the assignment. Common themes discovered across these communities are integrated throughout.

Keywords: community assessment, community-based research, pedagogy, rural areas

According to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), BSW and MSW students must be able to apply knowledge of human behavior in the social environment and understand the various social systems in which this behavior occurs. Students must also be able to assess and competently work within these systems, including communities, and be prepared to practice in their ever-changing contexts (CSWE, 2008). Content related to community theory is typically covered in Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) courses. Although students are exposed to multiple macro theories in these courses, little opportunity exists for direct involvement in community work. The use of experiential learning methods can help students connect these theories to actual settings, thereby better preparing them for future practice and intervention at the community level.

Experiential learning, or providing opportunities for students to become actively involved in the learning process, has been recognized as an effective pedagogy for almost a century (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Rogers, 1994). Experiential learning in macro practice, while challenging, is both possible and necessary; it provides students with hands-on learning opportunities in community work that can be powerful learning experiences (Carey, 2007) as it can provide for a means of integrating theory and practice (Quinn, Jacobsen, & LaBarber, 1992; Teater & Baldwin, 2009) and can teach skills in community research such as identifying needs and collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data (Anderson, 2002; Teater & Baldwin, 2009). Receiving hands-on experience in a rural context allows for an even richer experience and can provide an understanding of relationship-building, civic engagement, and fostering change in small communities (Norris & Schwartz, 2009).

This article details an assignment with a ten-year history at a school that immerses students in geographic communities and provides guidance and instruction for carrying out a

strengths-based community assessment. This assignment provides a learning experience in which undergraduate and graduate HBSE students apply macro theories and concepts within an actual community environment. Learning how a community functions as well as understanding its context provides students with the knowledge of how the macro environment impacts social problems and services. This experiential knowledge also allows students to recognize how a social worker might work with clients who reside in such contexts and as well as how to intervene in problems at the community level through organizing, development, and empowerment. The focus of the assignment on small towns and rural areas offers an exceptional opportunity for exploring the unique strengths and needs of these communities and their residents.

Overview of the Assignment

Students form groups early in the semester to choose a community and complete a community assessment. Groups are comprised of 3-5 individuals. Group members are chosen based upon established friendships, similar class schedules, or interests in certain communities. Students are asked to form their groups within the first three weeks of the semester so they can spend the majority of the semester immersed in the assignment and chosen community. Although students are also given the option of working individually, the majority choose to work in groups. Students who work individually often do so because they do not have the time to meet with group members due to school, work, or family responsibilities.

The assignment requires that communities chosen by students be geographic communities as opposed to other types such as virtual communities. In line with specific objectives in the HBSE courses, communities chosen must also focus on one or more of the following: rural areas, ethnic populations, or vulnerable or underserved populations and communities. The overwhelming majority of student community assessments in the past 10 years have focused on small towns and rural areas, with most of the communities chosen being comprised of 1,000 or fewer residents. According to the Office of Management and Budget (2000) classification, many of these areas would be labeled as "nonmetro, outside of a micropolitan area," meaning that the population is adjacent to an area having 10,000 to under 50,000 residents.

Students are not permitted to assess communities in which any of the group members are from or currently live. This requirement was added when it became clear that assessments involving home communities were not as objective and primarily reflected the work of the community resident in the group. Many students choose areas within a 20-mile radius of the school, which is located in Northern Appalachia. Groups choose communities in various ways including being curious about a community that is listed on a sign along the interstate or one that is only a few miles from campus but is considered its own community with its own culture. The assessment assignment was adapted from Johnson (2001) and Sherraden (1993) and includes the following components: a community observation, analysis of census materials, interviews with key informants, a summary analysis (including community assets and needs), and "giving something back." Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not needed as the assignment is not considered human subjects research and is part of normal educational practices.

Throughout the project students are engaged in a variety of learning experiences including: (a) collecting oral histories from community residents, (b) uncovering aspects of community culture and diversity, (c) examining formal and informal power structures within communities, (d) gaining hands on experiences with interviewing, (e) collecting and integrating both qualitative and quantitative sources of data, and (f) practice with constructing and delivering professional presentations. Professional presentations of the completed work are given at the end of the semester. Presentations must utilize overheads or presentation software and include photographs or video of the community that help the community "come alive" in the presentations.

Classmates, as well as the instructor, provide feedback on the presentations via a presentation evaluation rating form. Evaluation criteria for the presentation include knowledge of the community and its issues, ability to answer assignment questions, quality of the presentation (clarity, organization, style, and creativity), professionalism, and the ability to work well as a group. Multiple presentations allow for increased integration of course content on communities as well as a sustained focus on key features of and issues in rural communities. Classmates also benefit from learning about the various communities where they may practice in the future.

Components of the Assignment

Students are given a detailed description of and written guide to the assignment. The guide utilized by the authors includes the components of the community observation, analysis of census materials, interviews with key informants, summary analysis, and "giving something back." Students are also instructed to read assigned readings on communities prior to completing the assignment (i.e., Hutchison, 2011; Kirst-Ashman, 2010). Instruction and mentorship regarding delivery of a professional presentation is central to the success of this assignment.

Community Observation

In the first phase of the assignment, students spend time walking around the community and observing the people and the environment. Students are advised that this will take more than one trip to the community and are encouraged to take photos of places of interest. The observation focuses on geographic, economic, social, and political characteristics. Geographic features may include rolling hills, bodies of water, or physical isolation from surrounding areas. In terms of economic characteristics, students may report indicators of poverty, including housing or public buildings in disrepair. Transportation systems and major employers are also noted. Students quickly realize that many of these communities lack public transportation and close access to health care and social services. In addition, they also notice several businesses that are permanently closed and no longer provide goods or jobs to local residents. The observation may also reveal social characteristics of the community, including various churches or local "hang outs." Signs in support of political candidates and bumper stickers on cars can provide clues as to the predominant political values of the area.

In small towns and rural areas, students often observe meeting halls, bars, and quick marts as the local "hang outs." A conservative political environment is also common. Since many of the students are from small areas themselves, the values and political views of their assignment communities are not dissimilar from their hometowns. During observations, students are informed of the risks involved in photographing and filming certain aspects of communities. For example, after filming a power plant across the river from the community of focus, a BSW student was visited a few days later and a few hours in distance by Homeland Security agents and questioned as to the purpose of her filming. Some students also mention that communities are not always welcoming of outsiders and that they may not be accepted. This can present problems in the observation as well as in locating and interviewing key informants. Often though, the sentiments of the residents change once they realize why the students are visiting their community. At that point, most residents are proud to share information about their community. Some students of color have reported being "stared at" and feeling unwelcome in small, predominantly White communities. Other students in the group typically look out for these individuals and try to help them feel more comfortable in the community. Course instructors often address the "outsider" phenomenon in small towns and rural areas in class and problem-solve situations with the students. In very few cases, the decision is made to change the community of focus.

Analysis of Census Materials

Data for this analysis is typically gathered from the U.S. Census website. Supplemental information can be gathered from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice. Information can also be found through state agencies including state and local departments of health and human services as well as annual reports prepared by cities, counties, and states.

Students often benefit from instructor guidance in this area and a detailed guide and in-class demonstration for extracting census data is given. Population and income distributions, racial/ethnic status, age and family compositions, occupational structure, family size, and poverty and unemployment levels are suggested variables of focus. Conclusions about the data are made and comparing these indicators with state and national averages is encouraged. The results are also compared with the observation of the community. In rural areas, census data often reveals high poverty and unemployment rates and a "graying" population. Although many rural areas are seeing a growing number of Hispanic residents, ethnic homogeneity is common in student-chosen communities. The lack of employment opportunities in these areas is also evident from this data, as the majority of the residents in these communities report a commute time to work of 30 to 40 minutes.

The assignment requires professional display of the extracted data, including tables and figures. Instruction on the proper use of pie and bar charts, as well as on data summary is given. Information technology staff at the University have provided exceptional in-class (and often hands-on) instruction on spreadsheet and graphics software to successfully accomplish this component of the assignment.

Interviews with Key Informants

For this segment of the assignment, students are asked to choose two or more key informants to interview. An informant can be an activist, social worker, political leader, educator, clergy person, police officer, or other individual who is very familiar with the community. It is suggested that they seek names of key community members and leaders from other community members. For example, a small, unincorporated town has what the community calls the "unofficial mayor." Students are also restricted from using family members as key informants. For example, a student's uncle serving as the police chief in a community may provide a less objective view of crime in the area.

Students are asked to conceal the identities of informants in the presentation. They are given consent forms for photographs and interviews that solicit the level of confidentiality preferred by each informant. Students are asked, however, to generally discuss the types of informants interviewed during the presentation and are asked to invite interested parties to attend the presentation or to offer them a copy of the results. Interview questions stem from issues uncovered in the observation and analysis of census data. Suggested topic areas include community history, leadership, politics and government, health and human services, economics, and community assets and needs. These topic areas as well as a list of tips for conducting interviews are included in the assignment guide.

Key informants are not difficult to identify in small towns and rural areas as the "movers and shakers" usually have a long history of being highly involved in the business of the community. They are usually eager to share their views with students. In completing this component of the assignment, students come to understand the power dynamics, as well as the natural helping networks available, in the community. Taking detailed notes and audio-recordings are very helpful when students compile the presentation or paper. Members of older generations in the community are often exceptional informants as they can provide substantial history and folklore of the community. The stories shared by key informants are some of the richest aspects of the assignment.

Summary Analysis

This section serves as a summary of assessment findings. Drawing upon the information collected in the previous sections (as well as further research if needed), students discuss the assets or resources of the community including: (a) individual assets; (b) organizational assets; (c) private, public, and physical assets; (d) informal assets; and (e) resources originating outside of the community. The greatest needs and challenges of the community and the community's capacity to meet these needs are also to be included. Beaulieu (2002), Kretzman and McKnight (1993), and Murty (2004) provide excellent examples for how to present assets and needs.

The most common asset mentioned in rural areas is a strong sense of community identity, with close bonds between families and community members. In fact, these are the type of areas where "everyone lends a helping hand." Churches and civic organizations and other voluntary groups that are highly involved in the community are additional assets in these areas. Needs often noted include road repair, lack of public transportation, poor proximity of health

care, lack of human services and well-paying employment, and little recreation for children and adolescents. One group provided the following summary for their presentation:

> Point Marion, Pennsylvania is located in the Laurel Highlands region and is the breaking point of the Cheat and the Monongahela Rivers. It is found eight miles north of Morgantown. After the closing of major industries like the lumberyard and the glass factory this small community was forced to form a bedroom community to Morgantown. Though strong bonds remain between the inhabitants through small locally owned businesses and the Ford Dealership, the people in this area find themselves relying on Uniontown, PA and Morgantown for health care and employment.

> This small community remains united through the multiple clubs and churches located nearby. Many services are offered to the elderly like weekly meetings at a church and the close location of the assisted living facility. They are lacking children's services like after-school programs and licensed daycare services. As a result many children find themselves coming home to an empty house. With more funding the area could bring in more activities for the kids, contributing to both more employment for adults and raising the self-esteem of the children. We enjoyed our time spent in the community and found it to be a warm welcoming community with friendly people. Everywhere we turned we found a local interested in our presence and more than willing to contribute whatever information they could.

Giving Something Back

As a final component of the assignment, students are required to "give something back" to the community that has shared its time and resources with them for the purposes of their learning. Students are encouraged to ask key informants for suggestions in giving back or to base the activity on a need they noticed while observing the community or analyzing census data. Often, the give-back involves a special interest or resource of one or more of the group members. For example, one of the most creative examples was a group who took alpacas (owned by one student's family) to a children's after-school program. Other groups have picked up garbage in a park, participated in a read-aloud program, assisted with a pet telethon, served meals at a fundraiser, taken portraits at a senior center prom, and gathered and donated books for a community library.

Keys to Success

As an evolving assignment, instructors discover new ways to improve it with each passing semester. Because the majority of students have never completed a community-based assignment, instructors must provide in-depth instruction throughout the semester on how to complete the assignment. As mentioned, providing a detailed assignment guide, advance readings on the topic, and instruction for professional presentations and software can lay the foundation for the successful completion of the assignment. For group presentations, it is helpful to provide some in-class time for groups to collaborate as it can facilitate student development of a plan for the assignment process. The assignment should also be referred to as

often as possible and integrated with course content. The assignment can also be integrated into course quizzes or exams, as questions can cover material presented and include items that ask for themes among presentations. A guest speaker can be invited to speak on the use of community assessments in the grant seeking process. In assigning a community assessment in a BSW course, Timm, Birkenmaier, and Tebb (2011) also found that students need and benefit greatly from this level of preparation for the assignment.

The assignment can be given at both the BSW and MSW levels and can be integrated into several different courses. For example, a presentation of findings can be assigned in a HBSE course, while a paper on the group process or on community practice can be assigned in a practice course. One instructor from another university has even required that the assessment be a template for a grant application. The data analysis and summary, as well as the qualitative interviews conducted with key informants, can be integrated into a research course. Almost every aspect of the assignment could fit into a project in the field practicum, focusing on the specific community or communities served by field agencies. If integrated into two or more courses simultaneously, instructors should meet periodically or have some other way to discuss how students are responding to and integrating the assignment into the courses.

As currently assigned in BSW and foundation-level MSW courses, the project works toward fulfilling a number of EPAS (CSWE, 2008) practice behaviors. Students must gather, appraise, and summarize various sources of data (including personal observations, Census data, and informant interviews) which builds competency in critical thinking (EPAS 2.1.3). Related to EPAS 2.1.4 & 2.1.5, students also discover first-hand the meaning of culture and recognize how it can impact community residents. As the majority of the communities that are chosen are rooted in Appalachia, students also gain an understanding of the unique history, values, and traditions of this region. In addition, they learn how the region and its residents are subject to stereotyping and economic oppression. EPAS 2.1.7 is clearly met by the opportunity to apply human behavior in the social environment theories and concepts while being immersed in a geographic community.

To ensure a continual evolution of the assignment, two components are essential. First, instructors should offer incentives (i.e., extra credit points) for students who provide a copy of the presentation for the instructor to show in future classes. This allows students to see the finished product of a seemingly overwhelming task. This type of demonstration can also facilitate a discussion about professional presentations. The second essential component is to solicit feedback from students on ways to improve the assignment and/or advice to future students for the successful completion of the assignment.

In addition to offering suggestions for the completion of each component of the assignment, students can provide great advice for managing the logistics. Many mention that the key to success is to start early and warn, "Don't wait until the week before because it shows." In addition, it is important to carefully choose group members. As one student reflects,

> Be sure to pick group members that you know you are able to work with very
> well. The community assessment takes a great deal of hard work and can be

stressful. It is definitely important that you are able to communicate your ideas with your group members.

Students and instructors agree that the group process is an important element of the assignment and provides the benefit of cooperative learning, or working together in pursuit of one goal by utilizing the strengths of each member of the group. As such, the group divides up assignment tasks based upon skills and interest of its members. As others have found, this type of learning is preferred for large, complex assignments and material, and provides the added support of and instruction from peers (Dalton & Kuhn, 1998; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007).

Equally important as choosing group members is choosing a community. In selecting a community for assessment, students suggest one that really holds some interest to group members, is large enough to enable gathering of sufficient information, is within a reasonable driving distance (because you will be going there a lot), is one where no group members are from (avoids bias and makes project more meaningful), and is one where group members feel comfortable and in an area where there is a lot going on.

In entering a community, students advise that is important to respect the community entered, as "You may have heard negative things about the community, but go in with an open mind. Also, even if it is as bad as you've heard, realize that people may still be proud of it." They also suggest getting to know the residents by "going to lunch at a restaurant or just walking around talking to the residents." Further, "It is more interesting and fun when you get to know the community and the people." Teater and Baldwin (2009) also found that interacting with community members while conducting a similar assignment challenged their misconceptions about a community, its residents, and their needs.

Conclusion

The community assessment is a highly versatile assignment that can be utilized across many social work courses. Students have the opportunity to learn, first-hand, the features and dynamics of communities as well as the unique aspects of small towns and rural areas. This experience prepares them for the reality of social work practice in these areas. They also learn and refine several skills in the process, including delivering a professional presentation, data analysis and display, interviewing, and working as part of a team. Through mentorship and in-class instruction, students can learn the skills necessary to successfully complete the assignment. Likewise, instructors requiring the assignment learn a great deal in each semester the assignment is given, not only about the communities themselves but how to further improve the assignment. As an outcome, students find the assignment to be "a lot of work" but beneficial in their learning about communities. The resulting products are also often a source of great pride among the contributing students as well as the instructor. As an added benefit one student exclaimed, "It's actually fun!"

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