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Reflections on the Impact of Service-Learning/Experiential Education for the Field of Human Services

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Reflection on the Impact Of Service-Learning/Experiential Education For the Field of Human Services

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Abstract

This article will address the importance of a holistic approach for human services by exploring the concept of community and utilizing service-learning/experiential education in human service courses. ACCESS (Achievement, Collaboration, Community, Education, Standards, and Services) will be covered by illustrating how service-learning/experiential education is a great pedagogy for collaborative partnerships between the university, community, students and faculty. Important elements of service-learning/experiential education will be reviewed to provide a better understanding of the concepts. Reflections of the service experience will be included from students, community agency and faculty. Survey results will be utilized to demonstrate how service-learning/experiential education helps students achieve skills and a better understanding of course concepts while helping meet needed services in the community.

Human Services is a broad based discipline both in its foundation and practice. Thus it is important to use a holistic approach so that students have a clear concept of community since they will be assisting with community/social problems. They will also need to network in their delivery of service. Students need to grasp that society is like a web comprised of various interactions all of which directly and indirectly are connected. They basically need to have a better understanding of how the environment and individuals impact each other. Utilizing service-learning/experiential education in human services is a good methodology to illustrate this point.

Experiential education is a philosophy and methodologies in which educators purposely engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. (<http://www.aee.org/about/whatIsEE>) Service-Learning a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Both pedagogies rest on the principles established

by John Dewey. “For Dewey, community was a core concept of his social philosophy. It was the communal association that gave rise to the moral, intellectual, and emotional aspects of life as well as the foundation of democracy.” (Eyler & Giles, 1994) Experiential education/service-learning have “multiple outcomes for the public good.” (Hatcher, 1997) It links personal and interpersonal development with academic and cognitive development. It allows students to learn about social problems and address them through community action (problem-solving). “Learning improves the quality of service today and more importantly helps sustain it throughout a citizen’s life by developing attitudes toward community and a commitment to making a difference. Service transforms learning, changing inert knowledge to knowledge and skills that students can use in their communities.” (Eyler et al., 1997)

Students in the field of human services need to develop skills and knowledge that center around the concept of community. Their role will focus on helping and the importance of networking to provide needed services for their clients. Human Service skills encompass some important elements found in experiential education/service-learning reciprocity, reflection/evaluation, development, and diversity.

There are a variety of benefits/outcomes of experiential education/service-learning, for all involved the community, student and the college. “Universities have valuable resources that become accessible to the community when partnerships address community needs.” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996) Research shows that students in service-learning have more positive evaluations, beliefs and values toward service and community, higher academic achievement, and more likely to pursue a career in the service field. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Astin et al., 2000) Service-Learning also heightens the sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness of faculty and students. (Astin et al., 2000)

Surveys from East Tennessee State University human service courses (Introduction to Service-Learning, Introduction to Human

Services, and Child, Family, Community Relations) support these findings regarding the impact of experiential education/service-learning. Many students indicated that their service experience helped them with career decisions, improved skills, and they were able to apply course concepts, as well as, apply their service to the course and other courses. Please refer to the data below for specific percentages.

Impact of Service-Learning on Skill Development and Self Reflection

Career -

The experience helped to confirm career choices 31% made 20% think of a different career and 4% change career choice.

29% were somewhat stronger in confidence of their major and 31% were much stronger.

30% were somewhat stronger in confidence in career choice and 31% were much stronger.

49% were somewhat stronger in preparing for their career and 24% were much stronger in preparing for their career as a result of the experience.

Skills – Most felt the experience improved their skills

Writing – 55% somewhat stronger 9% much stronger

Analytical – 58% somewhat stronger 14% much stronger

Interpersonal – 55% somewhat stronger 36% much stronger

Most felt they were better able to complete a project.
46% agree 25% strongly agree

The experience allowed them to apply course concepts - 40% often
54% sometimes

Apply service to the course – 46% often 47% sometimes

Apply service to other courses – 34% often 48% sometimes

Other important outcomes were discovered regarding the impact of experiential education/service-learning. Most students indicated they were not volunteering prior to taking a course with service-learning but that they plan to continue to serve in the future. Attitudes about service-learning also improved with an increase in students wanting to participate. Service-Learning also made students more aware of community needs, interests and abilities. They became more involved in social problems and expect to be more involved in the future. Overall experiential education/service-learning help students feel they have the power to contribute. The experience also makes students more culturally aware. They are exposed to individuals from different backgrounds by serving and working with them. This creates an awareness of their bias and prejudices. Please refer to specific data listed below.

Volunteering and Culturally Aware Data

VOLUNTEERING:

Most students (64%) indicated they were not volunteering prior to taking a course with a service-learning component.

After taking the course most indicated they would continue volunteering as a result of the course.

50% somewhat stronger 40% much stronger

Attitude about service-learning prior to the course.
63% wanted to participate in service

14 % were neutral

25% didn't think they would have time

Attitude after taking a service-learning course.

71% wanted to participate in service

10% neutral

20% were surprised it worked into their schedule

Most indicated they experience affected their current involvement in social problems facing the nation.

69% somewhat stronger 14% much stronger

Most indicated they expect to become involved in addressing social problems due to the course experience

62% somewhat stronger 20% much stronger

RESPONSIVE CITIZEN

Empathy – The experience helped make the students more aware of community needs, interests, and abilities.

29% agree 58% strongly agree

Power to Contribute – The students learned how to become more involved.

38% agree 55% strongly agree

Cultural Identity – Most indicated the experience made them more aware of their own bias and prejudice.

36% agree 13% strongly agree

Most indicated the experience helped their understanding of different background than their own.

45% somewhat stronger 34% much stronger

Most indicated they served people of a different culture, race or SES background =82%

Most indicated they worked with people of a different culture =70%

Service-Learning is especially relevant since it balances the service and the learning. It goes beyond just volunteering where the primary focus is community needs. It is different than an internship where the focus is more on meeting the learning objectives of the intern. (Furco, 1996) Service-Learning assists students in the process of connecting the environment and the individual and how each impacts the other. The key is the reciprocity and reflection pieces of the pedagogy. The reciprocity in that community needs is met and the students learn based on their experience and applies the service to class and course concepts to the service. The service is meaningful to both. While serving and participating in class the students reflect on their experience for a better understanding of community and course material. Student, faculty and community reflections illustrate the power of experiential education/service-learning.

Student, Faculty and Community Reflections

Community:

* These students are wonderful asset to our program.

The children they are helping get someone a little more cool to relate to, we get invaluable tutors, the students get to make a difference and I think they enjoy it more than the children.

* The Service-Learning program has provided positive

role models for individuals with disabilities.

* The student consistently demonstrates the ability to interact in a positive, professional, and caring manner toward the children for whom she is an advocate... She is a valuable addition and asset to our program and I look forward to continuing to work with her.

Faculty:

* I have learned the extreme value of experience in the aspect of learning. Service-Learning enhances the overall learning in the course. Students frequently report life-altering experiences through their reflective logs.

* I could have never described or taught the experiences, feelings and features/benefits of these 2 community nutritional programs in the way the students learned while in service-learning.

* The service-learning component greatly enhances what the students have to bring to the literature.

* Service-learning expands students' knowledge base – I can tell them what the profession is like, but service-learning shows them. Service-learning extends the classroom and gives students real world skills. Service-learning helps develop ideas about potential careers, hands-on work place experience, application of classroom learning/training, personal growth; learning to work with others from diverse backgrounds.

* Enriches curriculum and assignment possibilities.

* It is real-life learning which makes a life-long impact. That the students will moan, groan and complain but in the end they learned so much!

* Service-Learning is an excellent opportunity for my students to observe how skills are being practiced or not practiced. Research supports what service-learning is doing as we know students learn best in the environment. I value and depend greatly on service-learning as I think this experience is as important as the classroom experience.

Student:

* I have definitely has a quality learning experience. Every day I walk out of class having been enlightened. I took this class out of curiosity. It has nothing to do with my major but everything to do with the rest of my life. I have started to do a lot of community service work. I jump at every opportunity I get to do it.

* This class has made me much more aware of the world. Unlike other classes that I've had in school, this has been a forum for learning what other people think and feel. It has taught me a lot more about other's values and opinions. It has taught me to respect others because each person comes from a past that I can't understand from just looking at them. It has also taught me to examine myself and see what I really believe in.

* This class had made me much more aware of how I can participate in society. It is not as hard as it may seem. If everyone would just take a small step as we have in this class, it would create a huge impact on our society as a whole.

* I was able to use my unique talents and abilities to give back to the community.

* I was surprised at how much I learned about my community.

*How much my communication skills grew.

* I learned a lot through working in the community and I think community work should play a larger role at ETSU.

* My service experience impacted me in a much more powerful way than I expected. I'm very happy I was able to take this course.

* I feel that if every student took this class It could make a big impact on the community.

* Helping the community has made me a better and happier person.

* Service learning is learning with my hands and heart.

* I think it is important to have experience in community service to see what it is like outside our personal bubbles and have knowledge in what reality can be.

* Sometimes people need help getting started on how to start volunteering in the community.

* I believe this course should be mandatory for Social Work students.

* Service is life-altering; you will earn respect for others who are less fortunate than you.

* The service experience made me grateful for the life I have and aware that not everyone has the same opportunities.

* The relationships you build with the agency are amazing!

* You may not be able to have a huge impact on the world, but you can have a huge impact on someone's life by helping them.

* I enjoyed getting to make relationships with my students.

* Everyone should have to volunteer at some point, it makes you appreciate other people more.

* Really this class should be a requirement for freshman year to help establish a baseline for Human Services.

* I think that service-learning is very beneficial for students and those being helped in the community.

Experiential education/service-learning brings the concept of community to life for students. It illustrates the importance of networks, life-long learning, and active citizens. Civic engagement is necessary to grow and sustain our world. The field of human services especially needs students to be well equipped in this area so they may be successful in their careers to meet the needs of their clients.

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