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Journal- Based Reflection in Undergraduate Service Learning and the University Therapeutic Riding Center

NACTA Journal, Dec 2004 by Pyle, A A, Brady, H A, Lawver, D E, Akers, C L, Cepica, N T

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Principles of Therapeutic Riding, Animal Science 3309, is a service- based learning course that gives undergraduates the opportunity to participate in hippotherapy sessions. This course first offered in 1998, has been held for 12 semesters. A total of 233 students from over 15 majors have been trained in this discipline. Advanced Therapeutic Riding, Animal Science 4001, is a continuation of the Principles class that allows students to participate in the sessions and serve in leadership roles. This class has been active for 8 semesters and has included 51 students.

Recognizing the enriched experience that reflection brings to service learning, a diverse methodology of reflection was implemented in Principles of Therapeutic Riding. Students are also administered pre and post-course surveys that measure attitudes towards the course and towards disabilities. Informal oral reflection is also used throughout the semester. In keeping with the same framework set forth by the University it is important to note that the definition of service learning at Texas Tech University is, "a pedagogy that links academic study and civic engagement throughout thoughtfully organized service that meets the needs of the community. This service is structured by and integrated into the academic curriculum, which provides opportunities for students to learn and develop through critical reflection," (www.provost.ttu.edu).

Written reflection in the form of journaling was implemented weekly to allow students to assess the week's course material, assess participation in hippotherapy sessions, and to allow students to voice questions and concerns. This encourages students to organize their experiences and put them into perspective. Journal entries include both responses to instructor-guided questions and free topics. Journals also document in-class discussions reflecting the experience of each assigned therapy session team. Weekly journal reflections allows students to explore their initial assumptions on hippotherapy and disabilities, reflect on experiences during the semester, and document personal accomplishment within the course.

Previous post-course surveys administered to each class found that 77.8% of students has experienced a change of general outlook as a result of this class. In addition, 100% reported having a better understanding of what people with disabilities and their families face in their daily lives. These results show the impact that this educational experience has made. The benefits that the students receive are tremendous. These benefits range from heightened self-efficacy, increased social and personal development, and an increased awareness of what children with disabilities face.

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