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Methods of Supporting Students' Critical Reflection in Courses Incorporating Service Learning

Michelle R. Dunlap
Connecticut College

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Papers

More than half of the courses required a term paper, which included book reviews, topical assignments, biographies, and reaction reports. When there was no requirement for a term paper, there was often a required project. Classes that required neither a paper nor a project frequently had large enrollments.

International Psychology

Discussion of international psychology was rare. Russian or Soviet psychology appeared in scattered references, but virtually no other reference appeared about global perspectives in psychology.

Miscellaneous

We made additional observations that did not fall into a single category. For instance, less than 5% of the syllabi mentioned local history or the genealogy of advisors or faculty. Almost all syllabi described in detail the calculation of the final grade. Syllabi also devoted a significant amount of space to definitions of plagiarism and its consequences.

Summary Impressions

Syllabi are incomplete reflections of what instructors intend for a course. Nonetheless, we formed some tentative impressions. First, although there are enormous differences among the courses, the syllabi describe an identifiable core. Second, most of the history courses surveyed did not reflect the advances in contemporary scholarship, except possibly in their textbooks. Third, applied psychology continues to play a peripheral role in syllabi in the history of psychology, despite its growth and importance.

Overall, we concluded that although history of psychology courses appear strong in traditional areas, a need exists for incorporating more information about current trends into them. We believe that instructors of history and systems courses will find this information useful, particularly to see how their courses compare with others.

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Note

Send requests for a list of required texts and articles culled from the history of psychology syllabi and correspondence to John D. Hogan, Department of Psychology, St. John's University, 8000 Grand Central Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439; e-mail: hoganjohn@aol.com.

Methods of Supporting Students' Critical Reflection in Courses Incorporating Service Learning

Michelle R. Dunlap
Department of Human Development
Connecticut College

Service learning seeks to provide students with real-life, community-based experiences related to the content offered in the classroom. In this article, I discuss methods that I use to support students as they reflect orally and in writing on their service learning experiences. The value of reflection journals and course group discussions is considered.

Many instructors recognize the value of integrating service learning with classroom instruction. Service learning is experiential or active education that is "differentiated from volunteerism by its attention to psychosocial processing and reflection" and its emphasis on "community building" (Campus Compact, 1993, pp. 4–5; see also Boss, 1994; Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991; Howard, 1993; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Morton & Troppe, 1996). A service learning component in a course provides students with real-life opportunities to grapple cognitively with the "theories acquired in the classroom and to concretize abstract thought ... leading to a deeper grasp of course material" (Campus Compact, 1993, p. 7). Written and oral reflection are key components of the service learning process (Goldsmith, 1993; Sigmon, 1994).

Students must discuss and reflect on their experiences with other service learners and facilitators to make appropriate connections to course curriculum and to help them realize their concerns are a normal part of the service learning process. Such reflection also provides a vehicle for expressing concerns and for sharing experiences with instructors and fellow service learners and allows time for exploring and identifying behavior patterns in themselves and in service learning clients. Instructors must consider numerous temporal, logistical, and other factors when including and supporting student service learning and critical reflection in a course. I use six methods to support students in the expression of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences concerning their service learning.

Methods

I have integrated service learning and critical reflection into my child development courses for the past 3 years. I require 2 to 4 hr per week of service learning experience from

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students in partial fulfillment of their course requirements for the 16-week semester. Students choose 1 service learning environment from more than 50 options, including the Human Development Children's Program laboratory school located on campus, public schools, after-school tutoring programs, day care centers, and homeless and domestic violence shelters, all in primarily inner-city locations. The campus Office of Volunteers for Community Service offers agency monitoring, basic orientation programs, and transportation services.

Critical reflection and processing with other students and staff are important as students attempt to deal with feelings and emotions such as boredom, disillusionment, and frustration that can arise during the service learning process (Goldsmith, 1993). After students arrange their service learning placements, I attempt to stimulate personal reflection in several ways. First, I provide a list of Journal Reflection Questions, which are a combination of instructions and questions to assist students in developing a habit of critical reflection. Second, students turn in their journals to me periodically for responses and suggestions regarding their issues and concerns.

A third means by which students receive support is through three to four in-class discussion sessions, which I schedule approximately once per month during the semester. For these sessions, groups of five or six students discuss their experiences, being careful not to refer to staff, community members, or clients by their actual names. Students may use initials or pseudonyms in discussions and journals and may offer demographic information such as age, as long as there are no identifying characteristics that could violate the confidence of the community members, staff, or agencies involved. Fourth, I encourage students to consult with me and with the professional staff of the campus Office of Volunteers for Community Service as needed.

A fifth support for students is a form letter containing the student's name and a brief description of the course and its service learning objectives, which students deliver to their agency supervisors on the first day. This letter familiarizes the supervisor with the course and the students' service learning objectives and helps agency personnel not to overanticipate or underanticipate my expectations. As a final support, students can submit their journals to me via the campus computer network at any time. I can retrieve and respond in the journal and return it with my comments almost immediately. Students and I also can discuss concerns via electronic mail.

Results

Using scales ranging from 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*outstanding*) the ratings assigned by my students over the past six semesters have been the following: the service learning ($M = 5.74$, $SD = .17$), the journal keeping ($M = 5.41$, $SD = .19$), and related group discussions ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .20$). Examples of excerpts from student journals regarding the role and the value of critical reflection follow:

> The [service learning] work was fun, and the journal really helped me to recognize that the concepts that I learn in class really occur in real life. Although sometimes it was a real pain to write in the journal, I think, that without it I wouldn't have realized many of the things that I know now.

> This teacher [at my service learning site] did the opposite of everything I have learned is a good way to deal with children. [It was a] nightmarish experience. I am so glad I have the opportunity to write about it and share it with someone who will understand my feelings.

> I feel much better now that I have gotten my feelings out [in my journal]. ... We are constantly bombarded with new situations and new information to assimilate. ... We are in a process of development, and this journal has helped me, to some extent, track this progression.

Discussion

Students become better equipped for adjustment in service learning settings and in making connections to course content when they receive supportive opportunities for critical reflection. Critically reflecting in journals and during class allows students to express emotions and experiences and to realize that much of what they experience is a normal part of the service learning process. Sharing anonymous past student critical reflections with future service learners, administrators, and agency personnel might also be explored as a means of aiding students in preparation for service learning projects.

In conclusion, service learning and critical reflection are beneficial for enhancing child development courses. Students' reflective struggles with the various issues that arise during service learning provide important life lessons as well as bring course concepts into greater clarity.

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Notes

1. Copies of the Journal Reflection Questions and the letter to agency supervisors are available on request.
2. Send correspondence to Michelle R. Dunlap, Department of Human Development, Connecticut College, 270 Mohegan Avenue, Box 5322, New London, CT 06320-4125; e-mail: mrdun@conncoll.edu.

Mentoring Programs for New Faculty: Unintended Consequences?

James W. Selby
Lawrence G. Calhoun
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Formal mentoring programs for new faculty have grown in recent years. Such programs, although having laudable goals, may have unintended undesirable consequences; in this article, we identify several. If individuals who begin careers as faculty members in psychology are deficient in their competence or in the interpersonal skills needed to proactively seek the help of senior colleagues, then the problem may lie in how doctoral programs prepared them.

If several mechanics gather around an engine, they will tinker. If surgeons discuss a person with abdominal pain, they will plan surgical interventions. If a set of senior faculty members surround a neophyte, they will want to instruct and advise.

Because we as faculty members have a strong inclination to do what we have been selected and trained to do, selling a psychology department on the idea of a formal mentoring program is relatively easy (Boice, 1989). The transition to the role of successful faculty member can involve significant stress and struggle (Petrie & Wohlgemuth, 1994), so who could be against helping a new faculty member joining the ranks? Formal mentoring programs have spread widely and currently tend to be regarded as a desirable, even necessary, component of the structure of academic departments (Sorcinnelli, 1994). Although such programs are not unique to psychology, broader institutional trends may lead psychology faculty to consider the mentoring process. Even where institutional policy mandates a formal mentoring program, specific plans for implementation tend to reside with the academic department or the specific discipline (Herr, 1994). As faculty in psychology consider developing their own programs to mentor new faculty, the motivation may well be to institutionalize a process that will help new faculty. Yet organizing a formal mentoring program may, in some ways, be a disservice to the faculty and a reflection of a system weakness.

A psychology department is a community of scholars who are, ideally, devoted to scholarship and teaching. We prepare for membership in this community through years of training and development. During graduate school, most have served as laboratory instructors, discussion leaders, or even as the principal teacher for undergraduate courses. Defense of a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation have been traditional avenues for establishing credibility as an independent thinker and scholar. Is a person who has successfully completed such training and received the acknowledgment of the graduate faculty not ready to take his or her place in a community of scholars?

Certainly when a new faculty member joins an academic department, there is much to be done. The newcomer must prepare many new lectures, develop examinations, and begin to articulate teaching philosophy and strategies. In most psychology departments, new faculty are expected to start a program of research. The individual must also learn the policies, procedures, and activities of the department and of the institution. The first year is a busy time. Do we look to the individual to take responsibility for his or her work, seeking out the advice or knowledge he or she may need, or does the department assume responsibility by creating a formal mentoring program with a designated mentor and a defined structure of what to advise and how to instruct the newcomer? This distinction between individual and departmental responsibility would seem to carry significant implications for how a department views itself. In the first instance, the emphasis is on a positive environment in which individuality can flourish, whereas in the second, the emphasis leans toward collective wisdom and a system into which the individual must seek a place.

A formal mentoring program, with the expectation that new faculty members participate, seems to carry an undesirable implication for how we view that new member. Is there not more than just a hint of paternalism? "Let us tell you how" and let the senior faculty act as your parents. There may well be an unintended negative message communicated by mentoring programs, which inform the new members of the academy that they are viewed as individuals who are not expected to be successful on their own. Being treated as a peer would seem a potentially better and more equitable introduction. An underlying assumption of mentoring programs appears to be that new faculty members on their own initiative are incapable of seeking out senior colleagues for advice, guidance, and collaboration. Institutionalized mentoring programs may inadvertently tell new faculty that the very psychology department that is explicitly saying "we support you by putting you in a mentoring program," is implicitly saying "we do not believe you can make it without the help of wiser and more competent persons."

The institutionalization of mentoring also raises an interesting question about attribution of responsibility for successes and failures. If the junior faculty member fails to achieve promotion or tenure, who is responsible—the individual or the mentor? Just as there are variations in the competence of beginning faculty members, there are also variations in the quality of mentors. What if one individual's mentor is better than another's? How should departments include such differences in decisions regarding faculty retention and reward? It is possible that formal mentoring programs may have many disadvantages not fully recognized in the rush to nurture new members of the faculty.

Psychology departments have many responsibilities, including pursuit of original knowledge, application of contemporary ideas and methods to current systems, sharing of knowledge, development of undergraduates, professional training of graduate students, and service to the institution and to the broader community. Such commitments lead to a

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