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The Potential of Service-Learning: Media Advocacy as Community Organizing with La Casa Guadalupana

Abstract

For 16 weeks in a course on community organizing, I applied theory in practice through service-learning to maximize the capacity of La Casa Guadalupana, a nonprofit organization located in Southwest Detroit, Michigan, United States¹. Throughout the course, we learned the principles and fundamentals of service-learning and its implications in community organizing to achieve public health. The class was divided into smaller groups. Each group was assigned a specific project such as developing social media platforms, media production, health care workshops, tutoring, advocacy, and fundraising. My project was focused on media production, creating an echo in the community to attract contributors, community members, and elected public officials. All groups were sharing a common interest and we all worked together toward a common goal, empowering La Casa Guadalupana and its mission in improve the conditions of life of the Hispanic community members in Southwest Detroit. Education is the key element that is embedded in the core of its mission to enhance socioeconomic opportunities for the Hispanic community members.

Introduction

Service-Learning is a fundamental approach in higher education that may help students to comprehend and address public health issues that concern community members. It is distinctive in terms of structure and perspectives from volunteerism, internship, community service, and field education (Jacoby, 2015, p. 1-25). In fact, it is a hybrid of all four forms centered around the beneficiary of community partners. The concept of service-learning can be defined in different ways. It is a curriculum-based learning process that integrates classroom instructions with community service (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Moreover, service-learning can be an educational tool that expresses the ability of community members to solve real world issues and conflicts within their communities. This paper examines how service-

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¹ Dr. Natalie Sampson teaches the HHS 350 Community Organizing for Health course at the University of Michigan-Dearborn College of Education Health and Human Services.

learning with La Casa Guadalupana advanced their media advocacy, as a community organizing strategy, to address social determinants of health, such as literacy, while offering learning opportunities for undergraduate students.

La Casa Guadalupana is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Southwest Detroit². It was established by a group of Sisters headed by Sister Marie Benzing in 2016. For 25 years, the group taught English to Hispanic children at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish Shrine, just next to the organization's building in Southwest Detroit or as people call it, the Mexicantown. The organization represents a dynamic and vital space to learn community organizing, practice service-learning, and promote media advocacy with high standards of responsibility and ethical conduct. The structure of La Casa Guadalupana's community from students to staff members and administrators were physically, emotionally, and mentally open to engage in any activity or task that would serve the organization's interest and our work at La Casa Guadalupana. This engagement was responsible enough to accept any challenging task. For example, when I interviewed Mr. Francisco Castro, who is from Columbia, serving as the math instructor at La Casa Guadalupana, he did not want Mrs. Brenda to translate for him and decided to speak in English as much as he could to deliver his message on the behalf of the entire organization. There were no barriers between the students and the service-learners as the students were very honest and open when talking or performing a task. This was extremely important in addressing some of the social determinants of health within the members of that community not just in the United States, but back in their home countries.

Service-learning is a tool which is very important in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills when tackling multiple issues during service. Again, a holistic definition of this term can be a philosophy, a community development model, and a teaching and learning method. It is a process that should be incorporated into every aspect of serving humankind along with education as a part of our daily lives, like practicing medicine. Historically speaking, service-learning was first identified and described by the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey in 1903. He developed the intellectual basis of service-learning stating that educational and learning environments should be inclusive and all members regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, or socioeconomic status, should be able to come together and work to solve common issues facing their communities. In my understanding, it is the method of learning concepts, theories, and literature regarding how to empower the individuals, communities, societies, and eventually the entire world. Then, we take the theoretical

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² Please visit the organization's website at <https://lcmdetroit.org/> to learn more.

foundations of service-learning and apply them directly and or/ indirectly to reach the potential goal in service. Learning should implicate the same level of serving the community and vice versa to achieve the desired public health outcomes.

The service-learning approach acts like a microscope, which provides a very deep insight on the various social determinants of health that govern and impact the community. The first determinant that was explored very closely was education. I realized that they have had a broad spectrum of literacy and education levels. For examples, I met students who attended universities and colleges back in their home countries and earned bachelor's and master's degrees. One of them was a college professor in Honduras and others were high school teachers. Some students only completed their elementary and middle school education, and some who did not attend school. I was able to assess their standards of life when they were in their home countries as they shared their stories with me. Those students who fled their countries found the United States a tremendous opportunity to seek a better quality of life and recover from economic and social corruption, low food and water access, deficiency in educational systems, lack of access to health care, high crime rate, social insecurity, and absence of job opportunities.

An important question in this paper is how community organizing can address social determinants of health and health inequities? It is obvious that investigating and evaluating health disparities and inequities is a major part of public health and public policy research. Policymakers eventually who are legislatures and elected public officials are responsible for establishing these policies that tend to find solutions for them. Also, they make sure that these policies are enforced in the community through federal and local laws. The framework and content of these policies depend on the findings of public health and public policy researchers in the scope of studying these disparities within a community. The main effectors in promoting policy changes are the community-based organizations and community members themselves, who are affected by the enforcements of these policies. Community organizers serve as the bridge between community-based organization, researchers, and policymakers. Through the work they implement in their community projects following the service-learning approach, they provide a massive insight on health issues, connecting health issues to other issues which concern their socioeconomic sustainability and quality of life. Simply, community organizing can equip public health researchers and policymakers with adequate information regarding social determinants of health and health inequities to promote a broader effect in policymaking, its content, and its level of enforcement.

One way of advancing public health, especially in community-based organizations like La Casa Guadalupana is media advocacy. Generally speaking, public health professionals refer to

advocacy as working on the behalf of a group of people that represent a specific social entity to achieve a positive change that would promote favorable outcomes. Using media in all its means and forms, the impact of advocacy has the potential to reach to the main decision and policymakers in the hierarchy of power, so that the spectrum of beneficiary would have a greater impact. Media advocacy is an indispensable approach that incorporates communication methods, science, politics, and advocacy to tackle public health issues that concern the community (Dorfman, L., & Krasnow, I. D. ,2013, p 293–306). Media which can include social media platforms, digital production, video and filmmaking, documentary, journalism, newspapers and magazines are very efficient tools of communication in determining the scope of change and how effective it will be in the long run.

Case Study: Community Organizing at La Casa Guadalupana

At La Casa Guadalupana, community partners and students were engaged in responsible and challenging actions for the common good. We maintained strong expectations for a genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment throughout the program. The time was very flexible as we were not limited with any boundaries, and thus our potential for creating an impact was successful. I trained my group partners, community partners, and students on how to conduct the work efficiently and effectively. My group maintained the supervision, support, and evaluation to meet service-learning goals. In our initiative, we articulated clear service-learning tasks for everyone including students, teachers, and staff members as well.

On the first day, we went on a bus with our instructor to La Casa Guadalupana to meet the community partners who were staff members. We met Dr. Lourdes Torres, who is the Director of La Casa Guadalupana. Also, we met Mrs. Christina Guzman, who serves as the Program Coordinator at La Casa Guadalupana. We were given a yellow sheet having all information regarding the community's structure including demographics, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, number of students enrolled in each program, language proficiency, and the diversity in educational levels. Moreover, the mission, vision, and values of La Casa Guadalupana were also introduced along with their programs, previous work, and future endeavors. The main program is centralized around adult education. However, they also have a program for children's care and education as well. Adults learn basic courses in ESL, math, science, economics and finance, and practical courses such as electric safety in homes. We were also introduced to some housekeeping rules as well. All information presented on the first day fell under the first element of entering and exiting communities which is recognizing assumptions. When recognizing assumptions, we seek and collect background knowledge about the place, people, history, and context.

I wanted to make an echo in the voice of this organization. My two colleagues and I were

assigned to the Media Production Team. Before we started our work, we did a general assessment of the team in a detailed team contract. This contract included many sections starting from our contact information, strengths, planning for weaknesses/areas for growth, scheduling group work, shared online space, main communicator and means of communication with the community partners, and ground rules. The contract also has a detailed work plan which includes project objective, planned work, and a timeline. With that being said, the second element of entering and exiting communities was fulfilled which is acknowledging the limitations. This element is very essential in evaluating limitations in potential, time, commitment, and understanding because these limitations will be equivalent to the same magnitude of productive work while serving the community of La Casa Guadalupana.

The class was a unified coalition and contributed to serving the organization. It was very dynamic, and this dynamicity was the main reason behind the fruitful accomplishment. This coalition maintained healthy and effective cooperation and communication through sharing thoughts, ideas, plans, and work in addressing and implementing strategic solutions for the issues that are facing La Casa Guadalupana. The main issue in which the organization is facing is financial stability. The lack of adequate financial support is resulting in subsequent issues such as lack of educational material like books and school supplies, defected and high-lead contaminated water system due to outdated plumbing, lack of high-quality services, reduced number of staff members, inability to rehabilitate the organization's classrooms and facilities, and securing salaries for the teachers and employees. Also, the organization is facing external issues in forms of enforced policies and state laws such as the enforced restrictions in the immigration policy, limitations in federal and local aid in food security and access to health care services, and lack of federal and state grants and financial support. During multiple meetings, we brought these issues, discussed several plans, and integrated them into one central application that had various faces including social media, media production, health care workshops, tutoring, advocacy, and financial support planning. I chose media production as an important practice of media advocacy in community organizing, and as a holistic tool in addressing all of these issues at once. Briefly, we addressed an urgent situation, empowered elements of the organization's community, provided services, increased communication among groups and broke down stereotypes, revitalized the sagging energies of members of groups, and launched comprehensive initiatives on a variety of issues.

Media Production

I scheduled interviews with students, teachers, and administrative staff members. The content of the interview questions was created based on each position in the organization's body

to construct a database of information, thoughts, opinions, self-reflections, and emotions which was the framework of the video. For example, some of the questions that were introduced to mainly the administrative staff members were the following: What makes La Casa Guadalupana unique? What state and local policies affect the organization's mission? What are some of the challenges the organization faces?

I conducted the majority of these interviews smoothly, ensuring that both people and place were engaged in the process. I worked on a very special interview with the main Founder, Sister Marie Benzing, and established a special set of questions in which most were featured in the video. I interviewed the program Director, Dr. Lourdes Torres on our campus at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, program Coordinator, Mrs. Christina Guzman, Director Assistant, Brenda Gonzales, teachers, and students. During service time, I faced a language barrier with the students in comprehending Spanish. Dr. Lourdes had to be present at each interview for translation. However, regardless of the language deficiency, I was successful in maintaining a healthy communication with the students through using my limited proficiency in Spanish and body language like expressing an action, object, or even a question. Also, I blended my cultural frame in their cultural system and established a strong trust which broke all barriers of etiquette for maximizing the potential and quality of work. I maintained a strong interaction with people. These two comprise the third and fourth elements of entering and exiting communities. I had great expectations for achieving my goal, and the students and staff members were the reason for meeting my expectations. The administrators have an enormous belief in their mission, and the students have an unlimited desire for education. They are full of energy-full of life, and I saw that in their eyes. I realized that what I am doing is beyond a requirement. It is now a duty. The fifth element of entering and exiting communities was achieved. I recall a quote of Mr. Carlos, one of the interviewees who said, "I came to La Casa Guadalupana to learn English. I have been in this country for 23 years and did not know how to speak fluent language in my workplace, grocery stores, and everywhere I go!" Mr. Carlos's statement signifies that the lack of education he suffered from for all that time caused him to have an atrophied profile of opportunities to improve his life like seeking a better career, home, means of transportation and communication, income, food and water quality, and most importantly access to health care and services. This quote was representative of the situation of the entire student body and their initiative in seeking education for better life.

I took a lot of footage of the organization's classrooms, hallways, offices, and the building as part of media production and media advocacy. Then, I worked for the last three weeks on processing and editing footage, interviews, and photos. Filmora9, an excellent video editing

software was used in this process. And finally, I produced a 16-minute video that summarized the organization's mission, structure, and business in a comprehensive way. Dani Leroux established a YouTube channel for the organization in which the videos are posted. The video was shared with the administrative staff and granted the absolute access and right to utilize it for any purpose that would best serve the organization's interest. The main aim behind this project was spreading the organization's voice through media advocacy. So, the last part of the work which was the most important was sharing the video or sections of the video with social media platforms (Instagram and YouTube primarily) of elected public officials, and governmental institutions like The City of Detroit, city council members, and state representatives.

Planned Outcomes

A special meeting was also planned with the U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib. Congresswoman Tlaib serves as the U.S. Representative for Michigan's 13th Congressional District since 2019. The district includes the western half of the City of Detroit, and several of its western suburbs, as well as much of the Downriver area, location of La Casa Guadalupana and the Hispanic community. A final step was a planned presentation to attract prospective donors and philanthropies like the Ford Motor Company Fund, which supports initiatives and nonprofit organizations in three areas: education, community life, and driving safely. The presentation was also planned for elected public officials in the State of Michigan House of Representatives to raise awareness and increase the financial support in form of grants and help build more resources for La Casa Guadalupana. Unfortunately, it has been two weeks in March and the Governor of the State of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer declares a public health emergency upon the spread of the novel coronavirus or SARS-Cov-2. Suddenly, everything shuts down from schools, universities, businesses, and of course La Casa Guadalupana. We did not have the opportunity to surpass the final advocacy and marketing steps, which were essential and inevitable in this process. Also, the last element in entering and exiting communities which is saying goodbye was not reached. We did not have the time to discuss the implications and the outcomes of the project with the administrative staff of La Casa Guadalupana. We also did not have the opportunity to discuss the future aspirations in developing the work and whether to continue beyond the course requirement or recruiting and training a team of volunteers that can commit to La Casa Guadalupana and continue to practice media advocacy. However, I was successful in sending thank you emails to all members of the administration. I am positive that I will hopefully return to work with La Casa Guadalupana, train a team of volunteers, and raise financial support to purchase new filming equipment after this pandemic ends. The work of all groups was shared in a common Google Drive, where many students had the opportunity to assess it. Also, community partners including Dr. Lourdes and Sister Marie also had the opportunity to see and evaluate our work throughout the semester.

Reflection on the Case Study

The community acts as a multidimensional unit with all its components, perspectives, and nature. Hands-on experience represents the vital portion of this process. The organization's community members who are all immigrants are the true builders of its diversity and success. People who have different backgrounds put their cultural practices and knowledge in one place and allow these two to fuse, creating a homogeneous community in supporting the organization's mission as a whole. This represents the practical aspect of the Freirean's approach in centralizing education as the main theme to the success of the organizational structure. They expressed their status of being marginalized because of lack of education, and that education which is adopted and guaranteed by La Casa Guadalupana attracted them to better their lives. The mission of La Casa Guadalupana is the body and the students are the life that makes this body functional. It is so important to have a maintained balance between the two components of the process.

Media advocacy aims to target policymakers by employing media to apply pressure on decision makers for policy change (Dorfman, L., & Krasnow, I. D. ,2013, p 293–306). It is extremely successful in triggering this change in a way that it affects whole populations by targeting a narrow range of policymakers for policy change. This range could be one person or group of people who form a committee. Media production at La Casa Guadalupana had the same expectations. The population served was not just the student and administrative body of the organization, but the entire Hispanic community in southwest Detroit. La Casa Guadalupana was the origin in establishing a platform of change across the entire community. While the main targets were elected public officials, public office, and prospective donors forming a narrow range of people who can cause an enormous change. For example, elected public officials like city council members and state representatives can help the community by promoting changes in the immigration policy, increasing access to food stamps and health care services, and granting La Casa Guadalupana more federal and local financial support to help community members complete their education. Prospective donors such as philanthropies and private business owners can enroll La Casa Guadalupana and similar community-based organizations in special programs that secure financial support in the form of grants and donations. Securing enough financial support ensures the establishment of a mechanism of action to solve all the issues which are facing La Casa Guadalupana.

In general, a real modification in any policy and its enforcements can be introduced if the public health issues that threaten a specific community are visible or noticed. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube act as the most rapid means of communication in revealing these issues and causing policy advocates to move in an accelerated fashion to

introduce new changes and enforcements that best serve the public interest. So, for community organizers and service-learners, media advocacy prepares them very well by bringing public health issues to light and creating and reacting to news. A 16-minute video was adequate in presenting the organization's history, services, future, and most importantly issues that are preventing it from developing and enhancing. Social media platforms create an agenda of news and terms from this video to target elected public officials and prospective donors to cause a change, and that is the main goal of media advocacy and why I chose media production in this community-wide project.

Conclusion

Community organizing, service-learning, and media advocacy were the functional base on which many fruitful outcomes were built on for both sides of this experience. For La Casa Guadalupana, our class was successful in contributing to support the organization's mission in revitalizing the environment by implementing projects and workshops, established a profile of experiences for any future service-learners to build on, empowered the members of the Hispanic community by integrating them into responsible and challenging tasks in our work, established a foundation of trust between the community members and people who represent an external unit of community organizers and service-learners, and most importantly established an agenda through media advocacy that can be used in the future to cause a change. Yet, I also gained from this remarkable experience as I was fortunate in learning the theoretical principles of service-learning in community organizing and being able to integrate this understanding with the scope of service, community organizing, and media advocacy at La Casa Guadalupana. I left the organizing as a competent and interacting individual, and this is the ideal process behind building a multi-disciplined community. I strengthened my skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, intellectual capabilities in media production and advocacy, creativity, organizational and teamwork commitment, and most importantly emotional intellect. I was successful in breaking the cultural barriers that separate human beings with respect to their norms, ethnicities, races, and customs. I also enhanced my proficiency in Spanish and body language in expressing my ideas and thoughts. Finally, I gained peoples' love, respect, appreciation, and trust and this is the most impacting outcome that I have won during this substantial experience at La Casa Guadalupana. Media advocacy was a very powerful way in this service-learning experience at La Casa Guadalupana in creating a long term impact on policymakers and their implementable policies to support La Casa Guadalupana civically and equitably, attracting new contributors, donors, and philanthropists to raise financial assisting programs to support the organization's mission, empowering the Hispanic community by presenting La Casa Guadalupana as a portal in achieving social justice, and creating a platform for more accountable media and journalists to advocate for similar community-based organizations all around the nation.

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