Implementing Service Learning Into Human Service Education

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Abstract
This article describes the complementary nature of service learning and human service education. The incorporation of a service learning component can be beneficial to students, universities, and communities (Singleton, 2007). Service learning can benefit students by making classroom learning more relevant to their career goals and aspirations (Prentice & Robinson, 2010). The relationship between the university and community can be strengthened by working in partnership to maximize student learning (Cipolle, 2004). Communities may benefit by receiving assistance at little cost and grooming professionals for future work opportunities within the organization. Even given the many benefits, service learning should still be approached with caution as there is a potential to reinforce existing power differentials between those in need in the community and those in a more privileged position at the university. Garnering information about various aspects of service learning within human service education is essential to maximizing desired outcomes for all parties involved (Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007).

Introduction
The incorporation of service learning in higher education is on the rise (Butin, 2006). It is imperative for instructors in academia to critically examine the components of service learning so that maximum benefits can be obtained for all parties involved. If the service learning experience is properly aligned with course content, it can enhance student understanding by effectively connecting community action to course concepts (Dunlap et al., 2007). If it is not properly aligned, service learning has the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes regarding power inequalities between students and community members in need (d’Arlack, Sanchez, & Feurer, 2009). This article examines the rationale for including a service learning component in the human service curriculum as well as recommendations and cautions for including such an approach.

Definition of Service Learning
For the purpose of this article, service learning is defined as a course-based educational experience in which students participate in organized community service to gain a deeper understanding of course content, civic responsibility, and a broader appreciation of the discipline (Bringle, Hatcher, & Games, 1997). Many universities across the country are incorporating service learning courses and assignments into the curriculum (Butin, 2006). The intent, quite simply, is to combine the needs of the community into the classroom content, thus becoming a win-win for all parties involved (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Tryon et al. (2008) explained...
one of the most popular ways of adding in an experiential component for students is by including a service learning assignment into an existing course.

**Rationale for Service Learning within Human Services**

Human service programs are representative of a trend in higher education that emphasizes university/community partnerships (Eyler & Giles, 2001; Fair, 2007; Slavkin, 2007). Human service programs and other service oriented disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and counseling, are well qualified to incorporate community needs into the curriculum due to their emphasis on human welfare and well-being (Fair, 2007). As a part of their education and training, students in human services are being prepared to understand human problems and to intervene effectively in them by offering an interdisciplinary approach to helping, grounded in the social sciences (Woodside, Curruth, Clapp, & Robertson, 2006). Therefore, combining service learning and human services creates a compatible dynamic by which the results are mutually beneficial. Communities benefit by having aspiring professionals investing time and energy into neighborhood improvements (Sperling, 2007), and students have opportunities to connect classroom learning to the realities of an actual human service setting (McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, & Fudge, 2007).

It is important to note that the service learning activities do not need to be linearly connected to career interests because the same core skills can be applied across human service job settings (McClam et al., 2007). Another consideration for the inclusion of service learning in human service education is the decrease in federal funding to support community programs. It behooves communities to form relationships with universities to help meet the needs of the area. Nontraditional efforts, such as university/community partnerships are needed now more than ever (Brown & Kinsella, 2006). It is important to examine these partnerships and the factors that contribute to their success (Brown & Kinsella, 2006; Eyler & Giles, 2001; Slavkin, 2007).

**Benefits to Service Learning in Human Service Education**

Successful service learning projects are an influential medium that can fundamentally result in numerous benefits for students (Slavkin, 2007). Traditional lecture-style classrooms reach students at the cognitive level, but when combined with a service learning component, students are able to engage in course content cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally (Sperling, 2007). Students join in classroom assignments that link theory to practice while concurrently gaining rich emotional experiences through hands-on action (Brown & Kinsella, 2006; Woodside, et al., 2006). Because of this multidimensional approach to learning, students acquire a deeper understanding of course material (Diambra, McClam, Woodside, & Kronick, 2006). Classroom instruction comes to life through interaction with real world situations. For example, Mcguire and Doty (2010)
implemented a service learning component into an advanced adolescent development course where students had the opportunity to develop and lead a mentoring and prevention program for at-risk youth. Incorporating service learning into human service education can positively influence the students’ experience in the classroom (Eyler & Giles, 2001; Prentice & Robinson, 2010; Boyle-Baise, 2002). Students reported greater engagement, understanding, and curiosity of course content and putting forth greater effort into a class accompanied by service learning rather than one without it (McGuire & Doty, 2010; Stelljes, 2007). As a result, students who engage in service learning are more likely to have higher achievement levels than students with classroom instruction only (Mpofu, 2005), thus making a strong argument in favor of service learning activities.

Not only do students increase their knowledge base, but they also increase and strengthen their repertoire of skills. Combining human service education with an experiential component that takes place in the community complements classroom learning by making the community a place where students can practice the skills they are learning in the classroom. Woodside, et al. (2006) were teaching a class regarding personality theory and mental health. The human service and counseling students applied their coursework to children at a local urban Title I school. There, students met with at least three children within and outside the classroom for a total of three hours per week for ten weeks. Before service learning assignments, students reported anticipating the opportunity to instruct community members with some anxiety. However, during and after the assignment, that objective became less salient as students became more absorbed in building relationships with community members rather than just providing services (McGuire & Doty, 2010). Students recognized the importance of the helping relationship thereby critiquing their rapport building skills and honing their communication skills (Woodside et al., 2006). Furthermore, students learned how to apply reflective thinking skills to real life situations, thus practicing the transfer of knowledge (Mpofu, 2005). Moreover, Woodside et al. (2006) noticed in students’ reflection assignments the progression over the semester to an increased confidence in their helping ability, which led to students feeling comfortable in the helper role. By the end of the assignment, students also had a raised awareness of the teamwork and planning, management, and leadership skills they would need in order to pursue careers working with differing populations (McGuire & Doty, 2010). Importantly, students are enabled to recognize their own skill deficits and cite what they hope to improve in the future (Woodside et al., 2006).

As students become emerging professionals by gaining an increased understanding of the field of human services, they turn their attention inward to their values. Through service learning, students are exposed to challenge, hardship, and injustice in ways that signal a deep affective reaction. In responding to the plight of another, students begin to develop a sense of social responsibility and personal agency, which spurs
them toward continued civic engagement (Boyle-Baise et al., 2007; Stelljes, 2007). When students affirm value to the service learning experience, there is a reinforcement of commitment to working in the human service field (Woodside et al., 2006). Students change from being self-focused to demonstrating a duty to others (Diambra et al., 2006), from reluctance to commitment (Woodside et al., 2006), and from being extrinsically motivated to being intrinsically motivated in pursuing their career in the human service field (Diambra et al., 2006).

Because service learning is an insight-oriented process, inaccurate beliefs (e.g., stereotypes, hierarchies, etc.) can be discarded, and new perspectives can be created. By being out in the community, often in places students would not typically frequent, they find out if their personal beliefs are supported by what they are experiencing. With the help of self-reflection activities, professors challenge students to take a critical look at their values, perspectives, and assumptions held of diverse populations on societal and individual levels as their world view evolves (McGuire & Doty, 2010; Stelljes, 2007).

Concurrently, the service learning experience helps students to form a more solid professional identity (Diambra et al., 2006). Contextually meaningful and experientially grounded learning activities create opportunities for students to foster professional growth (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). For example, in one service learning project, students from an intercultural communication course worked directly and indirectly with refugee, immigrant, and ethnic/cultural populations by working one-on-one with refugees, developing a communication program, and campaigning to raise awareness of diversity within the local community (Endres & Gould, 2009). Having the opportunity to partner with other professionals in the field creates a model for students to follow. Furthermore, in another service learning experience, human service and social work students were engaged in a local agency that supports the Latino/a community. Students collaborated with the director of the community organization to help Latino/a individuals and their families have a positive transition to a new country and culture, meet their basic needs, find employment, develop a support network, and support healthy parent/child relationships (Brown & Kinsella, 2006). Students were put in a role that required professionalism as others’ welfare took precedence.

By serving directly in community organizations, students learn about the human service arena and are enabled to critically evaluate and reflect on their pre-service training (Singleton, 2007). According to a study done by McGuire and Doty (2010), students reported a greater understanding of their own professional development needs and were able to reflect more thoughtfully about the types of professional experiences they would like to pursue, thereby supporting the development of professional goals. For instance, the experience could help students to determine what population of people they would like to work with and help them to consider the complexities that are involved in the profession as they deliberate over a future career. Students have the potential to
garner many professional and personal benefits as a direct result of service learning assignments. In order to optimize the benefits, educators must consider the cautions to service learning so as to effectively implement it into their courses.

**Cautions of Service Learning**

In light of the benefits previously discussed, it is important to approach service learning with a critical lens so that program coordinators and instructors can safeguard against potential barriers that can detract from the experience. Service learning yields positive results when proper classroom supports are in place and an equitable partnership exists between the university and community; when both are equally benefitting from the partnership. If students are not properly prepared in the classroom to engage in a service learning opportunity, the project has the potential to elicit anxiety (Woodside, et al., 2006), perpetuate inaccurate beliefs (Endres & Gould, 2009), and harm the community they are trying to help (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Furthermore, if an unequal partnership exists between the university and community, it reinforces and replicates existing patterns of power (d’Arlack, et al., 2009), thus becoming opportunistic for one group over the other. The emphasis in service learning is often on the student and their potential for growth, rather than placing equal importance on the needs of both the student and the community (d’Arlack et al., 2009). Rather than fostering reciprocity, the lack thereof is detrimental to both the community and university on an individual and systemic level. Awareness of these factors is necessary to the success of service learning programs.

A service learning assignment may be the first time students are able to work with “real” clients and experience first-hand what it is like to directly influence the life of another through the helping professions. Before students leave the classroom and enter the community, they may experience anxiety and fear about the experience due to a lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills, fear of being unable to relate to clients, and not wanting to make mistakes (Diambra, McClaim, Fuss, Burton, & Fudge, 2009; Woodside et al., 2006). These feelings are then compounded by the emotional content of the service learning experience itself (Woodside, et al., 2006). Direct learning is embedded with emotions and can cause students to be upset, taken aback, or uncomfortable, which can cause students to retreat into less vulnerable contexts and ways of viewing the world (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007). Students may avoid challenging situations and therefore remain static in their inaccurate perceptions of the world.

Service learning experiences may also influence students’ cognitively by perpetuating students’ inaccurate beliefs about stereotypes (Cipolle, 2004), white privilege (Endres & Gould, 2009), and charity (d’Arleck, et al., 2009). McGuire and Doty (2010) explored students’ expectations prior to their service learning experience. Students revealed stereotypes and described opportunities to teach their community.
counterparts about preferred ways of being, which suggested their intent to assimilate people into the dominant worldview. In practice, this paternalistic attitude reinforces preconceived stereotypes, prevents change from occurring, and allows the stereotype to continue (Cipolle, 2004). Likewise, service learning in human service education may provide students with the opportunity to rehearse and affirm the attitudes and advantages associated with economically privileged students (Endres & Gould, 2009). This then lends itself to viewing service learning interactions as charity, which is problematic because the notion of “helping the other” creates a hierarchy between the students and the communities in which they work (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Moreover, students can become absorbed in providing help for “the other” rather than examining their own learning process (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007). The misconception of providing volunteerism and charity is particularly relevant to students within human services because they will be meeting specific community needs while ultimately trying to improve their educational experience.

At times, the students’ inaccurate and somewhat oppressive beliefs are apparent to the community members. Though the students’ patronizing demeanor may be unintentional, community participants may feel stigmatized, oppressed, and resentful of the students’ involvement. Consequently, community participants may disengage from the program (d’Arlack, et al., 2009). Moreover, students who are ill-equipped with the proper knowledge and basic skills to work in human service settings require extra time, training, and attention from organizational staff, which can be taxing on the already limited resources of the organization (Blouin & Perry, 2009). A lack of professionalism and preparation can seriously harm the image of and partnership with the organization. If programs are not successful, providing partners are less likely to commit to future service learning programs (Brown & Kinsella, 2006). Thus, the university and community must have an equal, collaborative relationship so as to optimize the potential of a service learning opportunity.

If an unequal partnership exists between the university and community, service learning loses its potential to become transformative and counter-hegemonic (Cipolle, 2004). It is easy for the university, financially dependent and behaviorally entrenched in its expert role, to see the community as deficit-based and impose expert solutions (d’Arleck et al., 2009). There is hesitation on the part of the university to place the community in an expert role. Unfortunately, the concept of having privileged people helping underprivileged people is historically and institutionally embedded in power (Endres & Gould, 2009). Thus, universities may be disproportionately benefiting when compared to the advantages gained for the community counterpart.

Although service learning assignments may seem like the panacea to simultaneously meet the needs of students in the field of human services and community members, there are also legitimate concerns that must be remedied throughout the implementation of the service learning program.
Because service learning has been used for decades (Slavkin, 2007), the cautions of service learning have been explored while effective, empirically-based solutions have been recommended.

**Characteristics of Effective Programming**

In order to maximize the benefits and minimize the concerns of service learning within human service education, effective programming is essential. Based on the cautions of service learning, two themes emerged that professors, program coordinators, and researchers have used to safeguard the drawbacks associated with this pedagogical practice: proper classroom support and reciprocity.

**Classroom Support**

One challenge experienced by service learning coordinators involves designing courses to support students as they learn how to apply course content to professional practice. First and foremost, the service learning assignment should align with the content of the academic course. A connection should be made so that students can attach meaning to the experience (Brown & Kinsella, 2006; Slavkin, 2007). Secondly, instructors should facilitate knowledge and skill acquisition on the subject matter. Doing so contributes to the transition from the classroom to the real world (McClam, et al., 2007). Course requirements can be designed to allow students to practice professional skills in the classroom before fulfilling similar duties in the community setting (e.g. writing case notes, developing a plan of services, etc.) (McClam et al., 2007). Furthermore, within students’ assignments, they would reference required reading material, which highlights the importance of instructors making deliberate choices when selecting textbooks and other supplemental materials (Diambra et al., 2009). Providing adequate preparation prior to the service learning assignment helps to reduce the anxieties and fears students have about working in a professional setting (Brown & Kinsella, 2006).

Another way to reduce heightened apprehension is to provide structure to the service learning project. By providing students with clear guidelines and a projection of course assignments, by elucidating their role as both a student and community partner, and by framing the service learning project within the agency setting helps students to know what to expect thereby alleviating some of their anxieties and fears (McClam et al., 2007). In addition, by incorporating structured classroom assignments such as exams, reflection essays, and progress notes, students will bear in mind their responsibility to their own learning instead of being solely absorbed into their immersion experience (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007). In a study done by McClam et al. (2007), students reported that classroom assignments made them “feel accountable” and put them in a “professional role” (p. 21).

After the students are primed for their service learning experience, they begin the experiential component of the assignment. At this point, it is important to incorporate reflection into the coursework because it is a
key component in order to bridge the transfer of learning and skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Morris, Pomery, & Murray, 2001). It is not enough for students to simply participate in the experience. Students need to process their thoughts and feelings either through writing or classroom discussion (McClam et al., 2007). Diambra et al. (2006) reported that human service students who engaged in a service learning experience change both cognitively and affectively. Thus, engaging students in thoughtful reflection allows students to process their emotions, experiences, and cognitive dissonance, while also providing an opportunity for the instructor to provide feedback and monitor students’ reactions, growth, and learning (Slavkin, 2007). Likewise, if the service learning experience occurs in a context in which they are unfamiliar, students may develop a new worldview. Because their old worldview is inadequate to accommodate new information, students begin the process of questioning, challenging their current thinking, and looking for explanations (Woodside et al., 2006). Guided reflection helps students to critically process their changing worldviews. As a result, inaccurate beliefs are also challenged.

Students have the opportunity to identify their biases regarding such things as stereotypes, culture, diversity, and privilege, which then allows educators to help students replace their biases with accurate information (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 2001; Prentice & Robinson, 2010; Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007). Furthermore, advanced cognitive thought is practiced when students examine complex issues in a real world context. Reflections nurture higher-order cognitive skills, which are important as a student and professional (McGuire & Doty, 2010; Woodside et al., 2006). Lastly, the reflection assignments help professors to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the program, so they may make future improvements in order to better meet the needs of students and the community (Slavkin, 2007).

**Reciprocity**

Service learning assignments are different than other field experiences because they emphasize reciprocity, which means that the relationship between the university (i.e., instructors, students, etc.) and the community is collaborative, equal, and mutually beneficial (McClam et al., 2007). Unlike counseling practica and internships that focus primarily on the student’s acquisition of knowledge and skills (Woodside et al., 2006), service learning lends itself to equal opportunities. Accordingly, Brown and Kinsella (2006) asserted that partnerships build on each other's strengths to address each other’s needs. Service learning is at its best when it is tailored to meet the unique characteristics of participants and community members (Slavkin, 2007). Thus, the assignment takes on greater value as students meet real community needs and the community nurtures students’ understanding and skill sets that began in the classroom (Woodside et al., 2006). Coordination between the educational institution and the agency should be a priority in all phases of the service learning
assignment so as to foster and maintain a reciprocal relationship. Moreover, coordinating with each other from the outset helps to make the project clear and consistent with everybody, eliminating any confusion or conflicting information (McClam et al., 2007).

Because of the substantial commitment that is required on both sides of the partnership, it is important to have an equal distribution of responsibility (Singleton, 2007). Agency staff and course instructors need to communicate with each other about the amount of time they will need to invest in order to make a service learning venture successful (Brown & Kinsella, 2006). Importantly, they should maintain contact throughout the experience to ensure each group is appropriately meeting expectations. Furthermore, proper supervision of students from both parties positively correlates with a decrease in student anxiety and an increase in student growth and professional development (McClam et al., 2007). Also, it safeguards community agencies and members from potential student limitations.

Service learning is a joint venture. Successful partnerships require much more than good intentions; they require true collaboration. When the spirit of reciprocity is central to the service learning course, community members feel encouraged to teach the knowledge they possess. Reciprocity is key because community members are often so powerless in our society’s hierarchies that it takes time for them to value their own voice, and it also takes time for students and faculty to admit they sometimes know a lot less than their community counterparts (Endres & Gould, 2009). A unique facet of service learning is the ability for students, instructors, and citizens to be involved as equal participants in resolving pressing needs faced by a community by co-creating programs. By incorporating proper classroom supports and fostering an equal partnership between the university and community, an effective program can ameliorate community concerns and promote students’ learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the incorporation of service learning in human service education has the potential to help students broaden their knowledge and skill base. Instructors need to ensure that the service learning activities are carefully integrated into the curriculum and are aligned with the goals of the course. This alignment is imperative to a successful service learning component as this is what enables students to take classroom learning and apply it to the “real world.” The incorporation of classroom support and reciprocity are two essential components to effective service learning.

Service learning has the potential to reduce stereotypical thinking among students (Blouin & Perry, 2009). It should, however, be approached with caution, as it also has the potential to reinforce power inequalities between the community and university (Endres & Gould, 2009). More research is needed to clarify the components of a successful service learning experience for students. It is critical for human service
programs of study to examine how service learning can be part of the curriculum that helps students gain the necessary skills to be effective in their discipline.

References


