

Constructing Blank Cloth Dolls to Assess Sewing Skills: A Service Learning Project

Holly Kihm

Debbie Johnson

Jamie Napolitano

Southeastern Louisiana University

Service learning is a valuable teaching tool within Family and Consumer Sciences. The aim of the project was to create a service learning project that blended skills assessment with an application of developmental theory and an introduction to the field of Child Life. Students' sewing skills were assessed during the creation of a Blank Cloth Doll. The dolls were then donated to a local Children's Hospital, where they were used by Child Life Specialists to help facilitate coping among the pediatric patients. Students reported they placed more time and effort into completing the project because the dolls were going to be donated to the hospital, and used to help children.

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators use service learning as a teaching method to enhance students' learning experiences. Service learning is based on the principles that students learn course content, provide service to their community, and have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences (Brindle & Hatcher, 1996). Students who participate in service learning experiences report improved content retention, increased demand for critical thinking, and higher satisfaction with their courses (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Sax & Astina 1997; Strage, 2004). Students also report a sense of pride in knowing that they have used their course content knowledge to benefit others (Yamauchi, Billig, Meyer, & Hofschire, 2006).

The project, *Constructing Blank Cloth Dolls to Assess Sewing Skills*, was developed in collaboration with university FCS faculty and Child Life clinicians to provide a service learning opportunity where students were introduced to the child life profession, applied skills related to clothing design and construction to create blank cloth dolls, and donated their dolls to the children's hospital. The dolls would then be used by the Child Life Specialists (CCLS) to promote effective coping among hospitalized children.

Purpose of the Project

Assessment of Student Sewing Skills

The FCS Education National Comprehensive Standard 16.0 for textiles and apparel states "Integrate knowledge, skills and practices required for careers in textiles and apparel" (National Association of State Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2008). Content Standard 16.4 further specifies that students should be able to "demonstrate skills needed to produce, alter, or repair fashion, apparel, and textiles products" (National Association of State Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2008). It is important that FCS students, in particular those students who want to teach FCS within high schools, master these skills so that they may teach them to their students in the future. In a survey of high school teachers, respondents indicated that it was extremely important for teachers to be able to "perform basic skills necessary to use and alter patterns, construct and fit simple garments, and make simple repairs and alternations" (Lee, 2002, p. 29). In addition, it was recommended that teachers choose appropriate techniques and sequences of design beginning with fabric preparation and progressing to the cutting and

marking of pattern pieces, construction, and final pressing of the project. One method of assessing the beginning sewing skills utilized in an Introductory Clothing Construction course at the university level was the construction of a blank cloth doll.

Introduction to Child Life and Blank Cloth Dolls

FCS educators who are familiar with the Child Life field may better appreciate and understand the Blank Cloth Doll project. Child Life professionals (CCLS) have been developing and implementing therapeutic interventions for hospitalized children for over 30 years. The scope of CCLS practice has become more diverse and has attracted more widespread research. Professionals now practice in a number of settings such as surgery centers, outpatient clinics, dentist offices, hospices, and facilities that support abused children. The populations are different, with varying needs, but the act of play remains the single-most important form of communication between CCLS and the child (Koller, 2008). Play is also a universal language among children; it offers them the opportunity for self-expression and organization of their thoughts while allowing them to regain a sense of control in a threatening environment (Thomas, 2009).

Donna Koller, a clinician at the Hospital for Sick Children in Canada, studied the potential influence that various forms of play have on children's perception of their hospital experiences. Koller and her colleagues found that the use of dolls, puppets, and art, in conjunction with medical materials, during play reduced the negative psychological and physiological effects commonly associated with hospitalization and procedures (Koller, 2008). It was also reported that medical play is one of the most effective tools used when working with children who will be receiving medical treatment. For example, a CCLS can use the doll to show a child how an IV (intravenous therapy) is placed. The demonstration will give the child an opportunity to learn about the procedure, ask questions, and then develop and practice some coping techniques to use during the procedure. Because it is essential for the CCLS to have an understanding of the child's perception of experiences with medical staff, procedures, office appointments, and inpatient stays, CCLS need developmentally appropriate tools to assess all areas of the child's developmental level (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical) in order to develop an individualized treatment plan.

One of the tools that CCLS use during medical play and assessment is the blank cloth doll. The dolls are created with varying shades of muslin fabric (to represent a multicultural population) and are then filled with batting. Batting is cotton or synthetic material that is used to line or stuff fabric-based projects. The dolls have no facial features, clothing, or any other defining features with the exception of the head, arms, legs, and torso. The child is encouraged to personalize the doll by giving it a name, and adding eyes, ears, mouth, nose, hair, clothing, or anything else they would like to make the doll an item of familiarity or comfort. Once the blank cloth doll has been personalized, the CCLS initiates medical play with the child.

During medical play sessions, the CCLS offers medical equipment that the child is either familiar with or that he or she will be introduced to in the near future. Syringes, anesthesia masks, blood pressure cuffs, and catheters are among the many basic and specific supplies that are frequently introduced during a child's hospitalization. The play session is not only an opportunity to see how the child perceives these tools and how they are used, but it is also a means of teaching during a non-directive interaction. In this manner, the child asks questions regarding the equipment in his or her own time. Professionals can visibly see some of the

misconceptions that the child has regarding medical care, work as an advocate to redirect the child through play, and educate staff on the child's perceptions.

Some of the common themes observed during medical play with a blank cloth doll include aggression, withdrawal, misconceptions, understanding, or indifference. Lab draws, IV catheter placement, sedation, and the use of bandages are among some of the experiences portrayed during play. Children also tend to express their fears, anger, frustrations, and anxiety with regard to their current and previous medical experiences. This form of play offers great insight into where the child is emotionally and what the healthcare team can do to facilitate a positive coping environment for the child and his/ family (Thomas, 2009).

Garry Landreth, founder of the Center for Play Therapy, shares that play in the hospital setting can be viewed as a child's way of developing control over their experience, and that the utilization of dolls and medical equipment are just as important as the surgeon's tools in healing the child (Landreth, 1991). The importance of this therapeutic tool does not end after the play and teaching has addressed the child's immediate needs. Children are often encouraged to take their dolls with them into surgery, procedures, inpatient stays, etc., so that they still have the comfort and familiarity that is associated with their experience with the blank cloth doll.

Project Details

The blank cloth doll was used to assess students sewing skills in an introductory clothing construction course before they began their major garment construction project. Following lessons and skills application in areas such as pattern layout, marking, cutting, basic straight seams, sewing curves, clipping seams, grading seams, students were given an application test which required the completion of the blank cloth doll.

First, a child life specialist explained the use of blank cloth doll and the service learning project. Students were then given a pattern for the blank cloth doll and were also supplied with muslin fabric, which was donated for the project. The pattern is approximately 12 inches in height and 8 inches wide. The seam allowance for the doll is $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Students were instructed to cut out the pattern, mark appropriately, and construct the doll. Finally, students turned the doll inside out, stuffed it, and sewed up the opening.

Upon completion of the project, students took the dolls to the children's hospital and donated them to the child life department. The child life staff appreciated the donation of the dolls. Because the dolls are personalized and taken home by the children who use them, clinicians are always in need of new donations.

Project Outcomes

Skill Assessment

Based on information learned in the course, students were asked to utilize critical thinking skills to determine grading and clipping of curves while creating the dolls. Sewing skills tested through the blank cloth doll project included cutting, marking, backstitching, sewing straight seams, turning corners, appropriate seam allowance, clipping inner and outer curves, pressing seams, and hand sewing skills. Variances in students' abilities were recognized and each student was informed of the skills they needed to further develop. Some students had difficulty turning corners correctly, some needed to work on uniform seam allowances, and some needed to work on their hand sewing skills. Time was set aside in the following class to work on the skills that needed improvement.

Personal Accomplishment

Students who participated in the project were intrigued to learn about the field of Child Life, and were excited to use their skills to create dolls for the children. Because the students were asked to create such a unique doll for the children, they felt a sense of pride and goodness about their work. A grandmother of one of the students was so impressed with the service learning project that she and her sewing group constructed over 50 dolls that were also donated to the children's hospital. In addition, some students shared that they were willing to work more diligently on the task because they knew how important the doll would be for the children during their stay in the hospital.

Community Service

The outcomes of the service learning project reinforced how valuable experiences such as creating blank cloth dolls can be, and how application projects can be used as a strategy for more successful teaching and learning experiences. By developing projects for students that may be used in service to others, FCS faculty are able to assess their students' skills, while contributing something very unique to even the youngest members of their communities.

Conclusions

Utilizing service learning within the classroom is a valuable teaching tool. Students enrolled in the clothing construction course reported a better learning experience attributed to their participation in the project. Though the primary purpose of the project was to assess the sewing skills of the students, the experience provided them with other unique opportunities such as learning about an application of child development that is not commonly addressed within FCS curricula, and having their work used in a professional setting to help children. The Blank Cloth Doll project benefited many, and also reinforced the importance and usefulness of service learning within the classroom.

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About the Authors

Holly Kihm is an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator of Family and Consumer Sciences at Southeastern Louisiana University. She holds a PhD in Human Ecology as well as Certification in both Child Life and Family Life Education.

Debbie Johnson is an Associate Professor of Family and Consumer Sciences at Southeastern Louisiana University. She holds a PhD in and is a Certified Family and Consumer Scientist.

Jamie Napolitano is an Adjunct Instructor with Southeastern Louisiana University. She holds a Master's degree in Counseling, and is a Certified Child Life Specialist.

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