

Service Learning as a Transition into Foundation Field

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Abstract: *Service learning is a pedagogical method to bridge classroom and community experiences for students. Although social work education has historically emphasized this connection through internship experiences, service learning can fill a different function within the curriculum. This article proposes a service learning experience to assist graduate students with the transition into their foundation field placement. Beneficial outcomes of using service learning as an educational bridge are discussed for students, faculty, and the social work program.*

Keywords: *Service learning, social work education, curriculum, field practicum, community service*

During the last 10 years, colleges and universities have become more involved in providing students with opportunities for community service. Service learning is a type of community service that is designed to promote student education and development, along with promoting community goals (Gray, Ondaatje & Zakaras, 1999). In the 15 years since its initiation into educational institutions, faculty across disciplines (e.g., humanities, business, social and natural sciences) have started to include service learning projects in their courses as a way to bridge academic and experiential learning.

This article proposes service learning as a way to assist graduate students with the transition into foundation internships. The use of community experience is certainly not a new phenomenon in social work education, as the curriculum at both the baccalaureate and graduate levels involves extensive practicum experience. In fact, Jane Addams is credited with being one of the early proponents of "promoting learning by community service" which is the underlying premise of service learning (Morton & Troppe, 1996). Yet, service learning is largely absent in social work, as faculty seem to mistakenly perceive that internships and service learning serve the same purpose in the curriculum. Service learning can fill a different function and can be structured to complement a field program by preparing students for their initial social work practicum. Service learning serves to bridge practice and academic experiences by having students "learn while doing" in real community settings and functions as a transition into the foundation internship.

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OVERVIEW OF SERVICE LEARNING

History and Development

In the mid-1980s, faculty and administrators were increasingly concerned about the lack of civic mindedness within higher education. In 1985, presidents from Brown, Georgetown, Stanford universities, and the Educational Commission of the United States signed the College Compact to promote community service for students and provide national leadership in bringing together universities with their communities. The College Compact was based on the principle that students would willingly become involved and support their communities if they were given the opportunity (Kraft, 1996). By the mid-1990s, almost 1000 colleges and universities participated in some form of campus—community service partnerships (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994).

Statistics suggest that service learning has become an integral part of many school- and campus-based curricula. Current estimates indicate that about two million students participate in service-learning projects at four-year public and private institutions (Shumer & Cook, 1999). In addition, many students enter college having experienced service learning in their secondary education. Currently, the number of high school students involved in service learning is almost three million, with an additional 2.5 million middle school students involved in community projects. A boost for service learning was achieved in 1993 with the establishment of the National and Community Trust Act of 1993, which established 20,000 positions through the Americorps National Service and the national Learn and Serve America programs (Brandell & Hinck, 1997). Since the time that the College Compact was signed, the number of students involved in service learning has grown 3663% (Shumer & Cook, 1999)!

Definitions

Although service learning was started to promote civic responsibility, it moves beyond the concept of volunteerism. As McCarthy and Tucker (1999) state, "Service learning is not volunteerism; it delivers on the learning objectives of the course (for which the student has contracted) via community service activity just as an exam or paper does" (p. 555). Likewise, service learning is not identical to an internship experience. Furco (1996) offers a useful typology of different kinds of experiential education based upon two dimensions: *intended beneficiary* of the service activity, and *degree of emphasis* on service or learning.

- **Volunteerism** engages students in activities where the primary emphasis is on service provided, and the intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient. Examples are a friendly visiting program to a nursing home or being an activity leader in a recreational center for teenagers.
- **Community service** involves students in activities that primarily focus on service provided, with some defined benefit for the student. An example is having students provide a meal to the homeless population during the holidays. As a result of this activity, students receive some benefit by learning more about how this project makes a difference in the lives of homeless individuals.

- *Internships* require that students become engaged in activities primarily to obtain hands-on experiences to enhance learning or skill development. In social work, the internship typically involves a close relationship with an agency supervisor, structured objectives, and assignments.
- *Service learning* equally focuses on benefits for the service provider (the student) and the service recipient. Process and outcome are equally important in service learning projects.

While this typology is useful in discriminating among different instructional experiences, it does not yield a clear and precise definition of service learning. Multiple definitions exist. They stress various components of the service and learning dimensions. Some authors describe service learning in educational terms such as “structured learning” (Burns, 1998) or as involving reflection to further the understanding of course content and the discipline (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; McCarthy & Tucker, 1999). Other definitions stress the connection to the community such as being a method to “participate in organized service activities to meet community needs” (Brandell & Hinck, 1997) or the opportunity to “engage students in real life experiences” (Morton & Troppe, 1996). The most widely accepted definition, however, appears to be based upon the National and Community Service Act of 1990. This conception includes these four dimensions of service learning:

- Students learn and develop through participation in organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated in collaboration with school and community;
- The program is integrated into the academic curriculum and provides structured time to think, discuss, or write about their experiences;
- Students are provided with opportunities to use their newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- Experiences enhance what is taught by extending learning beyond the classroom into the community, which fosters development of a sense of caring.

SERVICE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Impacts of service learning have been identified for students, faculty, and communities. Students appear to develop both personally and professionally from involvement in service learning experiences. Service learning is also beneficial to faculty, who tend to become more involved in relevant community issues and learn along with their students. In addition, communities are enhanced by increased numbers of individuals involved in programs, and also benefit from resources associated with college and university settings.

Several studies on student outcomes in higher education have identified positive psychological, cognitive, and social results from service learning. Students in service learning courses have an increased sense of self-esteem (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Hedin, 1989), and a sense of empowerment in promoting social change (Boss, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Miller, 1994). In addition, cognitive gains such as enhanced creative problem solving have also been reported (Batchelder & Root,

1994; Markus, Howard & King, 1993), enhanced ability to apply concepts to real life issues (McClusky-Fawcett & Green, 1992), and increased motivation to learn (Berson & Younkin, 1997). Gains were also reported in students' ability to empathize with individuals who are experiencing social problems (Forte, 1997; Nnakwe, 1999). These outcomes are beneficial for students in any discipline, but are specifically related to program outcomes in social work education.

Although faculty often benefit from service learning experiences, they may initially be reluctant to engage in service learning due to their perception that students will not be committed to projects or will fail to carry out assigned tasks (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999). However, the opposite appears to be the norm. In a study carried out by the RAND Corporation, students in higher education were surveyed about their experiences with service learning. Those enrolled in service learning courses reported more satisfaction by rating their classes as above average more frequently (72% compared to 47%) than their cohorts who were in courses that did not include service learning assignments (Gray, et al., 1999). Faculty report that their service learning students are eager to learn and demonstrate more defined skills in analysis and application of content (Hesser, 1995).

Communities also benefit from partnerships with academic programs. Since service learning is equally focused on education and the provision of community service (Furco, 1996), programs receive additional personnel and support. In 1997, for example, approximately 1,650 hours of service were, on average, generated for each service learning project (Gray, et al., 1999). In another evaluation of impact, 300 service learning projects were initiated from 17 sites that provided more than 150,000 hours of service (Center for Human Resources, 1999). The added resources allow communities to pilot innovative or novel approaches without over extending or sacrificing resources. In addition, service learning ventures provide an impetus for expanding collaborations between the academic and service communities. Possible outcomes of service learning partnerships include generation of grant proposals, stimulation of additional internship sites for students, and jointly authored publications.

SERVICE LEARNING AS A TRANSITION INTO FOUNDATION INTERNSHIPS

In spite of the positive outcomes associated with service learning, there has been little attempt to integrate this instructional method into the social work curriculum. A notable exception is a service learning project for social work students with the homeless population (Forte, 1997). As a result of their experience on this project, students gained valuable insight into the lives of homeless persons and developed skills in civic responsibility and empathy building. Based upon similar outcomes reported from other disciplines, service learning can serve an important function in social work education.

Service Learning as an Educational Bridge

Although social work education already includes community service activities through internships and volunteer requirements, service learning can serve as a transition into foundation field placements. Because of the focus and structure of service learning, this experience can help graduate students prepare for their first social work internship experience. Used in this way as an "educational bridge," service learning can be beneficial to faculty, students, and the program.

In certain respects, graduate students are much less prepared to enter their initial social work practicum than baccalaureate students. BSWs have frequently taken a variety of social work courses prior to an internship and have worked with a social work advisor to construct a program of study. When undergraduates enter their field placement, they have some initiation into the professional social work role. Conversely, graduate students often come to the social work program with a variety of backgrounds and baccalaureate degrees. Their understanding of the professional issues, roles, and dilemmas may be at an elementary level. Part of the focus in the initial semester is to help modify the identity that was molded in their undergraduate major (e.g., psychology, sociology, humanities) into that of a professional social worker. Service learning provides such students an opportunity to view some of the issues that face practitioners and communities, and to become involved in promoting positive changes. The initial experience as a "change agent" is a positive entry into the beginning identity as a social worker. After completing the service learning experience, graduate students may enter their foundation internships with a more realistic and holistic sense of social work practice.

Since students do not always have a comprehensive understanding of professional practice, service learning can acquaint them with different client populations and service contexts. For example, gerontology is an under-represented field of practice in social work. While about 60% of all NASW members recognize the need for gerontological knowledge (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997; Peterson & Wendt, 1990), most practicing social workers have not received education or training in this field of practice (Klein, 1996). In fact, only about 10% of all social work students take a gerontology course (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997). Students' reluctance to take content on aging in coursework and internships may be related to a lack of exposure to older adults, ageism, and feelings about the undesirability of working with this client population. Service learning experiences provide students an opportunity to become more familiar with older adults and break through the associated myths. In an analysis of service learning in a long-term care facility, for example, 90% of the students reported that the experience was useful in their education. In addition, significant positive changes were found in their attitudes toward older adults from pre- to post-experience (Hegeman, 1999). This is just a one example of how service learning can expose students to new situations to generate excitement and enthusiasm. As a result of positive experiences in service learning projects, students may be motivated to select internships in areas they had not previously considered.

Service learning also can be enriching for social work faculty and the entire curriculum. Since faculty collaborate with agency personnel to construct learning-practice experiences for students, they become cognizant of priority issues in their communities. These opportunities allow faculty to engage in real practice challenges that add depth to the entire curriculum. As the result of their involvement in service learning projects, faculty can bring knowledge and experience to the other courses that they teach. Some of these partnerships can translate into expanded collaborations with community partners on grants, publications, and other research.

While a service learning experience may be pivotal for some students, others may struggle with their beginning practice experiences. An additional benefit of

using service learning as a bridging experience in the curriculum is the opportunity to evaluate student readiness for fieldwork prior to placement. Social work education has been admonished for failing to assess whether students are prepared for internships (DeWeaver & Kropf, 1995; Gibbs, 1994; Isaac, Johnson, Lockhart & White, 1993; Koerin & Miller, 1995). Service learning provides a gatekeeping juncture early in the program and allows faculty to evaluate whether students possess the necessary skills and knowledge to move into the foundation practicum. More importantly, this experience allows students the opportunity to evaluate their own goodness-of-fit with the profession early in the curriculum. Students who have difficulty at this point are identified early enough to make a decision regarding their academic career prior to spending considerable time, effort, and resources in a graduate program.

Integrating Service Learning into Foundation Courses

During the first semester of graduate study, many programs delay entrance into the foundation practicum. Some programs have students begin field placement midway through the first semester, and others have students start in the second semester. In either of these situations, a service learning experience can be incorporated into courses prior to the practicum. In this way, service learning functions as a transition into the more structured and individualized experience of the foundation internship.

Service learning activities vary greatly and can be incorporated into any foundation course. With the passage of the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) in July 2001, foundation content covers eight major areas within the curriculum: values and ethics, diversity, populations-at-risk and social and economic justice, human behavior in the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social work practice, research, and field education (Council on Social Work Education, 2001). The following section provides examples of how service learning can be incorporated into various core courses, and demonstrates ways that projects can augment content. In addition, methods that instructors can use to help students learn from and with each other will be highlighted.

Practice Content. In practice courses, students begin to master fundamental social work skills. They learn about ways to build relationships with clients, construct service plans, interview, and evaluate their practice. In some programs, students are also initially exposed to practice with various client systems, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. In addition, content on ethical issues, professional use of self, and working with diverse clients is typically included in this course.

Service learning activities can help students begin to employ their skill repertoire within various community contexts. As students begin to put these skills into action, the complexity of practice becomes more real, which provides opportunities to discuss how “reading about” practice differs from implementation. In addition, students have the opportunity to struggle with situations where the ideal outcome is not always achieved. In these instances, instructors can help the students identify alternate ways of progressing to accomplish their tasks.

One way of integrating service learning into a practice course is to have groups of students work in different agencies with various client populations. In non-

profit agencies, student support is welcomed as a way to maximize personnel and provide programs that go beyond what the agency could offer with its own resources. The course instructor could construct an assignment to run a program for participants in two different community settings. One group of students could be assigned to a homeless shelter, for example, leading a job readiness program. This assignment would involve serving as an educator to teach residents various employment skills, such as filling out applications and interviewing. Other skills include linkage to community resources including potential employers and GED courses. A second group of students would be placed at a different site in the community, such as an HIV/AIDS service agency. At this site, a program may involve providing community education about HIV/AIDS. This type of activity allows students to serve as educators on a macro practice level and focuses on prevention activities.

Assignments that focus on service learning experiences such as these can highlight several aspects of social work practice. Students can compare and contrast practice with client populations and different service contexts. In addition, students can begin to experience the complexity of social work practice as they become aware that some people are both homeless and HIV-positive. Using two different levels of practice (working directly with individuals and community education) provides examples of the ecological perspective. As they discuss and reflect on these issues, students become aware of the need to be flexible and innovative in their work with clients. In addition, they develop an appreciation for how the agency context impacts the various roles that social workers hold in different settings. Students also begin to struggle with personal values and biases such as racism, classism, ageism, or homophobia in themselves, classmates, or service providers. These personal values and biases can then be processed in classroom discussions. As students enter their initial practicum, they have an awareness of the dynamic and challenging context of social work practice.

Human Behavior in the Social Environment. In the HBSE content, students learn theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehension for understanding and assessing human functioning. Similar to the practice sequence, the course provides a theory base from individual to community levels. In addition, this content has a dynamic perspective that looks at the phases of development for the various levels of client systems (e.g., lifespan, group dynamics, family development, organizational change).

Service learning can provide students with an opportunity to understand human functioning at different points in the life course. Students also can work with similar services in different types of communities to gain insight into the macro-level variables that impact human behavior, for example, working with geographic communities (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) or non-place communities (e.g., ethnic or racial communities, gay and lesbian communities). These experiences allow students to evaluate micro-level factors, such as developmental issues and life stages, as well as macro issues of discrimination and oppression on human behavior and functioning.

One example of a service learning activity for the HBSE sequence is for groups of students to work in settings that contrast issues across the lifespan. Some students

may be involved with children at a day care center, while another group works with older adults at an adult day care center. In both of these settings, students have the opportunity to assess individual functioning, group dynamics, and family issues. Through their interactions at either day care setting, students can evaluate various developmental tasks at different points in the life course. As the children are becoming more individuated, for example, the older adults are adapting to a period of decreasing independence. Family dynamics also serve as a rich source of comparison as both sets may struggle with juggling multiple demands of caregiving, such as being in the labor force and filling other roles (e.g., marriage, other family relationships, leisure pursuits).

Service learning assignments provide a way to have students apply human behavior theory to actual situations. Assignments can stress the relationship between social work assessment and intervention, as human behavior content provides the foundation for client assessment. In addition, students also can reflect on particular biases in different theories. If, for example, an Eriksonian perspective is used to conceptualize human developmental processes, the experience with different types of individuals can highlight groups that are marginalized or omitted in this perspective (Kropf & Greene, 1994). In day care settings, a contrast between the issues facing children and older adults can highlight how late life is undifferentiated in Erikson's psychosocial theory, which leads to a conclusion that all older people face similar issues. This critique can be extended to analyze issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status in human behavior theory. As students move into their internships, they have a more complete understanding of the relationship between assessment and practice. In addition, they will have also started the process of critical thinking about theories and application to various client populations.

Social Welfare Policy. In the policy sequence, students gain an historical perspective of social policy. Policy is examined at local, state, and federal levels, as well as learning more about policymaking in each of these arenas. Students learn dimensions of social welfare policy and analyze implications for various individuals, such as women, racial and ethnic groups, older adults, gay men, and lesbian women. In addition, policies related to different service contexts, such as health care, aging, mental health, and income maintenance, are also considered.

Through the use of service learning activities, students can become aware of the link between policy and functioning of individuals, families, and communities. Students may also become aware of how various groups are marginalized or unrepresented in policy decisions and resource allocation. As a result, students learn ways to mobilize and empower these groups as a step to creating more just and equitable programs and legislation.

During an election period, a service learning assignment can involve students in voter participation campaigns. Through the project, students can become involved in community efforts to register new voters, provide education and information about relevant issues to community constituencies, and assist with methods to increase voter turn-out (e.g., requests for absentee ballots, transportation to polls). As a result of their experiences, students become involved in the various aspects that are part of the democratic process.

In the policy sequence, service learning projects can help students recognize how legislative processes and actions impact individuals, families, and communities. Assignments that relate to the service learning project can help students to focus on weaknesses in the current political structure as a way to stimulate thinking about necessary reforms. In addition, comparisons between different legislative models used in local, state, and national levels involve students in critical thinking about the strengths and limitations in the different political processes. Such assignments can help students become more aware of the political context involved in service provision (e.g., funding sources, accountability, constituencies).

Research. The foundation research course overviews the process of scientific inquiry. Students learn how to identify a problem for investigation, use existing research in problem definition, and understand various research methodologies. Students may also learn data analysis skills, and how to use various statistical procedures. In addition, they may be required to put all of these dimensions together in a research project.

In research, service learning provides an opportunity for students to collect, analyze, and interpret data. This type of experience allows them to master skills in the research process, as well as struggle with real challenges and ethics, such as informed consent, non-response, and missing data. In addition, many agencies lack the resources to collect and analyze data regarding their programs and services. This type of assignment can provide a valuable, needed service to many social welfare agencies.

One type of service learning project could involve working with an agency to evaluate a service that is currently provided. For example, foster care programs frequently run courses for families that are interested in providing care for children. A service learning activity could be constructed to help the agency evaluate the course and identify outcomes on foster family recruitment. Groups of students would assume different responsibilities in the research project, such as performing a literature review on foster family recruitment, constructing an evaluation instrument, completing Human Subject Reviews, collecting data, and performing the analysis. As a class, the students could make decisions regarding how to organize and construct a final report on their findings that would be shared with the agency.

The use of service learning provides a real experience for students with the research project. Students begin with a problem area, and are expected to use previous research as a beginning step in framing their study. This type of assignment links the practice community with research content and reinforces evaluation as a necessary component of practice. In addition, students face the challenges of reporting and disseminating data as they report findings from the project back to the agency. As students enter their first internship, they have a deeper understanding of the fit between practice and research content.

PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES

The previous section provides a model for integrating a service learning project into foundation courses. Particular examples are included to demonstrate actual projects that can build upon content that is included in each of the courses. Assignments that relate to the service learning projects provide students with an

opportunity to process their successes and struggles, integrate course content with their experiential learning, and prepare them for their first social work internship.

While these experiences are beneficial, they are also intensive in both preparation and implementation. For faculty, this process is time consuming, as close collaboration between the academic program and community agency is necessary. The faculty role is to work with the community site to structure service learning experiences for students. Ideally, faculty should spend time in the community along with the students to provide support, structure, and integrate academic content at opportune moments. Service learning projects are not haphazard experiences for students, and faculty need to provide the connection between the different learning settings. Faculty need to think carefully and critically about ways to structure academic components with the experience that students are having in the community. In addition, faculty must be flexible and innovative as service learning projects do not always develop in the actual ways that they are conceived.

Programs must also consider the issue of possible competing demands on agency resources between service learning and field education experiences. As such, a service learning experience can help students master the knowledge and skills that will allow them to have a richer experience within their field setting. However, uncoordinated efforts between field and service learning components may tax agency resources and compromise the integrity of the program. Therefore, field faculty should be involved in identifying those agencies that are potential sites for service learning in order to avoid negative outcomes on field education.

Service learning can be intensive for students. With competing demands on their time, students may believe that a service learning project is difficult to schedule along with other course assignments and responsibilities. It would not be feasible, for example, to have students involved in different service projects in each of their foundation courses. Curriculum committees can take responsibility for examining which courses offer the best fit to include a service learning project in their particular program. In this way, learning is not diluted by having students spread across several projects within the same semester.

While the model that is presented examines service learning in discrete courses, an integrated model could also be developed. A service learning experience would be required for students in the first semester, and each foundation course would integrate the project into the course assignments. The students' experience in the service learning project would be reflected in assignments within their practice method, HBSE, social policy, and research courses. This model has exciting possibilities, but also requires a well-integrated foundation curriculum and faculty who work closely together around assignments. For these reasons, smaller programs might be better suited to implementing an integrated service learning project.

In conclusion, service learning is an educational strategy that helps students "learn while doing." Unlike volunteer experiences or internships, the goals of providing a community service and integrating academic content are equally important. Through service learning, social work programs can form partnership with their communities to help students learn more about relevant issues, promote civic responsibility, and leave a legacy by providing a real service to the community.

Service learning has the potential to serve an important function in the social work curriculum. As graduate students prepare to enter their first social work internship, service learning experiences can be incorporated into foundation courses to serve as an educational bridge between academics and practice spheres. Through initial "real life" involvement in service learning experiences, students learn more about the challenges of the profession, have exposure to a variety of contexts and client populations, and begin to employ their social work knowledge and skills.

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