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SERVICE LEARNING: STUDENT MEETS REAL-WORLD CULTURE

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Service Learning: Student Meets Real-World Culture

Synopsis:

The presenters share reflections and benefits found in integration of Service Learning with online and face to face courses to enhance student application of course concepts in a real-world environment with cultural diversity as they also make a difference in that world.

Service Learning: Student Meets Real – World Culture

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Abstract

University students are expected to acquire proficiency in skills used in the profession and to serve globally as they graduate. Efficacy of this has been supported in studies in which skill mastery was enhanced through provision of experiential assignments. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience. Problem-based learning provides active, hands-on learning that is centered on real-world problems or issues. This paper shares reflections and benefits found in integration of Service Learning and Problem-Based Learning with several courses to enhance student application of course concepts in a real-world environment with cultural diversity.

Students in many education programs are expected to acquire proficiency in practice of techniques and skills used in the profession. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) specifies in its standards for accreditation that programs include training in skills through courses as well as with student practicums and internships. Efficacy of this has been supported in studies in which skill mastery was enhanced through provision of experiential assignments. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Problem-based learning is a pedagogical method of active, hands-on learning that is centered on real-world problems or issues. Both of these are used from elementary schools through institutions of higher education to allow students to frame educational concepts in the context of community and civic responsibility.

Background

Research has indicated that Service Learning enriches the learning process of students and also provides more effective career preparation than does more traditional educational methods such as lectures and writing papers. Lim and Bloomquist (2015) noted that often the term *Service Learning* can be confused with other types of experiential learning. A difference between service learning and volunteerism is the integration of service learning into academic course work. Service learning is different from practica and internships in that these focus on development of professional skills and service learning focuses on development of civic skills and student dispositions – traits that will be much needed in their future careers. Service learning provides the practical experience for students to learn by

doing. Service Learning projects have varied from one day volunteer activities to semester long engagement projects where students immersed themselves into a culture other than their own in a volunteer capacity.

Brooks and Schramm (2007) conducted a study in which they found that combining traditional university mission goals of research, education, and service into integrated activities within courses offered substantial benefit to all stakeholders – faculty, students, and the community served. The efficacy of problem-based learning is supported through a study by Tawfik, Trueman, and Lorz (2014) in which pedagogy of problem-based and service learning were applied with STEM students. These authors reference many other studies to support the use of Student-centered learning, Problems as the catalyst for learning, and Self-directed learning.

in course work.

Eyler (2002) noted that while research on service-learning has been mixed, there is evidence to

suggest that service-learning programs which thoroughly integrate service and academic learning through continuous reflection promote development of the knowledge, skills, and cognitive capacities necessary for students to deal effectively with the complex social issues that

challenge citizens. While there is not much research in the service-learning literature that specifically addresses techniques of reflection, evidence from studies of problem-based learning,

situated cognition, and cognitive development suggests approaches to reflection that will enhance the power of service-learning in attaining these important goals which facilitate full community participation. This review presents concrete suggestions about this type of program.

A study at Siaulia University in 2006 (Baleiuniene and Mazeikiene, 2008) was conducted to compare benefits to students and the communities and organizations that accept them for service learning work. This study indicated that students gained the benefits in emotional satisfaction, academic enhancement, strengthening of thinking abilities, affirmation of citizenship attitudes and competencies, and personal development. Benefits for the communities were help for the communities in areas of need, strengthened partnerships between the university and communities, and emotional support for target groups that the communities take care of.

Vandzinskaite and Ruskus (2008) implemented a service learning project at Northern Lithuanian higher education establishments with a three-fold purpose. The aim of the project was to “narrow the gap between academic, social and business spheres, bring contents of studies to the needs of the region, and ensure successful development of students’ careers.” (p. 33). Focus groups were used to ascertain advantages and disadvantages of service learning experiences that all focus group participants had within the university establishments. Advantages that were noted for individuals included increased ability to solve problems and conflicts, strengthened student socialization and adaptation, and increased capacity for critical and analytical thinking. Limitations to the efficacy of service learning engagement included time management problems and occasional problems with coordination of interest.

While service learning can enhance the learning of students and can enhance preparation for future career service, the efficacy of it depends on commitment and efficiency in organization and administration of projects. Bureau, Cole, and McCormich (2014) noted the

importance of intentional planning, implementation, and program assessment. One of the most crucial components of service learning for student participants was self-reflection at the end of the project as it helped students to personalize the experience and increase application of the lessons that they learned through the experience. The service learning experiences discussed in this paper focused on three levels of reflection by students. The first level was a reflection of the student on what was learned about self. The second level was a reflection on what happened in the experience and how that related to what the student was learning otherwise in the course. The third level was a reflection on causes of the issue and possible solutions to the issue.

Project Description and Method

Over several school years and several courses, the authors studied the impact of integration of problem-based and service learning. In each course, the students had a major project that required application of course concepts in working with persons in local communities outside the classroom with provision of service in some way for these people. At the end of the project, qualitative assessment was measured per student critical self-reflection of the experience at a learning levels of what was learned about self, what about the experience exhibited concepts learned in the course, and what was learned about continuing needs in the area of service and how those needs might be met.

Summary of Project

The proposed Service Learning Projects were conducted in courses as shown in Table 1 to provide students with integration of course concepts and practice of counseling skills and theories with community service and critical self-reflection. These Service Learning Projects integrated problem-based learning and provided a major component of the course experience and grade in real-world application of course concepts. At the end of the semester, an assessment was conducted to measure progress in attainment of initial goals. Students also completed a reflection to include the three levels of Service Learning as related to the objectives of the specific course. These reflections were submitted in class in a paper. The three levels of service learning are:

- Mirror – Reflection on what student learned about self and possible future changes in self from the experience.
- Binoculars – Reflection on the details of the experience and how those related to course concepts.
- Microscope – Reflection on the etiology of the issue and potential future resolutions for the issue.

Table 1

Courses and Projects

Course	Project
Professional Orientation to Counseling	Students first conducted research on areas in school counseling for professionalism and ethics that seemed to need improvement. Students then each developed a website page to share information on a specific topic area from their research. The students used free website builders such as Weebly and Wix and built a website that included a name and content that reflected focus on this topic to inform school counselors of the importance of the chosen professionalism and ethics area for the profession. Students were required to include at list five resources included with a diversity, such as links to article,

	<p>videos, other sites, a blog, etc. After the website was built, students were required to share this with fellow professionals for feedback and integrate that into their reflections on</p> <p>.</p>
Lifespan Development and Learning	<p>The course project for Life-Span Development and Learning was designed to provide students an opportunity for hands –on application of course concepts through interaction on a project with a person in a designated life-span stage. Students conducted research with at least five members of the chosen life –span stage to determine needs for that age group. Informed consent was attained from these participants. Students then developed a web-site page to address that issue and received feedback on the webpage from the five participants from the initial research. The results from the initial research and from the final feedback were included with the student’s reflections at the end of the project.</p>
Theories & Techniques of Counseling	<p>As research indicates that most people have needs for improvement in areas of their health and wellness, that was the focus of this course project. Students integrated a selected theoretical approach and techniques from that approach to work with a volunteer of an age of their choice to assess current healthy lifestyle habits, plan goals and activities to strengthen those habits, and then conduct six sessions with the volunteer to practice course concepts in helping the volunteer attain improvement in the selected health and wellness area of focus. . Informed consent was attained from these participants, to include caregiver consent if the volunteer was a minor. This work was recorded in a journal that the course student and the volunteer completed together. At the end of the project, the journal was submitted with the student reflections on the levels of service learning.</p>
Counseling Children & Adolescents	<p>As research indicates that children of today have significant health issues that could impact their longevity as compared to previous generations (http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm), that was the focus of this course project. Students integrated a selected theoretical approach and techniques from that approach to work with a child or adolescent to assess current healthy lifestyle habits, plan goals and activities to strengthen those habits, and then conduct six sessions with the volunteer to practice course concepts in helping the volunteer attain improvement in the selected health and wellness area of focus. . Informed consent was attained from these participants with consent from the caregiver and assent from the volunteer youth. This work was recorded in a journal that the course student and the volunteer completed together. At the end of the project, the journal was submitted with the student reflections on the levels of service learning.</p>
Counseling Multicultural Populations	<p>The Cultural Immersion experience required student service in an identified cultural context versus a student bringing elements of an identified cultural context into the student’s sphere of familiarity. Students could focus their experience on any of a number of cultural identity factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. While time parameters of this experience varied, the overall experience designed by the student was to be sustained and on-going, ideally involving an extended duration over multiple weeks, with most experiences including several hours a day for several days.</p>

Some students also integrated actual residence in their selected setting for a period of time to facilitate a more full understanding of the culture and local needs.

Results

Results of this qualitative study affirmed efficacy of the use of Service Learning and Problem Based Learning to support integration of course concepts into real life application. These results were assessed through student reflections on the three level of service learning and through feedback from volunteers with whom students worked, interviewed, or attained feedback on the completed project.

Professional Orientation to Counseling

Students reflected on the increased awareness of the role of counselors in settings such as schools and clinical mental health agencies as well as the opportunity for positive impact they could have in making a difference for other people, their problems, and even local communities. A common reflection was also the long-term impact that they could have – not just a person and issue for today, but the opportunity to support future quality of life as well. Students noted that the service learning experience made course concepts more real to everyday life and potential use in their future careers. Finally, many students indicated that they acquired a sense of advocacy for pertinent issues through the service learning project and that they wanted to continue to volunteer with the same people and issue that was the focus of their project.

Lifespan Development and Learning

Reflections from students in the service learning project course indicated both insight for self and insight for the different ages of people they might work with upon graduation and entry into their careers. A common insight on self was appreciation of life support factors up to that point, such as family and education. Many students noted that the project complimented what they were learning in class, especially in application of theories. A common theme was a sense of enhanced preparation for their desired career. As with other courses, students also reported increased sense of advocacy for issues.

Theories and Techniques of Counseling & Counseling Children and Adolescents

Results for these two courses are provided together as the focus of the course project was the same with the exception of the required age range of participants. Results included both weight loss and increase of health behavior to prevent obesity. The total weight loss over the six weeks of intervention and mentoring was 129 pounds for 14 participants. Two UWA students reported that the project encouraged them to also work on their weight and these two students together lost 18 pounds. Through their weekly journals, participants reported increase in regular exercise, increase in consumption of water, fruits, and vegetables, and increase in management of stress such as dealing with conflicts and use of meditation or yoga. Participants reported decrease in consumption of sodas and snacks.

Following are excerpts from some of the UWA student reflections about insight gained on course concepts and on personal growth through the project.

- I learned that you can be taught by anyone, even a child. This project gave me the opportunity to see life through the eyes of a child and to appreciate her views as well as my own.
- From this project, changing my way of thinking was the hardest. I had to daily encourage myself by saying “If the volunteer can drink more water, I certainly could. I have learned

that if you write down what you eat, drink and the number of times that you exercise, it will be a constant reminder of what is required to succeed.

- Through this project, I have learned that I must be honest with each client served. I believe that now I have more empathy now than before. As a result, I have learned how to handle issues and circumstance that lead to unhealthy choices and cause stress. As an alternative, I can use Positive psychology as an outlet for my clients in the future that may result in negative consequences. This experience has definitely changed the way I promises to deal with future situations that may occur.
- I believe this experience will alter my future behaviors, attitudes, and career as I work with students and clients because not only do I believe from a theoretical standpoint, but also from a practical standpoint.

Counseling Multicultural Populations

These are some reflections shared by students upon completion of their cultural immersion project.

1. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to visit and share with people of a different culture. The Sysouvanh's were very gracious in allowing me to see their world along with them. I learned so much about the Laos culture just being able to attend a couple of events and sharing. I truly enjoyed the wedding ceremony the most! But the one thing that stuck out to me the most is the fact that we all may have differences that make us who we are, but we also have similarities that connect us on some level.

2. My cultural immersion experience was a life-changing opportunity. I knew there were a multitude of challenges that members of the African American culture have to overcome. Even though the three families I worked with are all from different socio-economic levels, they all share the importance of family values. They all have various struggles that interfere with their personal lives, but they make sure their children are supported and they have their best interests in mind. I have asked my husband and daughter if we could attend another church service with Ms. J. I also want to take my daughter to the X boys' games and meet the T's daughter. I think they have similar interests and would work well together. I think it is important that my daughter interacts with members of every culture and obtains different traditions and attitudes to create her own unique belief system. Our society is going to continue to grow as a multicultural civilization and individuals need to be free to express themselves in a variety of ways. My husband doesn't like change and is afraid to try new things. I think this experience will help him grow as an individual and learn to accept that we as a multicultural society are all equal and we each have distinctive traits that allow us to grow.

3. I cannot be thankful enough for this amazing experience. I am so glad that we were given a reason and a chance to participate in this experience. This cultural immersion experience has been life changing and is something that I will never forget. It has definitely given me insight into the Vietnamese culture, as well as confirming that there are many different ways of thinking, living, and doing things. I believe that this experience will definitely help me in my profession as a guidance counselor. The real life, hands on experiences that you get from doing something like this cannot be taught or learned from a textbook. Another plus from this experience is that I've gained a forever friendship with such a wonderful family. This was awesome!

4. This was an educational experience and wonderful opportunity. Before beginning this project I did not know much about Judaism other than that it shared in beliefs of the

Testament of the Bible. After taking part in this weekend of activities and having conversation with some of the members I have a level of respect for those who believe in Judaism that was not there before I visited the synagogue. The thing that I will most apply to my career is learning to assist families involved not only in multicultural adjustments and difficulties because of race, skin color, race, and sexual orientation but also the additional conflicts that biracial and interfaith marriages must face. I am committed to learning more about how to assist such families by researching on my own, continuing conversations with those currently in such circumstances, and finding community resources available for this topic.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Needs of a global society dictate a need for university graduates to move from academia into work and service that makes a difference to resolve needs and promote viable world, national, and individual economy. Traditional classwork in academia has focused on learning course content in isolation within a brick and mortar classroom or an online learning management system. Upon post degree employment, university graduates have found a dichotomy between what was learned and what was practiced in the real-world. This study examined integration of Service/Problem-Based Learning as a modality to increase student exposure to real-world needs that matched their academic preparation. Student reflections indicated that their projects increased awareness of real world needs and their role in meeting those needs to an extent that could not be attained through just “book-learning.” The study supported increased need for courses to help students to learn by doing. Student reflections also indicated a depth of personal commitment to contribute time and effort toward issue resolution, even through personal volunteerism.

Continuing research is needed on efficacy of integration of Service/Problem-Based Learning within academic preparation of students to actively contribute to the world they live in as they graduate. This integration can promote student personal growth, can promote student preparation toward better meeting the needs of a global work force, and can contribute more effort and commitment to resolution of societal issues of need. As students connect with others to serve diverse needs, they will increase in efficacy to serve diversely. Students will not only learn and be, but will also learn and do.

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