

Transforming Learning: A Longitudinal Examination of a Collaborative Service Project Involving Graduate and Undergraduate Students

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Overview of the project

This research study included six years of data collected from college students regarding what they learned from participating in a collaborative service learning project. The project paired first year students and master's degree students in hands-on community service activities.

Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of the research study was to understand what first year and graduate students learned from participating in a collaborative service learning project. "Learning" was broadly defined using Howard Bowen's (1978) outcomes framework considering cognitive (information), affective (self-awareness), and life skills outcomes as indications of what a student might learn. As with most service learning projects, there were some alternative purposes for constructing the project as we did. These secondary purposes were: to provide graduate students, most of whom held assistantships in various student services offices across campus, as role models and resources for first year students transitioning to campus; and to provide an applied setting for graduate students enrolled in a course about college students to learn about them through first-hand experience.

Project design

Students from two courses were paired each fall from 2005-2010. As a part of Illinois State University's "LinC" (Learning in Communities) course, first-year students are required to complete 6 hours of service in the community in order to introduce them to their new place of residence and to help them become aware of needs that exist. Concurrently, each fall semester first-year graduate students enrolled in the college student personnel administration (CSPA) master's degree program take a course entitled "College Students and Their Cultures." Over the six-year period, approximately 200 graduate and first-year students participated in one of the associated service learning projects.

The projects varied each year, as did the partnering agencies. Most of the time, the community organizers or the local agency provided all the necessary supplies. Over the six years, classes have come together to **paint** (a home for dislocated hurricane Katrina families, a childcare center for low income children, a vocational/technical wing of a high school, and a summer camp), **perform landscaping and yard maintenance** (at group homes for adults with developmental disabilities and at a pre-school), **work at an animal shelter** (cleaning cages, clearing trash, and walking dogs), **build a home** (Habitat for Humanity), and **stencil warnings on storm drains** (as an environmental awareness campaign to avoid improper dumping in neighborhoods).

To best encourage interaction, students were assigned to work in teams of 4, including 2 undergraduate and 2 graduate students. Graduate students provided leadership for the teams, initiated conversation, and kept the group on task.

A variety of methods were used to assess students' learning. All participants wrote reflection papers and participated in separate class discussions about their experiences with the service learning project. During year one, LinC class participants also kept weekly journals, and their writing about the service learning projects was included as a data set. Since year three, the students wrote one-page "pre-project expectations" papers and then used those as a basis to reflect upon their experiences afterwards. Course evaluations, and any qualitative comments associated with the service learning project, were also included as a set of data for the purpose of understanding what students learned. In 2010, an open-ended survey asking about the service experience was sent to all the previous participants for whom current contact information could be located (n=85).

Narrative comments from these data sources were analyzed through a constant comparative approach (Merriam, 2002). Based on the analysis process, distinct and broad categories emerged and were used to further explain students' learning within the jointly conducted service learning projects. A *sample* of themes that emerged and representative student comments included:

(over)

***understanding their connection with people in need and the community**

“By integrating community service into the educational environment and including both graduate students and first-year students, they (the students) are able to learn from each other and in the process, give back to the community in which they are living.” and “Helping members of the community in which you inhabit gives you a sense of completeness and satisfaction.”

***enjoyment in helping as part of a team**

“There was never a time in the working session at the high school when people weren't working together. It was a very enjoyable work setting. I learned how to work with people that I have never met before, knowing that we needed to accomplish a task and do it together.”

***satisfaction with the work completed**

“I felt such a feeling of accomplishment like I had done something worthwhile...It is good to give a monetary donation, but I felt more of a sense of really doing something and helping after the service project.”

***awareness of the value/impact of the work**

“Evidence is all around that our economy is going into a major slump. This will create a larger demand on our charities and service organizations. So now more than ever, the understanding the value in service is needed in our students. Many students do not realize the satisfaction volunteering can bring until they are exposed to it. And this exposure might not occur unless it is through a college course.” and “I was always the one saying, ‘If I am not going to be paid then what is the point in working?’ Now I realize the point is to make a difference in someone else’s life that is less fortunate...”

***appreciation for what they had**

“By participating in this service project I learned how lucky my family, friends, and I were when we were growing up.” and “[I learned] that I was given a lot throughout my life.”

***talking/working with new people**

“Not only did it pull two classes together to work toward a common goal, there was a genuine task at hand. It was not something that was artificial such as a bonding or team-building game. I think that helped people let their true colors show, more so than trying to manufacture an activity would have.” and “I feel that the greatest value of an activity like this was the contact between the classes. All too often ‘freshmen’ or ‘graduate students’ can be abstract terms that we read about or talk about, but this put a face, a voice, and an attitude on those terms.”

***awareness of personal skills and competencies**

“When I saw others doing an inadequate job, instead of motivating them to do better, I merely did the job myself. It became more important to me to do a great job and fulfill my own expectations, than to teach and inspire others to do a great job together.” and “This project truly opened my eyes to the amount of influence and significance we have with our students. I realized that whether I feel like an adult, or not, does not make any difference; I am perceived by students as a knowledgeable, competent adult that must be the example on how to become a contributing adult.”

***empathy for “the call” to serve**

“I learned that some people are more than just ‘volunteers.’ Some people should be called ‘dedicators’ because they honestly dedicate their life to an organization that helps people, animals, or just the earth itself. I also learned that volunteering does actually make a difference.” and “In my opinion, taking this trip to the animal shelter and doing community service like this was an excellent choice for this course/school to include. I think it helps the students notice how hard others work at what they love. This gives the students a sort of motivation for school to study what they love and work hard at it.”

References and previously published works about this SoTL research project:

Bowen, H. (1978). Learning goals and outcomes. *New Directions for Education and Work*, 2, 79-94.

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McCluskey-Titus, P. (Fall 2008). The value of a cooperative service project as reciprocal teaching/learning for undergraduate and graduate students. *MountainRise: The International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 5(1). Available on line: <http://mountainrise.wcu.edu/html/MR82.pdf>