Service-Learning in an Adolescent Development Course: Students' Assessments and Reflections
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Abstract
Service-learning is an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to the content. Effectively linking service-learning to course content not only offers students a powerful opportunity to maximize academic learning, but also promotes their personal growth and instills a commitment to lifelong, civic engagement. Service-learning was integrated into an upper level undergraduate course, Adolescent Development. In addition to completing the traditional course work, students also completed a service-learning experience at a community agency that served adolescents. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the service-learning component, students were surveyed at the end of the semester about their service-learning experiences. Almost all students agreed they had learned more about course concepts as a result of their service-learning experience, and the majority felt their service-learning activity provided a needed service to the agency and community.

Educators have increasingly embraced opportunities to prepare college students for future leadership roles by integrating service-learning into their courses (Ash, 2003; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Boss, 1995; MacDonald, 1994; Smith, 2002; Truesdell, 2001). Service-learning is an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to that content. Research has shown that service-learning helps students retain more of the concepts learned in class and that students have greater satisfaction with the course (Eyler, 2002; Hamner, 2002; Payne, 2000). In addition, service-learning helps students develop more community awareness, changes students' stereotypical beliefs, and increases their understanding of diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hamner, 2002; Jones & Abes, 2004).
Service-learning is distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by its intent to benefit both the provider and recipient of the service, giving equal focus to the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996). The service must be linked to course learning objectives; it is not simply volunteering. Experiences that enable students to think, write, and/or discuss what they are doing during the service activity are integrated into the course.

Service-learning offers effective pedagogical strategies and enhances student development through active learning and participation, engagement in the community, critical thinking, and information on “real life” situations. In addition, integrating service-learning with classroom educational experiences enhances student involvement, personal reflection, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Waldstein & Reiher, 2001). Effectively linking service-learning to course content not only offers students a powerful opportunity to maximize academic learning, but also promotes their personal growth and instills a commitment to lifelong, civic engagement.

Service-learning does, of course, involve challenges. Depending on the course and its content, educators may need to invest considerable time in locating appropriate service learning sites and preparing effective service activities. The reflective experiences which are necessary to help students make connections between course content and their service-learning require time and may mean a reduction in the amount of class time available for content coverage. In addition, educators may occasionally need to assume the role of mediator between students and their service-learning sites if miscommunication occurs.

At Appalachian State University, service-learning was integrated into an upper level undergraduate course, Adolescent Development, to enable students to connect research and theory with active practice. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the service-learning component of the course.

**Methodology**

In the original Adolescent Development course, students examined the basic changes, contexts, and developmental tasks of adolescence through textbook readings, lecture, discussion, videos, and guest speakers. The course outline indicating the content is provided below:

- Basic changes of adolescence
  - Biological transitions
  - Cognitive transitions
  - Social transitions
- Contexts of adolescence
  - Families
In the revised Adolescent Development course, students continued to address course concepts through readings in the textbook, lecture, discussions, guest speakers, and videos. In addition, students chose a service-learning experience that would enable them to observe and apply course concepts through association with adolescents. Students worked with adolescents two hours per week for nine weeks of the semester by serving at community agencies that assisted adolescents, such as after-school programs, programs geared toward at-risk youth, programs for first-generation college students, a residential treatment program, a charter school, and an adolescent outdoor experiential program. Depending on the site, students engaged in a variety of experiences with their adolescents: tutoring, sports activities, arts and crafts, hiking, canoeing, caving, and just “hanging out.” Although students were often engaged in group activities, they selected one adolescent upon which to focus their observations and reflections and generally had ample one-on-one time with that adolescent.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in class activities that enabled them to reflect upon their service-learning and connect it to course content. For example, as the concept of physical development was addressed, students not only read about and discussed it, but they also assessed the physical development of the adolescent upon whom they were focusing. In the study of adolescent peer groups, students not only identified the typical cliques and crowds in schools today, but also analyzed their adolescent’s social standing in his/her school. In addition to the class activities, students prepared a report in which they applied the concepts they were learning in class to their particular adolescent. They used the theories and research to explain their adolescent’s development and behavior.

**Findings and Discussion**

At the end of the semester, 22 students completed a survey that evaluated the service-learning component of the course. Thirteen were seniors, and nine were juniors. In terms of the course, 95 % felt they had learned more about the concepts presented in the course as a result of their service-learning experience. On a 4-point scale, with 4 being “strongly agree,” the
average response was 3.5. Their level of satisfaction seemed particularly significant considering the additional time commitment outside of class associated with the service-learning. Other findings included the following:

- 86% of the students agreed that they had been adequately prepared for their service-learning experience
- 95% agreed that the service-learning made the course more interesting and applicable to “real world” issues
- 91% agreed that their time was effectively used while serving at their agency
- 91% agreed that the class had helped them to become more aware of social issues that existed in the community
- 91% felt their service-learning activity provided a needed service to the agency and community

Almost every student agreed that the service-learning made the course more interesting and applicable to the “real world.” One student noted, “It was more beneficial than sitting in a classroom and listening to a lecture.” Another noted the value of gaining experiences related to the future: “I will be working with all ages of children in the “real world,” and I can understand why they do the things they do and be more patient because I understand.”

With the inclusion of the service-learning, students seemed more satisfied with the course, noting many times how they were actually experiencing what they were learning:

- “I got to see what we were learning in class with my own eyes instead of just hearing examples or remembering back to my adolescent years.”
- “I put into practice what I was learning.”
- “I was able to apply my information to a real person.”
- “I learned more about adolescents outside the classroom than inside the classroom.”

The majority of students felt that the academic projects associated with their service-learning, primarily the adolescent observation report, helped them to more effectively learn and retain the course material. As one student reported, “Through the observation report, we were able to talk about what we learned in class, basing our discussion on our adolescent that we closely watched all semester.” Another noted that through the project, he/she “learned how to think more about adolescent development.”

Several students noted the personal growth they experienced through the service-learning:

- “I was a positive role model for two adolescents, and I know I really made an impact in their lives.”
- “I learned that if everyone teams up and works together, we can get anything done!”
• “I learned a lot about myself from this experience.”

The service-learning helped many students to become more aware of social issues that existed in the community. As one student said, “There are many troubled teens in the world that need someone to help them with their problems; I can be one of those people.” Another stated, “I didn’t realize how many kids in our area have really hard lives and can use some encouragement and support.”

This service-learning experience seemed to give many students their first meaningful experience with diversity and helped them to question some previous assumptions and stereotypes they had held:

• “I got to see the different lifestyles these adolescents were in and how it affects their social behaviors.”
• “I learned how to be more patient, because I saw that all adolescents weren’t like I was.”
• “I became more accepting towards others because you can’t always know what a person is going through.”
• “Some of the adolescents’ situations I saw made me realize what a good life I have had.”

In terms of transferable skills, 82% felt the service-learning had helped develop their leadership skills, while 86% felt the service-learning had allowed them to acquire or practice other skills (such as communication, observation, and teamwork), that would be useful in their future careers:

• “I feel like my social, problem-solving, and leadership skills have been enhanced by completing my service-learning experience.”
• “It has helped me communicate better with someone and learn how to take what I know and teach it to someone else in a simple manner.”
• “I will be a high school teacher, and working with my adolescents helped me with my patience and communication skills. This will really help me in the future.”

Upon completion of their service-learning experience, many students felt an increased sense of responsibility toward their community. One student reported, “I feel like it is very important to help people in your community. I hope that I can do more service like this in my own community over the summer.” Another added, “I know I can make a big difference.” Some students even planned to continue their service-learning beyond the course requirements: “I’ve gotten to know these adolescents, and I feel I need to keep helping them to improve my community.”
In a final open-ended question, students were asked to share the most important thing they had learned during their service-learning experience. Responses indicated the varied impacts experienced by students and included the following:

- “How to better relate to high school students”
- “Increased my understanding of youth”
- “How people really appreciate your hard work, and that it feels good to help people”
- “That all adolescents are not the same and that’s OK”
- “That I take what I have for granted”
- “You can’t learn everything from a textbook; it’s good to have ‘real’ experiences”
- “How to communicate clearly and effectively with others”
- “Always be open to try new things”
- “Positive interactions can greatly influence adolescents in the right direction”
- “That many times adolescents are looking for someone to ‘be on their side,’ but they also need reasonable boundaries”

No formal evaluations were completed by service-learning site supervisors; however, several commented on the success and helpfulness of the project. One site supervisor shared, “The service-learning enabled our agency to better carry out its mission of helping young people.”

**Conclusions and Implications**

In this Adolescent Development class, the service-learning enabled students to not only apply course concepts in the real world, but also bring the lessons learned back to the classroom, thus enriching the learning environment for all. Therefore, the service-learning component will continue to be a part of this class. Efforts will be made to secure additional sites to provide further diversity for future service-learning experiences. Further reflection activities will also be developed to provide even more opportunities for students to connect the course concepts with their service-learning. Data will continue to be collected in order to assess the effectiveness of the service-learning experience and any changes that are implemented.

Other programs and classes could also utilize service-learning to enable students to better understand course concepts, as well as broaden their perspectives. There are numerous opportunities in all communities to “give back” by allowing students to apply what they are learning in class. Such service-learning experiences would require students to “humanize” the information they were learning in class, and in the end, benefit not only the community, but themselves.
Finally, the service-learning office at this university is developing more assessment strategies to better evaluate all service-learning courses across the campus. Increased emphasis is being given to faculty development in the form of workshops and actual service experiences. Most recently, the university has implemented a Designated Service-Learning Faculty Program to recognize and reward faculty for their dedication to improving their teaching effectiveness related to service-learning, as well as engaging in scholarship and service in this area. It appears that both educators and administrators are recognizing the value of service-learning as an instructional method.

References


