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The Meaning of Service Learning in an MSW Course

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The Meaning of Service Learning in an MSW Course

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*Service learning is an educational practice that bridges the gap
between academics and the real world. Knowledge generated
within educational institutions is offered to a community with the
goal of strengthening student learning and increasing students'
civic engagement. There is a pedagogical congruence between
service learning, civic engagement, and the educational and pro-
fessional values of social work given the field's commitment to
social justice and the empowerment of oppressed groups at the
macro-level. Though social work may hold an affinity for ser-
vice learning, there has not been a corresponding connection to
research regarding service learning's impact on civic engagement.
The following research contributes to knowledge by understanding
the experience of a group of graduate-level social work students
who demonstrated civic engagement after the completion of a
service learning experience.*

KEYWORDS service learning, MSW students, civic engagement

Service learning is an educational experience that brings course content to
life by applying classroom theories, concepts, and skills within a community
(Scott, 2008). Civic engagement is a desired outcome from service learning,
with critical meaning for the fulfillment of higher education's mission of fos-
tering a committed citizenship (Saltmarsh, 2005). Two national-level devel-
opments indicate that support for civic engagement and service learning is
at an all-time high. First, a number of universities and national-level educa-
tion associations include civic engagement within their agendas (Saltmarsh,

2005), with service learning as a method for its achievement. Second, The National and Community Service Acts of 1990 and 1993 encouraged universities to provide service learning opportunities. Since the passing of these acts, scholarly interest in service learning and its outcomes has increased across a number of diverse disciplines including social work ("Learn and Serve," 2004; Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Lima, 2005; Sterling, 2007).

SERVICE LEARNING, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL WORK

Social work education is known for having a long-standing affinity for service learning and civic engagement based on the profession's historical and contemporary commitment to interventions that seek citizen's civic empowerment as a goal (Boyle, Hull, Mather, Smith, & Farley, 2006). Evidence of social work's research interest in service learning as a means of strengthening learning and civic engagement began with Forte's work (1997). Since that time, additional studies have demonstrated service learning can be a forum for enhancing macro-practice skills, including civic engagement when a comparison group was employed (Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2006; Rocha, 2000). Results are promising, and research efforts must continue given the recent publication by Lemieux and Allen (2007). These two authors conducted an interdisciplinary review of electronic databases in addition to a search of social work education journals only to find eight research articles appropriate for their review. Lemieux and Allen found a number of diverse outcomes that focused primarily on student attitudes and perceptions. One study (Rocha, 2000) was dedicated to comparing a service learning course and a traditional course regarding civic engagement. There were a combination of some significant and non-significant differences between the service learning and the traditional course. Given the low number of studies, the different outcomes, and the diverse instruments, service learning and civic engagement research in social work can be considered to be in their infancy. It is imperative that research continue to explore the experience of service learning with a focus on the key service learning outcome that distinguishes it from other educational methods—increased student civic engagement.

This study contributes to the knowledge base through qualitative research of a master's-level social work service learning course in which students demonstrated civic engagement after course completion. Civic engagement can be defined narrowly as political involvement or as " . . . the active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good" (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2002, p. 16). Gottlieb and Robinson's definition will be used given it is the definition that is recommended for infusing into curriculum. This definition will be operationalized in this study to capture the students'

decision to return to a community that was the focus of an elective course and to assist the community with its desire to hold a 1-year celebration of its community center's opening. What is notable about this display of civic engagement is that it was an idea generated by students, was not a course requirement, and involved the students' physical return to the community after the course had been finished. Although a majority of students returned to the community, there were some who opted not to go back. Therefore, this study sought to explore the meaning of the service learning experience in its entirety and understand why some students demonstrated civic engagement after service learning and others did not. The most distinctive contribution of this research is that it utilized observable behavioral manifestations of civic engagement versus attitudinal measures or self-reports.

COMMUNITY CENTER DESCRIPTION

A Third Place Community Center (ATPCC), one of the principal nonprofit organizations within Turley, a small, midwestern community, was spearheading an effort to promote community rejuvenation from within and from the bottom up. The organization's name derives from the need for people to have three places: Home is a person's first place, work is the second, and a third is where people socialize and network. A Third Place is unique to the community of Turley because it offers several avenues to community members for improving their health and well-being through its medical clinic, a food pantry, access to community gardens, and a weekly nutrition class. In addition, the center offers computer access, a library, and a meeting place for local groups, organizations, and churches.

TURLEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Turley is a census-designated place (CDP). CDPs are unique in that they do not have elected officials, nor do they have legal status (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2007). Turley's geographical boundaries are adjacent to a major city, yet they are not eligible for community-level funding from this city but must look to the larger county, state, and federal funding mechanisms for financial assistance. In terms of demographic data, the USCB collects data on CDPs only every 10 years (USCB, 2007). Yearly USCB population and housing estimates are not available for CDPs. Therefore, the 2000 census provides the most valid and current data on the town (USCB, 2000). Turley has a population of 3,231, which includes 49.5% males and 50.5% females. Its racial mix is predominantly White (66.9%), with African American the second-largest group (14.4%) and American Indian and Alaska Natives (11.0%) constituting the third-largest racial group. That racial composition is similar to that of the United States with the exception of the American Indian population. That

group does not make up the third-largest ethnic/racial grouping nationally (USCB, 2000). The median age of Turley's population was 36.3 in 2000. Thirty-eight percent of the residents had a high school diploma or graduate equivalency degree, and 28.8% had attended high school but did not receive a diploma. Eleven percent of Turley families lived below the poverty level. Also notable is that the number of residents with a disability status (27%) is higher than the national level (19.3%).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Community Asset Assessment (CAA) was the elective course that provided the focus for this research. This course was defined as a social justice service learning course. This means that students were steeped in knowledge related to the roots of inequality, their own privilege and power, and ways they could serve as an agent of social change (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). CAA was a masters-level social work elective open to students majoring in direct practice or administrative and community practice. The specific course objectives were to foster the following knowledge and skills: (1) understand a positive paradigm of community assessment focusing on the illumination of community assets and strengths and how they operate to foster quality of life within a community; (2) employ multiple qualitative methods in conducting an asset assessment of a particular community; (3) collaborate with community members and residents in planning and implementing a basic asset assessment; and (4) undertake a qualitative case study of specific assets to illuminate their value in a particular community context. (APA reserves the use of numbered lists to convey a specific sequence in which something must be done.) The class met for four consecutive Fridays and Saturdays beginning in June 2008. The Saturday classes were held at the ATPCC in Turley.

For the first Saturday class, students met at the ATPCC and toured the center. The executive director introduced himself and indicated that the center needed documentation of abandoned properties to move forward with its goal of removal and clean-up of the area. First, the students conducted a windshield survey of Turley. In this type of survey, individuals drove around the community to familiarize themselves with the area. Community residents accompanied students to point out landmarks and offer history of the area and its present circumstances. After this activity, students and community members convened at the community center. The students discussed their impressions and received answers to their questions about Turley. At the end of the discussion, a theme of agricultural assets emerged. Additionally, the executive director of the community center and residents requested that students document the abandoned properties in the area. Students prepared written reports and visual displays of agricultural assets. They also provided the community center with presentations of properties that were neglected

and offered ideas for potential uses of the properties. Students prepared final reflective papers that integrated their assessment experience with course readings, lectures, and interactions with residents and elaborated within the papers on their approach to working with communities using examples from their other assignments. The university's internal review board would not allow these final reflective assignments to be used for this study because approval was not sought prior to the class's beginning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researchers began this study knowing that most of the students had returned to Turley at least once after the course finished. The majority of the students who completed the course elected to continue their involvement to fulfill the community's desire to hold a 1-year celebration of the community center's opening. The verbal feedback about the service learning from the students during the course was positive. The university is considering incorporating service learning into more MSW courses; however, with so little in the literature about MSW service learning, the School of Social Work wanted a greater understanding of the concept and process before proceeding with further service learning integration. The researchers wanted to understand the students' experience of the service learning and why they continued or discontinued their service once the course ended. The answers to that question might help course designers determine whether to continue MSW service learning. The research questions for this pilot study were as follows:

How did the students experience the phenomena of the Turley service learning?

What about that experience led some students to continue their service to the community outside the classroom and some to stop their service?

METHODOLOGY

The research strategy for this pilot study was phenomenological because it attempted to understand the meaning of events, actions, and interaction in a particular situation, the Turley service learning experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998) and the reason that led some students to return to volunteer in the community though others did not.

Site and Sample

In phenomenological studies, the data are collected only from people who have experienced the phenomena (Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989), in

this instance Turley service learning. The typical number of participants is 5 to 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989). This study's sample was seven students from the 2008 summer elective. All 11 students who took the course were invited to participate. Two students did not respond to the invitation. One student was too busy to participate. Another student had moved out of the area but said it was a "wonderful learning opportunity for me."

Data Collection

One researcher e-mailed all 11 students notifications that another researcher would be e-mailing them to invite them to participate in focus group(s). Due to the students' conflicting schedules, the researchers decided that individual interviews would be a better strategy than the focus groups. The individual interviews were conducted by one researcher in her office. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological study research is guided by its own type of analysis and interpretation. Using NVivo8 software, the researchers began by searching the transcriptions for idiomatic phrases. They then synthesized the data by conducting thematic analyses or clusters of meanings. Finally, by discussing, writing, and rewriting, they documented a general description of the experience, the textural description (i.e., what was experienced), and the structural description (i.e., how it was experienced; Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

RESULTS

General Description of the Experience

All of the respondents reported enjoying and benefiting from the experience. The respondents' comments were overwhelmingly positive, with only a few negative criticisms. Their discussions of the course content, activities, and assignments were comparable to the description presented earlier in this paper. All respondents' descriptions of the physical community and community center were similar as were their feelings toward the community members.

What Was Experienced and How?

None of the respondents spoke of the experience in the *abstract* of service learning. They all spoke of Turley. For what and how it was experienced, researchers focused on students' thoughts and feelings before and after their

interaction with Turley, their first and last impressions, and whether they believed service learning belongs in the MSW curriculum.

Thoughts and feelings before

Two respondents felt "hesitant" about working in Turley due to believing it to be dangerous. Two knew little of Turley, and one of these respondents said, "The first day when I went there before the class, it was like a ghost town to me." Three lived or had lived in Turley. One of them said, "My cognitive impression of Turley was that it's a place of community. It's got a very rich history. And it's highly neglected and overlooked by the city"; another had a very different feeling, "sad"; and the third simply said, "I didn't have any issues. I wasn't afraid or anything."

Although there were trepidations about Turley itself, all respondents felt "excited" and/or "intrigued" about the assignment. As one respondent said, "I was jazzed. I was so excited I was coming out my skin."

Thoughts and feelings after

The thoughts and feelings of all respondents regarding Turley changed during the course. Even the respondent who expressed positive feelings of Turley prior to the course said, "I felt more confident in their efforts to achieve their goals. I felt like we had helped progress them further down the road towards those efforts than if we hadn't been there."

The respondent who was most "hesitant" to visit Turley said,

> It was just nice to see that you hear all the bad things about communities and it was just nice to see that there were people out there that were willing to help their neighbor, people in their community . . . If I were to have a flat tire or have car problems in Turley, Oklahoma, it really wouldn't bother me to have someone come up and stop and roll down the window and say, "Hey do you need some help?" I wouldn't be afraid to say yes. . . . I hated to leave [laughed]. I really enjoyed and really had a good time working with the people in the community.

One respondent seemed to sum up all respondents' remarks when she said,

> And I think it changed my whole perspective about community work. Because I think previously my perspective was about you go in and take program you take a service and you help the community. Well in this way it was about you go in, you find out what they want, what they need. And I think at the end of the semester, I realized that there's so

much more to a community, and the value of the community lies within
the people.

Four students hoped that the college would continue involvement even if
the students could not. They were concerned that they would be perceived
as "fly-by-night" volunteers, and they recognized that their work was far
from complete.

Should it be part of MSW curriculum? All respondents felt strongly that
service learning show be incorporated into the MSW curriculum. Some of
their comments include:

- "I do. Absolutely. I feel really strongly about that."
- "I think it should be in spades . . . I think you're doing great disservice to
  future students in this program if you don't."
- "I loved it. I mean for me for the class I think thus far that was probably
  the class for me that I got the most out of."
- "Oh man! I think it should be a requirement like practicum . . . I definitely
  think it should be a part of this graduate studies."
- "Definitely."

As for why service learning should be in the MSW curriculum, the over-
arching theme was that it bridges the "wide gap" between classroom and
practice. As one respondent said,

> I didn't have a reality classroom in my undergrad. [This] course was a
> reality classroom. It went beyond just writing a paper. It was actually
> able to, what is the book we had, it's an acronym. I think it was "action,
> look, and think."

Second Research Question: Continued Involvement

Interestingly, and contrary to both researchers' assumptions prior to the
study, only three of the respondents recalled that the community celebration
was her first return to service in Turley after the course. All of the respon-
dents expressed a desire to return, and some did return. The motivation to
return appeared to be the relationships that developed between the respon-
dents and the community members; the desire to return was to help people
the respondents knew. As one respondent said, "I felt more of an attachment
to Turley and the people because we got to know them individually, espe-
cially some of the Turley residents who participated every time in our class."

One respondent continued via a field placement, but she also con-
tributed "a lot of sweat equity, and some of my financially being able to

purchase paint and stuff like that. And that's continued. . . . I have fed the community when we had a big weather call presentation . . . ."

Another respondent, who lived an hour's drive from Turley, returned to a town diner to eat and to see people. Another lived more than an hour's drive from Turley, so she did not return. Another lived more than an hour's drive but still returned three to four times to see people and donate clothes.

Some students felt there would be more continued involvement if there were structured activities. The only respondent who did not return said she would be more likely to if the college would "throw ideas at us or give us some things to kinda work on the side when we have free time."

DISCUSSION

An obvious limitation to this study is the small sample on which the discussion is based. Another is that four of the students in the course did not participate in the study, and two of those never responded to repeat e-mails. Their experiences may have been quite different from those of the seven respondents whose experiences were similar. The researchers' relationships with the respondents may have impacted their responses in spite of efforts to avoid that bias. Another source of potential bias could have been the perspectives of three students who lived or had lived in Turley. The assumption was that these students may have had a positive view of the community and, therefore, had not experienced any change. However, only one of the two had made positive remarks about Turley prior to the service learning experience, and all three experienced change. Their responses were similar to those of the other participants in that their orientation to Turley was one of change and hope after completing the course. A final bias is that although students did not know of the assignments or exact nature of the course prior to the first day of class, they did self-select into an elective that offered community interaction. Perhaps these students had an affinity for service learning and civic engagement.

The experience of service learning was beneficial and enjoyable for everyone. All initially felt excited and intrigued about the assignment. Amid these feelings were also negative impressions of the community that were transformed after the service learning experience. Fears, hesitancy, and sadness related to initial impressions of "dangerous, ghost town, and abandoned" were replaced by a "sense of safety, enjoyment, and regret about leaving." Even for the three respondents who had lived in Turley, there was a shift to empowerment in terms of the community's ability to define its issues and assets and achieve goals, particularly with the continued involvement of social work service learning. All of the students overwhelmingly communicated the importance of service learning in the MSW curriculum for its ability to bridge the gap between the classroom and practice.

One of the most interesting findings was that only three of the seven respondents considered the return to the community to assist with the ATPCC's first annual celebration as service. One could argue that the other four viewed it as required coursework. Yet, the course instructor reiterated that participation and attendance at the celebration were not required elements of the course. The celebration was held a full 2 months after the course ended and grades were assigned. The belief that it was a part of the course would hold more support if there were not a unanimously stated desire to return for service but actual displays of civic engagement among several students. Students returned more than once to donate items, to eat at the local diner, and to visit with community members. Even more may have returned if the university had offered continued, structured activities within Turley.

The changes articulated by the students in terms of their perceptions of a community and macro-level practice indicates that service learning has powerful implications for social work education in terms of its ability to impact negative impressions of struggling communities and of community-based practice that is centered around the empowerment of individual residents. This particular service learning experience allowed opportunities at every class session for interactions in the community with residents. The course used a strengths-based approach that allowed for the documentation of abandoned properties and agricultural assets.

The implications of this work for future research include offering structured civic engagement opportunities for students after course completion that can then be assessed in regard to those who participated and those who did not. These opportunities should be open to those who did not complete the service learning course to provide a comparison group. It must be reiterated that the opportunities represent civic engagements that are separate from the course. In addition, a method for capturing impressions of the community before and after course completion can determine whether the service learning experience had any impact. A strengths-based approach is the best foundation for altering negative community impressions. Those seeking to replicate this study should attend to these recommendations and decide whether they want to utilize any materials (journals) from the class. For this study, journals students had completed in class were not permitted to be used, as student approval had not been sought prior to their completion.

With national-level support continuing and service learning activities across universities increasing, it is imperative that studies focus on the impact of this educational practice, thereby, increasing the limited research base. Social work is particularly challenged to meet this need given the congruence between social work educational values and service learning goals. Evidence from this study indicates service learning is a valuable method for transforming impressions of communities, defining macro-practice, bridging the divide between courses and practice, and fostering civic engagement.

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