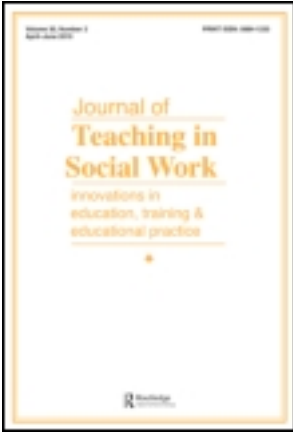


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Evelyn Marie Campbell ^a

^a Department of Social Work, University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota, USA

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Implementing Service Learning into a Graduate Social Work Course: A Step-by-Step Guide

EVELYN MARIE CAMPBELL

*Department of Social Work, University of Minnesota Duluth,
Duluth, Minnesota, USA*

Service learning is a powerful pedagogical tool linking community service to academic learning. Several steps are necessary to implement service learning effectively into the curriculum. This study uses a case example as an exploratory study to pilot-test data on how service learning impacts student outcomes. The paper will (1) provide an overview of the literature on service learning, (2) explain a model for incorporating service learning into graduate social work courses, (3) identify specific student issues in implementation, and (4) demonstrate how service learning can enhance the outcomes for educational policy and accreditation standards competencies in an advanced organization and community practice course.

KEYWORDS *teaching research, macro-practice, oppression*

INTRODUCTION

The recent spread of service learning may stem in part from President Obama, who expressed a need for active citizenship and for preparing young people through the integration of “service into education” (Marbley & Dawson, 2008, p. 1). Because of the recognition of the benefits, service learning has increased in institutions of higher education. Organizations are encouraged to provide service learning opportunities to youth (Govtrack.us, n.d.). The Minnesota Campus Compact website defines service learning as

Address correspondence to Evelyn Marie Campbell, Department of Social Work, University of Minnesota Duluth, 1207 Ordean Court, Duluth, MN 55812, USA. E-mail: ecampbel@d.umn.edu

“a process through which students are involved in community work that contributes significantly to positive change in individuals, organizations, neighborhoods, and/or larger systems in a community; and to students’ academic understanding, civic development, personal or career growth, and/or understanding of larger social issues” (Minnesota Campus Compact).

Service learning increasingly is used as an instructional tool in higher education (Wallen & Pandit, 2009; Davis, Ellis, & Van Ingen, 2009; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Anderson, 2006). Theories that support service learning include constructivism and experiential learning (Furco, 2001). Constructivist learning theory applies to service learning in that “learning is potentiated by active engagement in real or authentic activities” (Jacoby, 2009, p. 197). The National Society for Experiential Education argues that for service learning to be considered experiential learning it must be carefully monitored and students must have “intentional learning goals” and engage in active reflection “on what he or she is learning throughout the experiences” (p. 9). Service learning is part of the educational experience fulfilling not only the community need but course learning objectives. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) define service learning as a

course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 505)

These definitions recognize reflection as a key component of service learning because it helps students analyze their experience (Peterson, 2009, Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2004). Mundel and Schugurensky (2008) discovered “many instances of learning through formal and informal reflection” (p. 52). Reflection allows for students to step back and think about the experience and learn from it, and it allows students “to link the concrete experience to more abstract learning” (Weisskirch, 2003, p. 141). Students can explore new ideas, feelings, and ways of doing things and see how what they are learning in the classroom fits with what they are observing and experiencing in the world outside the classroom.

Service learning creates opportunities for universities and communities to collaborate in addressing important community needs. Therefore, forming a community partnership is an important aspect in service learning. Different approaches for developing a community partnership can be found in the literature. However, it has been noted that the quality of these partnerships did not always benefit the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). To succeed, community partnerships should be based on an equal relationship and be mutually beneficial for both the community partner and the university (Fisher et al., 2004; Furco, 2002). For service learning to be

successful, there must be a strong, supportive, and trusting relationship with staff in community-based agencies. Staff must be respected as co-educators (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Bringle and Hatcher (2002) describe the five components of a successful service learning experience and stress the importance of communication in carrying out the project; they are “planning, orientation, training, supervision and evaluation” (p. 505).

SERVICE LEARNING AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The social work professional literature offers little empirical research in the area of service learning in graduate social work education. A database search of social work abstracts from 1997 to 2010, using the terms *service learning* and *community partnerships*, revealed 26 articles. Some of the limited research on service learning in social work education focused primarily on building community partnerships. Mulroy (2009), for example, described two different approaches to achieve a community partnership: the “dispersed” and the “coordinated” models (p. 35). Another article evaluated the effectiveness of a learning center as a model for collaboration between the university and community (Schmid & Blit-Cohen, 2009). Scott (2008) discussed an “integrated service-learning-based curriculum” for graduate social work students (p. 214). That paper attempted to document steps for creating a service learning project within a graduate social work course and described how service learning contributed to graduate social work learning outcomes, based on Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competency objectives.

CASE EXAMPLE

An Organization and Community Practice II course will be used as an exploratory case study for this article. This course provides a framework for analyzing and intervening with social problems at the macro-level of social work practice. Community organizing methods of shaping community development, social policy, and social planning are addressed in the course as are organizational theory, administrative functions, and management practices in social service agencies. This paper describes an innovative approach to service learning designed to comply with the 2008 EPAS of the Council on Social Work Education (2008a,b) and utilizes Bloom’s taxonomy as a framework of instruction. The service learning project required students to move from the lower three levels of learning (e.g., knowledge, comprehension, and application) to the higher levels (e.g., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; Pregel, 1994). Course objectives for students were to identify a

problem in the community, describe a program to address that need, state the limitations of that program, and make recommendations based on their findings, using the higher levels of learning. In their analysis, students also were expected to describe the process they went through to accomplish their tasks, explain what they learned from the service learning endeavor, and make suggestions for how to conduct future projects. This was the first formal attempt at systematically incorporating service learning into this course, and the steps that were taken (and the mistakes that were made) are presented in the following section to serve as a guide for others who want to incorporate service learning into a similar macro-social work course offering.

Step 1: Defining Civic Engagement for the Setting

Step one was to connect service learning to the mission of the academic department (Furco, 2002) and began with the adoption of a working definition of civic engagement. Social work faculty adopted the definition of civic engagement created by the University's Office of Public Engagement:

Engagement is defined as the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (University of Minnesota, n.d.)

Step 2: Setting up the Community Partnership

Step two involved the formation of a community partnership. This goal was accomplished by approaching the local school district with the knowledge that MSW students wanted to learn more about social work practice with children and were interested in "hands-on" learning. Social work faculty then held two meetings with community informants, one with school social workers and the other jointly with the Sexual Harassment and Violence Specialist and the Safe and Drug Free Advisory Committee to discuss the project's focus (and the unmet needs of the local school district) to determine a strategy for incorporating MSW students into the schools. The group determined that this initial project would focus on one local high school. Regular meetings subsequently were scheduled to review the strategy for implementing the project and to address any needs or concerns that might arise. Regularly scheduled meetings then were held with school administrators, support staff, and teachers to review progress and address concerns.

The community partner was a high school located in the working-class neighborhood of a small city in northern Minnesota. With the closing of

factories, this area was experiencing a higher level of poverty. The school population at the time of this study consisted of 945 students (American Indian, 6.3%; Asian, 1.8%; Black, 5%; Hispanic, 1%; and White, 85.9%; Minnesota Department of Education, 2009).

Step 3: Planning Course Assignments

Step three involved matching learning objectives to course assignments. The organization and Community Practice II course had 21 such learning objectives. For the purposes of this study, Table 1 details the competency-related assignment and the learning objectives related to the service learning project. Student learning objectives were measured by five assignments.

All of the 17 students registered for this course were informed about the service learning project at the beginning of the first class. Of the 17 students, 16 completed the course. Students were given a pretest that was a self-assessment of the extent to which civic engagement was a part of the students' social work identity. The instrument measured students' strengths and limitations in performing civic engagement activities. The self-assessment included seven questions about the students' perception of civic engagement and its impact on their practice. Five questions used a Likert-style scale, and two were open-end. In addition to these seven questions, students had the opportunity to make additional comments. The Likert-style questions asked students to respond on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 designated as *strongly agree* and 5 designated as *strongly disagree*.

TABLE 1 Competency-Related Assignment and the Learning Objectives Related to the Service Learning Project

EPAS Competency	Assignment	Learning Objective
2.1.1: Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.	1) pre/post student self-assessments on civic engagement	How did students autonomously assess their strengths and limitations in advanced generalist practice?
2.1.10: Engagement (a).	2) in-class discussions	How did students initiate actions to achieve organizational goals in advanced generalist practice?
2.1.1: Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.	3) reflection paper	How did students engage in self-reflection, self-monitoring and self-correction in advanced generalist practice with diverse populations?
2.1.10 (a)–(d): Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.	4) process paper & 5) final formal presentation	How did students demonstrate the ability to autonomously collect, organize, and interpret data in advanced generalist practice?

Step 4: Project Implementation

During the implementation phase, the first two classes began with an orientation with the community partner at the high school in the community. The orientation consisted of students' learning the policies and procedures of the school and the types of projects they could get involved in to meet class requirements. They also received a directory of staff and teachers, and school administrators created a confidentiality agreement for the participating students to sign.

In this course, students were required to form a working group to evaluate a service program at the local high school. They wrote a final paper on this process, which helped measure their ability to autonomously perform data collection, organize and interpret data, and assess the program. Requirements for the final paper included (1) a discussion on the historical context of the selected problem, (2) a description of the program service and how it addressed the problem, (3) limitations of that program, and (4) recommendations based on their findings. Also included in the paper was a description of the process they went through to accomplish their tasks, what they learned from the service learning project, and suggestions for how to conduct and improve future service learning projects. At the end of the semester, students also were required to present a synopsis of their learning experience to the school administration, school staff, and social work faculty. A DVD of their final presentation at the local high school was produced.

Programs the graduate students evaluated were:

- developmental and cognitive delayed (DCD) social skills groups (social skills are taught to students identified as having DCD);
- open house program (an annual event where parents meet with school personnel);
- link crew program (leadership program for ninth graders);
- positive behavior interventions and supports program, addressing problematic behaviors of students;
- ninth grade core program (helps students in the transition to high school);
- Clothing Closet (free clothing program for low-income families); and
- comprehensive assessment of all service programs.

Step 5: Ongoing Monitoring

The fifth step was the monitoring of the class project through online discussion. Classes were designed to meet for 3 hours every other week so that students could spend time working on their service learning project. When classes did not meet, students were expected to participate in online class discussions and fulfill three requirements: (1) describe your week, (2) describe any problems you encountered and how they were resolved

(or ask your classmates for advice on a particular problem); and (3) integrate your coursework with what you are learning in your project, giving specific examples of activities and how they relate to theories, values, and skills learned in your courses.

Step 6: Evaluation and Reflection

The purpose of Step 6 was to assess the service learning experience of students; therefore, an attitudinal paper was assigned. It was used to gain information about what students learned and what they felt about the overall experience. Questions included the following:

1. What were the benefits of your service learning experience?
2. What did you learn about yourself? About the community? About your service site?
3. What would you change to improve your service learning experience?
4. How did your experience relate to the class readings, discussion, and activities?
5. Would you recommend this service learning experience to other students? Why? Why not?
6. How have your perceptions changed from your first impressions of the service learning experience?
7. What stands out about your experience, either good or bad? What did you learn from that particular situation?
8. Write a two-sentence headline that summarizes your service learning experience this semester?

Step 7: Feedback from Community Partner

The final step of this project was to gain feedback from the community partner. School staff and administrators who worked with the graduate students were given an evaluation to complete. Receiving feedback from community partners is important in developing and maintaining the relationship (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). There were nine questions on the survey. Four questions used the Likert-type scale, and five were open-end. Eleven surveys were e-mailed to staff, and three were completed. Responses were few due to lack of follow-up on behalf of the staff.

Competency Results

2.1.1: Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

A self-assessment survey questionnaire was used to measure EPAS competency 2.1.1. Table 2 shows the results of the survey for the pre- and post-self-assessment. Seventeen students completed the pretest, and 13 students completed the posttest.

Table 2 shows that the greatest percentage of change was with question 1 and question 2. Students' perceptions that civic engagement was a part of their professional identity increased by 14%. Students also perceived that their confidence in planning and participating in civic engagement increased by 6%. There was little change with questions 3, 4, and 5.

Students gave a variety of answers for question 6 regarding what they learned from their civic engagement experience in the pretest. Two themes emerged: (1) an awareness of the issues and (2) the importance of social networking. One student commented, "Civic engagement can be empowering and can bring the community's attention to otherwise overlooked issues and problems." Another noted the importance of networking: "Networking is a huge benefit from civic engagement."

Results from the posttest showed two themes. In the posttest, making a difference was the overriding theme, with a typical statement being, "I really enjoyed the experience, I am hopeful that we made a difference to the students." The second theme was the knowledge gained; for example, a student commented on the importance of micro-skills in "building coalitions."

For Question 7, in both the pretest and the posttest, students overwhelmingly agreed that civic engagement brought people together. In the posttest, students wrote about building stronger communities and getting people together, stating, "it really strengthens [community] by getting people involved."

2.1.10: Engagement (a).

TABLE 2 Results of Student's Self-Assessment on Civic Engagement: Pre- and Posttest

SW8331	Pre Mean Score	Post Mean Score	% of Change
1. I feel civic engagement is already a part of my professional identity.	3.5	4.2	+14%
2. I feel confident about planning and participating in civic engagement activities.	3.8	4.1	+6%
3. I feel civic engagement activities can contribute to my knowledge and increase community knowledge.	4.6	4.7	+1%
4. I enjoy doing civic engagement activities.	4.1	4.2	+1%
5. Communities benefit from civic engagement activities.	4.7	4.8	+1%

Note: Rating: 1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*.

ONLINE DISCUSSION

An online discussion was used to measure EPAS competency 2.1.10. During this course, students were expected to have online discussion seven times during the semester to monitor progress and how effectively they were preparing for their selected projects. In the beginning of the semester, students were a little confused but very eager for the project to begin. By the fourth week of class, they were discussing which program they were going to evaluate. By the end of the semester, students were writing about their projects and about some of the problems they were encountering.

2.1.1: Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.

REFLECTION PAPER

A reflection paper was used to measure EPAS competency 2.1.1. Students reported in their reflection papers that the beginning of the experience produced anxiety and confusion; however, some realized that taking the initiative was part of the experience. One student commented, "This felt uncomfortable and frustrating . . . what I learned is that professionalism involves making decisions and taking the initiative . . ." Another student reported her perception of the client population changed: "I also found that I had many preconceived notions about the abilities of these students that were not true." Reported outcomes were: initiative, increase in knowledge and skills, and commitment to service learning. Though some research indicates modest increases in cognitive, social, and psychological development, there was a general positive impact on student learning with service learning here (Batchelder & Root, 1994). To summarize the experience, one student wrote, "The service learning experience, while challenging, is an invaluable way to learn macro-level social work. The service learning experience goes beyond the classroom to teach students macro-level skills while simultaneously helping strengthen the community." Another commented, "The service learning experience for MSW students went beyond the sequential and neatly organized chapters in the textbook regarding macro-level social work by adding the element of unpredictability to create a more complete picture of how macro social work is really done."

Students completed seven online discussions during the course of the semester. Reflections were evaluated for quality of self-reflection, problem-solving skills, and demonstrated initiative.

2.1.10(a)–(d): Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

PROCESS PAPER AND FINAL FORMAL PRESENTATION

The process paper and final formal presentation were used to measure EPAS competency 2.1.10(a)–(d). They both required students to identify and describe nine projects, evaluate the projects, describe the process, and give recommendations on how to improve the outcomes. A DVD of their final presentation at the local high school was produced. During the formal presentation, school administrators and teachers commented on how fortunate they were to have the graduate students there and how satisfied they were with the experience.

Specific issues students faced in implementing their service learning project were revealed in their process papers. Three themes emerged. The first theme was the unclear expectations. Ten of sixteen students gave examples. One student commented, “It was really frustrating to begin with because we were not clear on a lot of things” Another student said, “I didn’t feel like I had a full understanding (of) what really was expected of me” Yet another comment was, “I felt anxious in terms of not knowing exactly what (to) do in taking the first step.”

The second theme that emerged was students’ recommendations for more planning by the faculty, students, and school staff. Five of sixteen gave examples. One student commented, “I think that if the community projects with [sic] had been developed before our class had started we would have found a project that was a better fit for this class” Another observation was, “Timelines were changed and the beginning seemed very unorganized.”

The third theme was the lack of time and difficulty with the coordination of group members within projects. Six of sixteen gave examples. One student stated that “There was, personally, some hesitancy about getting enough time with the students, or about whether they had the availability to meet with us during school hours.” Other students said that they wanted more time to figure out what they were doing and to have more time to do it or that they felt rushed and that, “Some of the things that were difficult about this project included setting a time where everyone or most people could meet” Another student response spoke to the difficulty of coordination of group activities within the workgroups, noting that “There were many internal conflicts that needed to be worked out.”

Community Partner Results

Table 3 shows the results on the teacher survey. As previously noted, 11 school personnel at the high school that partnered on this project were e-mailed surveys, but only 3 responded. The low response was blamed on lack of follow-up by staff.

TABLE 3 Community Partner/Teacher Survey Results

Questions <i>N</i> = 11	Needs Improvement	Fair	Satisfied	Above Average	Excellent	Total Number of Faculty
1. In general, were you pleased with the students and faculty in the work they did for your class/school?	0	0	1	1	1	3
2. Did you feel that the students and faculty were adequately prepared for this project?	0	0	0	2	1	3
3. Faculty adequately facilitated projects with students.	0	0	1	0	1	2
4. Overall, you felt that the students and faculty contributed to improved academics, behavior and/or attendance at your class/school.	0	0	1	1	1	3

The community partner survey results indicated that the biggest advantage to having graduate students and faculty at the school were “It was helpful to discuss our program with other professionals, they brought needed objectivity”; “Cool art projects that the kids really enjoyed doing; new faces and extra adults to help out with the students”; and “I was able to break my large class down into smaller groups which are always better for discussion.”

The community partner survey results indicated that the high school personnel felt that the biggest disadvantage to having social work students and faculty at the school was “Being tied to one day per week, when they were coming for class. It made my lesson planning fairly rigid.” Similar responses were written to the question on what changes they felt would make the students and faculty more helpful in the future: “More flexible scheduling, easier ways to make contact as needed when things changed” and “More time to plan before the project started to really lay things out.”

Nonetheless, the community partner survey results indicated that school personnel wanted the students and faculty back again. Comments included “Absolutely!” and “Yes, it was successful, and can be more so the next time around.”

Limitations

A major limitation of this case study was the small sample size. Also, the social work program already had a strong vested interest in community

service through the field practicum; therefore, the results may not have been as significant compared to another graduate program. In addition, the assessment tools were not tested for validity or reliability but instead were developed by looking at a variety of samples.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this case study was to explore the extent to which civic engagement was a part of students' social work identity and to assess their strengths and limitations for autonomous participation in civic engagement activities. In the student self-assessment, the greatest percentage of change was in how students felt about civic engagement's being a central part of their professional identity and their confidence in participating in such community engagement. Small changes in some of the other areas, such as their enhanced understanding of civic engagement and its benefits, may be attributed to the fact that the social work profession is connected to this form of macro-participation.

After completing their service learning project, students' assessment of their confidence in their ability to plan and meet organizational goals increased by 6%.

Lessons Learned

As with any new initiative, there is always a learning curve. Five lessons were learned:

1. Understand the importance of planning with your community partner.
2. Provide enough structure and clarifying expectations to students when starting the project.
3. Offer opportunities for students to voice their expectations and concerns when the project starts and continually as it progresses.
4. Recognize the significance of reflections and how to apply them to the service learning experience.
5. To gain better insight into responses, add additional space for open-end comments and reflections on the survey.

Eyler and Giles (1999) comment about the importance of creating a climate where "disappointment or confusion" can be discussed; otherwise, students may lose out on critical thinking and personal development (p. 202). Having students complete periodic anonymous surveys in class could provide the opportunity for students to voice issues they may encounter but would otherwise be afraid to ask in class.

Conclusion

This exploratory case study supports the literature on civic engagement and how it may contribute to a graduate student's academic understanding of social work theory and practice. Toward this end, this article describes seven steps for incorporating service learning into a social work course in the macro-practice curriculum. Recommendations for future studies include using a larger sample size and launching longitudinal studies on service learning and civic engagement activities in the community. From the outcome of this modest pilot study, the pedagogy looks promising.

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